

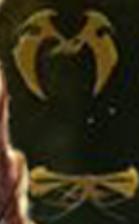
~ Toy Soldier Saga Book II ~

Brothers in Arms

Diane Morrison



A Novel in the
SPELLYHAMMER
Fantasy Universe



Brothers in Arms

A Spelljammer® Novel

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

Diane Morrison



Spelljammer® is a registered trademark of Wizards of the Coast LLC® in the United States and other countries; copyright © 2012, 2013, 2014 by Wizards. All rights reserved. This novel is not affiliated with, endorsed, sponsored, or specifically approved by Wizards of the Coast LLC. This novel may use the trademarks and other intellectual property of Wizards of the Coast LLC, which is permitted under [Wizards' Fan Site Policy](#). DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®, D&D® and Spelljammer® are trademarks of Wizards of the Coast and D&D® core rules, game mechanics, characters and their distinctive likenesses are the property of the Wizards of the Coast. For more information about Wizards of the Coast or any of Wizards' trademarks or other intellectual property, please visit their website at www.wizards.com.

All other content is copyright © 2012, 2013, 2014 by [Diane Morrison](#). This work is published under a  [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives License](#). All other rights reserved.

Cover art background "Pursuit" by [John "Paladine" Baxter](#). Used by permission.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Acknowledgements

No writer creates a story alone, and I have had more help than most. My thanks go out to:

The writers of Spelljammer, especially Jeff Grubb, who created it; Elaine Cunningham, who made the elves come alive; Roger E. Moore for taking the orcish viewpoint; and Bruce Nesmith, for giving us the scro.

The members of my D&D campaign for helping me spend many happy hours creating this story.

The members of the Spelljammer fan community, who have been supportive in my project and have served more than once as reference guides and a research team. In particular I thank: Adam “Night Druid” Miller, David “Big Mac” Shepherd, and Paul “GM” Westermeyer for their fantastic research and fan support; and also John “Paladine” Baxter and Steven “Silverblade the Enchanter” James for their inspirational (and often very technically accurate) art, without which this Universe would not live as vividly it does.

See you in the stars!

It is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be imperilled in a hundred battles; if you do not know your enemies but do know yourself, you will win one and lose one; if you do not know your enemies nor yourself, you will be imperilled in every single battle.

Sun Tzu

Becoming the enemy means thinking of yourself as if you are in the opponent's body.

Myiamoto Musashi

Man has no right to kill his brother. It is no excuse that he does so in uniform: he only adds the infamy of servitude to the crime of murder.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

We have found the enemy, and he is us.

Walt Kelly

Part One:
Vengeance is Mine

Prologue

Sylria stepped off of the gangplank onto the most picturesque ash-wood dock she had ever had the pleasure to visit. Blue water sparkled and danced, casting flickering glimmers of light onto the faces of the mostly-elven residents of the small port city of Theraspar, which was teeming with green growing things and a thousand shades of flower coming into bloom. Her silver uniform flight suit was not the least out of place in this Navy community, but oddly, her plain brown ponytail was. The little outpost world of Nedethil was a settlement out of Toril and therefore, mostly inhabited by silver and gold elves, like the elf she had come to see; rather than high elves like herself. She noticed a few cursory glances in her direction despite the Lieutenant's crescent at her collar, and recalled how the lads had spoken of the racial segregation of elvenkind that was the norm here.

Once again, her stomach knotted with doubt. Was she certain that they would want the news she brought? What if they rejected her? Like they need any more complications brought into their already complicated lives, she ruminated unhappily. Still, she was committed. He had a right to know.

She shouldered her pack and carried on into the city, passing the small dockyard market where traders hawked their wares and Navy personnel inspected cargo for contraband. A crew of gnomes were

engaged in a heated argument with some elves in Marine's uniforms; she was too far away to hear the conversation clearly over the chatter, the ship bells and the gulls, but the angry tones, the arm of the Marine Captain pointing firmly back towards their odd, apparently steam-powered ship, and the enormous orange and white-furred rodent leashed to the mooring post with a hawser told her everything she needed to know. *They should know better*, she sighed to herself. *Giant space hamsters have always been strictly forbidden in elven ports.*

Cheered by the realization that things were pretty much the same here as everywhere else, Sylria scanned the terrain until she found what she was looking for; a domed building of shimmering moonstone. Based on the lads' descriptions, that had to be the Temple of Sehanine. She made her way purposefully towards it. Sylria figured that it was possible that neither Shaundar, nor Yathar, nor Vice Admiral Ruavel Sunfall were in port at the moment; and the Navy office was not likely to tell her if they were or not, since it was SOP for the current locations of such illustrious persons as the Admiral and his family to be classified. But she knew that Shaundar's mother was the High Priestess of Sehanine on Nedethil, and it was reasonable to assume that she would be at the Temple; or that the clergy might know where she could be found.

As she approached the Temple, the foliage opened up to reveal a rather pretty graveyard. Sylria was astounded by the beauty – and the expense! – of the mausoleums and the statuary amongst the carefully-tended ground cover. None of the resting places here were really ancient – Nedethil was only colonized some thousand years ago – but many of

them were not only carefully and painstakingly chiselled in stone to the smallest detail, but enhanced with permanent magical lights or illusions that displayed names, or scenes from the lives of those who lay here. An elven nobles' necropolis for certain. And sadly, a necropolis it was. This was a military community, and the numbers of elven dead here made a quieter city of their own.

She made her way respectfully down the path, offering a silent bow at the gate. Some of the graves here, she was sorry to see, seemed very fresh. But of course, the war waged on, and war was not fought without casualties – as she very well knew.

She paused in her stroll to watch a young elf maid kneeling at a shrine. It had drawn her attention because the family plot was large but there was no crypt on it; just two small headstones lavished in fresh flowers. Recent passings, then. Her heart went out to the maid. And then it hitched and froze, because Sylria thought she recognized her.

Before she realized what she was doing Sylria had cut a beeline across two family plots to reach the kneeling elf maid, who glanced behind at her approach. She almost didn't recognize the *etriel*; there had been such a change in her. Flaxen hair that was the envy of every elven maid Sylria knew now hung listlessly about her face, her fair complexion ghostly white and marred by deep circles beneath once sea-foam green eyes, now dark like black holes and overflowing with loss and pain. Even the golden sparkles in them seemed dull somehow, and her always delicate frame seemed downright brittle. "Narissa?" she whispered.

“Sylria?” the maiden croaked. Her voice was hoarse and her eyes still glistening.

Sylria, horrified, held her breath as she fell to her knees beside her friend. With an unsteady hand she moved the flowers aside to read the names on the headstones. And she gasped and put her trembling hand to her mouth. There it was, there in plain Espruar; “Yathar and Shaundar Sunfall; sworn blood brothers, who gallantly gave their lives in the Second Great War 5044 O.C. in service to the People.” There was more, but she simply couldn’t bear to look. There was a single large urn. Yes, she supposed they would have wanted it that way. They did everything in life together; why not . . . ?

The second headstone marked a grave which might have been dug yesterday. It was very, very small. It read: “Selene Alastrarra Sunfall; born and died 5044 O.C. You were loved, and you will be remembered.”

“Sylria?” Narissa whispered again. “Did you . . . ?”

“No,” she gasped, not wanting to hear Narissa say it. “No, I . . . I came to see them.” Now that she was looking, she could see that Narissa’s figure was fuller than she remembered, and her waist a little thicker . . . and yes, her pallor was likely somewhat caused by loss of blood.

“Oh Narissa,” she murmured, “I am so sorry.” She threw her arms around the younger elf maid.

“Me too,” Narissa managed in a very small voice.

They sat there together in the graveyard and talked for hours as the light faded, sharing their memories and their grief. “How long are you staying?” Narissa asked at last.

Sylria hesitated before replying, “I can’t stay. We were just in port to resupply. I thought I’d stop in while I had the chance.” She cleared her throat. “Are you going to be okay?” she finally demanded.

Narissa gave her a thin smile. “I’m staying with Shaundar’s parents,” she explained. “They’re taking care of me.”

Sylria nodded. She didn’t ask why Narissa had left her father’s house. She thought she could guess. Her eyes strayed to the tiny grave again and it was all she could do to keep from bursting into tears. Her lips trembled. “I’ll write though,” she promised. “Will you write to me?”

Narissa nodded.

A shadow fell over them. Sylria looked up and just about fainted. The elven man standing above her was dead. Then she blinked and she realized that there were subtle differences; but the resemblance was uncanny.

“Narissa?” he asked softly. “Are you okay? Who’s your friend?”

“Laeroth,” she murmured, “this is Sylria. Sylria, Laeroth Oakheart.”

His blue eyes widened. “Sylria! I have heard a great deal about you, *etriel*.” He bowed formally and with genuine respect.

Sylria smiled just a little at the corner of her mouth. It was a bittersweet smile, lamenting the loss of another man she loved. “I’m not an *etriel*; I’m just a commoner,” she corrected gently. “But I can say the same. Your brother thought the world of you.” She remembered Garen’s eyes, his loving arms, his gentle hands, the feel of his body moving against hers . . . and she wondered why she had decided to torment herself by coming here.

Sylria returned to her ship that night with a broken heart. It was a personal, not a military vessel, as she had implied to her friends. Her mother, a pretty but not exceptional high elven woman whose features were echoed in those of her daughter, met her gaze with deep concern. Never having left the Valley of the Mage before, she had accompanied her daughter on this journey for moral support. “I take it that things did not go well,” she observed sympathetically.

Sylria sank down on the cot next to her. “He’s gone, Mom. He was killed in action,” she confessed dully. “So was Yathar.”

Her mother hitched in her breath. “Oh honey, I am so sorry,” she breathed. Not knowing what to say, she reached out and grasped Sylria’s shoulder.

The bundle wrapped in blankets in her other arm shifted and stirred. Sylria took her daughter back into her own arms and held her close; her lifeline. The yellow-haired babe looked back at her with wise, cornflower blue eyes, speckled with almost unique platinum sparkles. Sylria knew that Shaundar had never liked the in-between platinum shade because it revealed his mixed heritage; but she thought they looked just like stars and she knew with certainty that her daughter was destined to become a spelljammer one day. Of course she would; like her mother, and her father, before her.

“Do you mind if we just go?” Sylria inquired plaintively. “I don’t think I can stay.”

Her mother shook her head. “No, of course not. Do you want me to take the baby?”

“Just until I get situated on the helm.” She made her way to the helm room and started preparations to set sail, a familiar rhythm that gave her a measure of comfort in the routine.

Yes, they needed to leave, no matter how much Sylria wanted to remain. Narissa must never know about Shaundar’s daughter; not when her own child had been lost, not after she had lost Shaundar too. They

had loved each other so much! It would probably shatter her, and that was the very last thing in the Universe that Sylria wanted to do.

They disappeared into the night after sounding out of harbour. Sylria didn't allow herself to weep until Nedethil had dwindled to just another star in the vast Sea of Night.

Chapter One

It was over. The Champion of Clan Bloodfist looked over the flotsam and jetsam that had once been the greatest fleet in the history of the Scro Empire, shattered and broken like so many forgotten toys. At least, they would be if the blood and body parts weren't floating serenely between them. His blood brother Corin, the clan leader, was no longer pouring blood from the wound in his throat where a stray shard of broken metal from their shattered rail had pierced it, but he was still unconscious and whether or not he would live or die remained very much anybody's guess, especially since the healer was only Sarga's acolyte. Sarga was dead, killed when their primary helm was crushed by rough-hewn accelerator shot. They were adrift in the Void, and all around them the noose tightened as the butterfly-shaped vessels of the Imperial Elven Navy Fleet, easily three times the numbers they had any reason to suspect, swarmed the outer limits of the shattered remains of Borka, prepared to pick them off if they dared to navigate the dangerous, oddly floating rocks and escape their deadly trap.

"Helm's down, sir!" Thorgir, their Artillery Commander, bellowed too loudly through his ringing ears. The smoke of the cannons was still thick in the air, barrels of the eight-pounders cooling. "Shall I get some straws?"

The Champion considered it. Elves thought that orcs kept lifejammers aboard ship as backups because they were evil bastards who had few qualms about wasting lives. And that was true of some orcs perhaps. The expenses of major helms were also a contributing factor; lifejammers were much cheaper. But mostly it was because mages were in much shorter supply than they were among elves, and chances were that if your helm had been destroyed, the best of your three Warpriests was already dead. Anyone could pilot a lifejammer, but they drained life energy, not magic power.

The tradition among the Bloodfist clan was to draw straws. But the Clan Champion knew that none of the others had his training. He knew that the rest of the Clan Bloodfist's dozen Mantis ships, overcrewed to seventy-five apiece for this initiative, were relying on him as their military leader to get them out of this; especially since their Clan Leader Corin was lying in a pool of his own blood, hovering between life and death.

“Sir?” urged Thorgir.

The Clan Champion hissed between his tusks and stood up, Corin's blood running freely from his hands where they'd been clasped around his throat to staunch the bleeding. “Yeoman!” he roared, running for the hatchway, “Signal the clan that I am taking the helm and they are to follow me *precisely!* Invite all who would join us to follow!”

“Sir?” exclaimed the Yeoman, stunned by these unorthodox orders.

“You heard me, damn you!” he bellowed, and he leaped through the hatch and somersaulted so that he was properly oriented to the gravity plane. When he banged open the door into the grapple control room the orcs at the machines started in surprise. The Champion glanced about and his eyes found one of the goblins, who were pumping grease into the right claw gears. “Ghost!” he commanded. “Take the canvas off the lifejammer.”

Tiny Ghost paled. “*Gul, karr,*” he affirmed, probably assuming that he was about to be ordered into the helm himself because the orders from the deck would not have reached him yet; but he obeyed the command.

The lifejammer was innocuous enough; a simple chair, though this one was well-padded for a secondary helm, as though the artisan had been aware of its purpose and was working to compensate. The only visible difference between it and the helm that was now in pieces and likely covered with gore was that this one had thick armrests and was equipped with leather restraints.

“Matey!” came a cry from upstairs. “There’s one of them smaller Men-o-War bearing down on us, sir!”

The Champion stopped hesitating. “All hands prepare to go to full tactical!” he cried back through the brass speaking-tube that carried the orders to the upper deck. “Stand by to fasten restraints,” he ordered the small goblin.

“Sir?” Ghost questioned. But it was too late; the Champion was in the helm.

He felt the familiar spelljammer’s trance take him, washing through his consciousness like water over desert, and his senses expanded to be aware of the ship as if it were his own body. Immediately he was assaulted by an excruciating stab of pain in his fifth cervical vertebra, corresponding to the shattered bridge. There was nothing left of Sarga but a smear; he could see it now as his awareness ran a visual over the entirety of the *Sword of Courage*, their vessel. He would mourn the loss, for Sarga had been a friend.

Their heavy catapult was in pieces, translating roughly to a whiplash feeling between his shoulder blades, and its crew was dead. Part of the upper rail was missing; it was this injury that had wounded Corin, but that was really cosmetic and the Matey barely felt that in his own body at all. Their crest blade was severely warped; they would not be able to use it for its intended purpose, which was to scuttle ships along their keels. The Champion could see the elven ship coming through the strangely-hovering meteors that had once been the planet Borka, and knew he would not be able to get the Mantis moving in time; but its progress was slowed by an unexpected shotput-sized rock with

impeccable timing. The ship took a pot-shot at them anyway. Their last minute effort to evade that stone of the gods turned what might have been a killing blow from a catapult stone into a grazing shot that bounced off of the already-damaged crest blade.

The goblin fastened the leather restraints around his wrists to bolt him into the helm, and then the ankle cuffs were also locked into place. Tendrils of sinister red light snaked their way out of the lifejammer and began to attach themselves to the Matey's blood vessels like macabre veins of their own. A low pitched heartbeat thrumming began to echo throughout the ship, only it was a keening funeral dirge instead of the life-affirming thrum of a magic-powered helm.

The pain really wasn't so bad; nothing like what he'd been expecting, having never been in a lifejammer before. But it did insinuate itself into every synapse and nerve ending. "I have the helm!" he cried. "Katha!"

"Sir!" the Sailmaster yelled back.

"I am taking command of the sail crew. Follow my coordinates *exactly* as I tell them to you!"

"*Gul, karr!*" he returned, though the First Mate knew he must be thoroughly confused.

Suddenly grateful for the rigid chain-of-command, he gauged the position of the oncoming elven ship, and called out, "Pitch eight up, all

ahead full! All hands brace for impact!” And he extended his will to charge ahead with everything in his power.

The *Sword of Courage* rocketed forward. The Champion could hear Sailmaster Katha crying out his orders on the upper deck. They barely got their nose up in time. He figured the last thing in the world the elven ship had been expecting was for the crippled scro Mantis to charge along its forward gravity plane and scour their bow with those skate blades on the Mantis keel. A metallic scraping noise screeched through the grapple control room as the sharp bow of the elven corvette skimmed along the front torso of the Mantis ship, likely leaving a good scar; but then the bow of crystalline wood crumpled in on itself as the Mantis continued along its slightly-upward trajectory. The last thing the Matey heard as the ships parted was the screaming of the corvette’s crew as the heavier Mantis ship disrupted their gravity plane and threw everything aboard forward towards the Mantis. He had a momentary flash of guilt, but there was nothing else to be done.

“Who’s with us, Rathgar?” the Matey called out to his boatswain as they cleared the elven ship’s rigging.

“Sir!” he called back. “We have . . . I’d say twenty Manti and half a dozen smaller craft!”

“Are all the Bloodfist ships accounted for?” he demanded. It would be ideal to get as many as he could away from this slaughter, but his duty – and the true concern of his heart – was with his clan.

There was a delay before the response. The Champion tried not to gnash his teeth in frustration. Every second would cost them lives.

“Confirmed!” Rathgar acknowledged. “All surviving ships of the clan are following!”

“Right then,” the Matey muttered to himself. He was rusty at this. Gods, it had been years. He would need all of his focus and concentration. Muttering a prayer to his gods, he allowed himself to slip deeper into the trance. Becoming aware of a persistent aching pain from the drain of the lifejammer and drawing upon a skill he had developed for his own survival in another life, he used it to fuel his focus.

He sensed the planetoids of Borka before him; could almost smell them as much as see them. “Pitch up twenty!” he cried, and the crew tilted the topsails to aid the Mantis in its climb. “Hard starboard!” he called; and the sail crew hauled close to make the sharp turn. One of the hindmost Manti didn’t make it; the collision tore the ship apart on the iron rock. He realized that he was pulling away from the rest of his impromptu flotilla and he made himself slow down, which was contrary to every screaming instinct he had. The lifejammer didn’t like that; it sent bolts of pain through his synapses like an electric current and he gasped with the strain of it.

There was one advantage to having been kept as far away from the glory as possible, the Champion mused. Their clan was in the best position to escape from this disastrous manoeuvre. By now, most of the

Elven Fleet would be on the other side of Borka, contending with the mines as they followed their prey into the asteroid cluster. The natural lust of battle would take any ship who could find an excuse into the field to claim glory and prizes. So the rear blockade was likely to be insufficient to deal with the force about to be brought against it.

“Yeoman!” he commanded. “Signal the fleet to prepare to receive our orders! And damn the flags! Use the drum signals!”

“Sir?” sputtered the Yeoman in astonishment.

With the searing pain in his resisting nerves, the First Mate was in no mood for questions, never mind the change in procedure. “*Did I stutter?!*” he peeled from the back of his throat.

“Sir! No sir!” gulped the Yeoman; and the drum tattoo rolled out.

The Matey bared his tusks in a fierce grin. The elves might have some of their flag signals decoded by now, but there would be no good way they could have learned the drum code. It wouldn’t have been possible to do this in almost any other circumstance, but Borka was an anomaly; although each body had its own individual gravity, they shared a collective air envelope. The drums would ring out through the air of the shattered world, uniting the intent of the Scro Fleet; and the elves would be none the wiser.

A few moments later the Champion of Clan Bloodfist heard the answering rolls from the rest of his small fleet. This was just as the next band of asteroids rolled into view. "Dive!" he cried out, and the crew hauled in the lower foresails so the Mantis would tip forward and down. When another large floating rock was revealed in behind it, he called, "Brace for impact!" and he felt the gravity of the large stone body pull his wrists against the restraints as it tried to yank him from his chair when they passed under it. Some of the grapple crew were lifted right off of their feet for just a split second and they came down hard when they cleared the planetoid. Ghost fell on his rump.

"Sorry 'bout that," he muttered through the headache that was beginning to set in. The ships following wheeled around the asteroid as well. There was a rotating turret mounted on it and the operators were firing the heavy ballista into the blockade. That gave the Champion hope; obviously the defensive line here had not been completely broken yet. They might escape after all.

The weapons platform cleared, they passed over the craggy peaks of Potemkiz. The Champion felt a pang of sympathy for the Special Forces trained volunteers there, and vowed to come back for them at some point if he could. But there was no time for a planetary landing if they had any hope of escaping the blockade.

A full-sized elven Man-o-War hove into view. The Matey howled, "Fire at will!" Both of their ballistae and the two forward-facing eight-pounder cannons fired and the Mantis groaned and jerked under

the recoil. The Matey moaned as the impact slammed him figuratively in his shoulder-blades, upper back and breastbone. All missiles found purchase and the enemy ship, primarily hit in the larboard wing, spiralled out of control and crashed into the rocky surface of Potemkiz, where it toppled end-over-end until it shook itself apart.

By whatever means necessary, he thought to himself grimly; and hoped there was no one below that he knew.

“Larboard ten, pitch fifteen; execute!” he yelled, just in time to avoid a stray meteor that was about the size of a respectable boulder. The flotilla passed over the obstacle with no mishaps; and then they found the blockade. Just as he suspected, the elves were spread thinly and staggered at awkward points. “Reload!” he commanded.

“Already in process, sir!” their Artillery Commander replied.

The Champion grinned. “I love you, Thorgir.”

“*Nor drakaar*,” the big orc responded dryly. Despite the building strain in his nerve tissue, the Matey was surprised into a laugh.

“All right!” he cried as the blockading elves caught sight of them and their flags started to run up the masts, “Signal the fleet to form into the Minefield with us at the center. Direct the *Warmaster* and the *Starkiller* to form port and starboard. Send the *Greytusk* port of the *Warmaster* and the *Bloodrender* starboard of the *Starkiller*. Have

everyone else fall in to the best of their ability. Tell them to stay in Minefield until we hit the net. Got that?”

“*Gul, karr!*” the Yeoman called back. A moment later the complex tattoos to give these orders rang out over the ship deck. The Champion smiled. He was hands-down the fastest jammer; the *Warmaster* and the *Starkiller* were the next quickest, followed by the other two ships he’d named. The ships began to move into a staggered line, the ones on the bottom spinning so that their keels faced off against the keels of the ones on the top.

“Now,” he said as the blockade began to move to intercept them, “when I give the word, the fleet is to form into the Rock-biter Arrow. Have the *Warmaster* and the *Starkiller* hold the top and the bottom; have the *Greytusk* and the *Bloodrender* hold the port and the starboard. We’ll take point. Copy that?”

“*Gul, karr!*” the Yeoman acknowledged and the drums continued to thunder out the commands as directed.

“Good one, sir,” Sailmaster Katha called down to him. “I think you’ll find a weak spot twelve points off the starboard bow.”

The Champion struggled to stretch out his awareness. The ache in his nerves had begun to itch in that maddening kind of way that he associated with a major injury healing and it was distracting. But he saw the hole in the blockade net that Katha was talking about. The closest

vessel to the already large field of stars was one of those corvettes, which he suspected had been taken from the shipyard at Greela before they were finished growing and hastily helmed and armed to meet the threat of the scro fleet. It seemed to him that their crews were also woefully inexperienced. *I feel sorry for you lads*, he thought with genuine regret. “Good eye, Katha!” he said. “Let the fleet know we’ll be veering starboard for that opening when we form up!” The Yeoman acknowledged his orders.

The Matey was beginning to see why victims of lifejammers would rather die than continue to pilot the helm. With each passing second, the pain in his nerves worsened. The steady, maddening itch was progressing into electric shocks, and he was becoming aware of a slow, draining weakness that felt as though he were bleeding out from a major artery somewhere. Sweat was starting to bead at his brow. He prayed he had the strength to do this.

The ships of the blockade were moving to intercept in the tactical pattern that spelljammers called the Court Dance or “Stitches.” Because they could afford to expend superior numbers, two elven ships made for each orcish vessel; which opened up an even bigger hole in their defenses. They thought they were going to pick off some scattered survivors. The Champion growled low in his throat. Not today. “Have the fleet pick their targets,” he commanded. “We’ll take the leader. Fire on my signal and prepare to ram.”

“S . . .” started the Weapons Master of the grapple crew; but his question died at the expression in his commander’s eyes.

“I did not say, ‘Prepare to board,’” the Champion pointed out.

The Master swallowed. “*Gul, karr,*” he acknowledged. Turning back to his crew, he ordered, “Pull the claws up into the ready position.” The heavy gears and pistons began to grind as the mechanisms were cranked and levered into place. On the outside of the Mantis, the claw-like grappling rams were raised into the position that gave the ship its name. The Matey felt as though his arms were also raised and ready, poised to strike.

“Matey, the first of the elf ships are in range!” announced someone topsides. “Should we . . . ?”

“Hold your fire,” spat the Champion. “All ships hold your fire.”

The drums continued to roll out instructions. Now precise timing would be required and the Matey hoped his navigator’s training was up to the task. He remembered an old shipmate who’d been a gifted navigator and found himself wishing she were here. Though of course, he mused with a smile, this would be impossible. He calculated the distance from the farthest edge of the farthest rocks of Borka. The elves would be waiting for them at the edge of its strange collective atmosphere. If his math was precise, and if his timing and awareness were perfect, they should have just enough time to get out the command by drum signal

before there was no shared atmosphere to carry the sound between ships anymore.

The first of the elven ships began firing their long-range weapons. Accelerator shot whipped past them closely enough that the Matey heard it whistle; but he didn't command evasion because he knew it would miss. "Good, spend that ammo," he whispered with a smile. A drop of sweat dripped into his eye, but he was so deeply in the spelljammer's trance now that he didn't even notice.

Did he smell a change in the air? Was it clearer, like a mountain peak? And was that a shimmer of bluish light he saw before him?

"Punch for the break!" he roared. "Execute attack pattern! Fire at will! Full tactical; nose up! Brace for impact!"

The drums thundered out. The *Sword of Courage* leaped forward and the Matey moaned with relief as the resistance in his nerves released. The other ships began to fall into position as though they had rehearsed it, and their forward weapons fired into the Man-o-War that was suddenly right in front of them. Their bow tilted upwards and the skate blades mounted on their keel followed. The force of their impact was sufficient to slice both of the butterfly ship's wings right off. With a horrific crash the forward deck bent in along the center seam and one of the gears from the grapple rams bounced free and almost took out the Matey's head like a flying sawblade. The corresponding pain winded the First Mate like a broken sternum. "Claws are down, sir!" the Weapon

Master announced in the chaos. The Champion only knew what he had said by reading his lips.

“Make . . . for the Grinder,” the Champion panted when the noise had ceased. His ears were ringing, and he repeated the order to be certain it was heard. “As fast as we can. All ships . . . lock on to us. Set course . . . for the Grinder.”

There were fewer drums now, since they had cleared Borka’s atmosphere and the only ones who could hear them were their own crew. Once again the Champion slowed his pace and waited for the rest of the fleet to catch up. He couldn’t suppress a gasp as the lifejammer fought him with a pain that tore at his nerves as though they were being pulled apart.

But then they pulled away from the elven blockade, the four lead ships right behind him – damaged, but alive – and he felt the odd doubling that indicated that they were about to enter spelljamming speeds. “Brace for spelljamming!” he cried out; and with that, they made enough distance from other gravity planes – ships, planets or otherwise – that they were able to accelerate to the incredible velocity of arcane space travel, leaving Borka and the Elven Imperial fleet far behind them.

There was a moment of stunned, disbelieving silence; and then the entire crew burst into raucous cheers and applause, embracing each other and coming over to embrace the Champion in his prison on the helm. Even Thorgir, Rathgar and Katha came down to laugh and clap him

on the shoulder. Rathgar, the youngest among them, was sniffing and trying not to show it. “Well done, sir,” he beamed. “You saved us all.”

“The Captain?” he asked in response. Immediately joy turned back into tension. The Champion’s heart sank. But Katha put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s all right, lad,” he said. “Cap’n’s lost a lot of blood, but he’s a tough one. He lived through the battle; I think he’s gonna make it.”

The Champion closed his eyes and some of the tension drained from his body, like the life force being drained by the helm. “Thank the gods,” he breathed. If his blood brother had died . . . ! “Damage report, then,” he demanded, once he had collected himself.

“Catapult’s gone,” Thorgir declared. “So’s the grapples.”

“Rigging’s damaged,” announced Katha.

“Our crest blade is scrap metal,” Rathgar put in. “And the primary helm’s gone, as you know. The bridge is destroyed.”

“But all the other weapons are still good,” Thorgir added.

“And the landing gear’s probably a little scratched up, but intact,” Katha piped up. He grinned. “Landing might be a little rough, but it shouldn’t be a problem for you, my lord.”

It was actually better than he’d hoped. “Casualties?” he demanded.

Thorgir looked grim. “You know about the Cap’n, sir. Sarga’s dead. So’s the Second Mate. We’ve got about three quarters crew.”

He nodded slowly, taking this all in. Then his eyes snapped to the idle grapple crew. “You lot. Go help the Carpenter and the Metallurgist with repairs. Warriors, help with the wounded. Off you go.” With sharp orcish chest-pounding salutes the remaining crewmen cleared the deck, leaving him alone with the Sailmaster, the Artillery Commander and the Boatswain. Ghost gave him a long look. “*Nor lakaar, sir,*” he said before he headed topsides.

“Thorgir,” he grunted, “you’re my acting Second.”

“*Gul, karr,*” he agreed with a nod.

“How many made it out with us?” he wanted to know.

His mouth narrowed into a line around his tusks. “Fourteen Manti, sir.”

The Champion hung his head. So much loss! What would happen to the war effort now, he wondered?

“When are you standing down the helm, sir?” Rathgar wanted to know.

The Champion set his chin in a determined expression. “I’m not,” he explained. “Not until we get to the Grinder or until I can go no longer.”

The three scro gaped openly at him. “But sir!” Thorgir exclaimed. “It’s two weeks to the Grinder!”

He nodded. “And until we get there, you need me at the helm. I think I’m the fastest we’ve got and I’ve got training you all don’t. I learned it as a merc,” he replied in response to their questioning looks. It was a lie but it satisfied them.

“You won’t survive that,” Rathgar breathed. “No one would survive that.”

“I’ll go as far as I can,” he told them.

These words were met with silence. But then Thorgir cleared his throat. “I don’t have the authority to argue,” he began, “but as acting Second Mate, can I ask you to reconsider, sir?”

“If not me, then who?” snapped the Champion abruptly.

There was no reply. Rathgar looked away. Yes, they understood the situation. Anyone who took the lifejammer helm was at risk, and his life force was already draining.

“Now leave me to it,” he directed. “The crew needs a CO on deck. Get up there, Thorgir. Rathgar, I’ll thank you to come down in a couple of hours to assist me with the personals. I understand that job would normally fall to the Warpriests, but we need them all for healing the wounded.”

Rathgar swallowed hard. “*Gul, karr,*” he nodded.

“*Nor lakaar* indeed, sir,” Thorgir grumbled, clearing his throat. They saluted and reluctantly, left him alone on the bent and broken deck.

The Champion of Clan Bloodfist leaned his head back and became aware of a flash of burning pain from the drain of the helm. He sighed. And before anyone else came down to see what he was doing, he made use of the opportunity to silently invoke the incantation that preserved his shapechanged orcish form for one more day, since he didn’t know when he would have another chance.

Champion Bolvi Bloodfist, who was also elven pilot Shaundar Sunfall, fell into the spelljammer’s trance; and for the first time in many years, also into reverie.

Chapter Two

In Shaundar's opinion, the desolate world below him suited his temper perfectly. Permafrost was a coin-shaped flatworld, a disk of ice floating in space all by itself, and its varied terrain, from huge ice spires leaning at impossible angles to pitted canyons and cracked sheets, hardly invited landing. *That's exactly how I feel*, Shaundar thought to himself. *Like I'm frozen*. Only the promise of vengeance sustained him these days; a vengeance as jagged and cold as the planet he was descending upon.

Permafrost probably would have been ignored entirely, except that it was the first celestial body that spelljammers encountered after a minimum month-long voyage through the phlogiston from the closest known crystal sphere, and therefore, it was often necessary to touch down there to resupply, or at the very least, refresh a ship's air envelope. So the Imperial Elven Navy kept a base on it, supposedly so that Navy ships could do exactly that. But like in the case of Shaundar's icy spirit, there was more going on beneath the surface than most of the Universe knew.

"Beginning our approach, sir," he informed Captain Madrimlian, his immediate superior officer and an old family friend whom he called "Uncle" in less formal settings, as he willed the flitter to head down towards the forbidding ice. The flitter responded to him almost before Shaundar could focus his intent. Shaundar was a gifted helmsman; by his

reckoning, it was likely the only thing he had ever done really well. Most spelljamming ships responded instantly to his wishes. He even had the impression that most of the butterfly-shaped living ships that were used by the Navy, grown from the leaves of starfly plants, rather liked him. And for his part, Shaundar loved to pilot a spelljamming helm. Making the magical bond that enabled him to see and feel almost as if he were the ship, then flying through the cosmos like a great starbird, was the only thing that still made him feel alive; except, of course, for his rage.

The Captain just nodded. Madrimlian was a high elf from Oerth with long, neatly combed brown hair fastened into a ponytail, and piercing silver and blue eyes that seemed to see more than others did. Though technically just a Captain in Realspace, Shaundar's crystal sphere of origin, Madrimlian answered, in point of fact, directly to Lionheart Command, the Council of Admirals from more than a hundred spheres who were the actual Mithril of the Imperial Navy. Shaundar had vaguely known his whole life that his uncle was involved with Intelligence, but it turned out that he was actually a significant mover and shaker in that branch of the military; respected enough that he had been authorized by Lionheart to create his own project. That project was why Shaundar, and his blood brother Yathar, were here.

Yathar stood close at his shoulder, leaning on the helm with his silver right hand – a mithril prosthetic – and watching out the bow of the little ship at the stars and the glistening frozen diskworld below. Anybody else might have made Shaundar uncomfortable leaning that closely, even though the cramped quarters fairly demanded it; but after everything

they had been through together, Shaundar was pretty sure that they were about as close as two elves could be who weren't lovers, and in many ways, perhaps they were closer.

The contrast between them was striking. Shaundar's hair was corn-silk yellow, neatly tied back into a short regulation ponytail, while Yathar's was an untidy black mop whose concealed cowlick mostly defied gravity. Shaundar's eyes were a light, almost periwinkle blue flecked with unusual platinum sparkles, suggesting water and winter; and Yathar's were the rich hazel-green of summer and flecked with the fiery gold sparkles common to sun elves of their homeworld. Shaundar's eyes were mostly sad; Yathar's, mostly angry.

In their childhood, Shaundar had been bullied and Yathar had defended him from the bullies. You would never guess it now. Both young elven gentlemen – and gentlemen they were, from significant noble families with royal ties – were powerfully built for elves and amazingly strong; the legacy of two years of hard labour on a diet of bugs and blood gruel, followed by a rigorous physical therapy program to restore their starved and withered muscles and tendons.

Their newfound physical prowess would be helpful in the Permafrost Project, Shaundar had been told; but that was about all he really knew about it. It was classified "top secret" by Lionheart, and Shaundar and Yathar had been required to feign their own deaths to join. Shaundar had no idea what story Madrimlian had told his family. He doubted they would believe it anyway – not with Lady Sunfall's uncanny

intuition at work, and not after they had already been “MIA, presumed dead” once before – but it didn’t really matter. Everyone else would believe it, and effectively it was the truth. Coming home, Shaundar had felt like some kind of poltergeist; mostly invisible and out-of-phase with everything, until he lashed out in destructive fury and scared the Nine Hells out of everyone. No, there was nothing left for him there. He might as well be dead.

A vision of a lovely flaxen haired elf maid collapsed in a heap by a small pool, her sea-foam eyes swimming with tears while her lip and cheekbone swelled and scratches on her naked body oozed blood, flashed through his mind so clearly that he could smell the metallic scent of the water and her faint rose perfume. He shook his head to clear it, but the tears still came to his eyes. Shaundar wondered if they always would when he thought about her; which was often.

“It’s not too late to change your mind,” Madrimlian said softly from the gunner’s turret.

But it was. He’d thought he had stood up against the orcs; that they had not conquered him. But he was wrong. The orcs had broken him somehow after all. He drank too much. He was violent and destructive; and he was cold like Permafrost when he wasn’t. He had brought nothing but misery upon his family and his beloved betrothed upon his return. The Admiral was right; the best thing he could have done for anybody would have been to stay dead.

This was the next best thing.

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, *quessir*,” Shaundar told him with a thin smile, “but I’m committed to this.”

“Me too,” Yathar piped up in his slightly deeper bard’s voice.

The Captain returned their tight smiles that were more like grimaces with a similar expression. “All right then; once you’ve hit atmosphere, skim along the planet’s edge and set course for the far side.”

“That’s the one with all the spires, I would guess, sir?” Shaundar inquired. Because there were two suns in the sphere – Aurel at the center and smaller Ballock nearer to the outer edge of it – Permafrost was subject to frequent heating and cooling as it made its rotation in the course of its lengthy year. Since it constantly presented only one surface to the sphere’s centre, that side was the recipient of some heat at all times, while the other was subject to extreme heating and freezing, depending on how far away Ballock was in its orbit. Neither face had much flat terrain as a result, but the far side was a forest of irregular abstract razors; extremely dangerous to fly or land in.

“*Av, Teu’Ruan*,” confirmed Madrimlian with the twinge of a smirk in his voice. “I thought you would rise to the challenge, after the tales of your record performance at Aces High.”

“*Av, quessir*, I will,” Shaundar agreed. He made for the atmosphere. He had little trouble dodging the ice shards in the tiny butterfly-shaped ship.

“Sou’-sou’west for two minutes,” the Captain told him. “You’re looking for an ice formation like the tip of a spear.”

“Sou’-sou’west, two minutes, *av*,” Shaundar replied automatically and steered their craft in that direction. He could already feel dampness in the air that one did not experience in space, making the air seem even colder than it actually was. This side of the planet was shrouded in perpetual twilight, with the light of both suns radiating only from around the other side.

“Won’t that melt when Permafrost is at perigee to Ballock?” Yathar asked Madrimlian curiously.

The Captain smirked a little. “It would,” he concurred, “if it were actually ice. But it’s not. It’s rock crystal, carved to look like ice.”

Yathar smiled and nodded approvingly. “Clever.”

Shaundar’s sharp eyes caught it. “Formation sighted,” he announced, pointing. Still several hundred feet away, it was exactly as it had been described, resembling a knapped obsidian spear tip if it were made of ice instead. A golden nimbus gleamed around it as Ballock’s rays touched its edges. The camouflage was perfect.

“Set ‘er down as close as you like, Shaundar,” Captain Madrimlian invited.

“Av, *quessir*,” Shaundar replied; and indulging his natural desire to be a smart-ass, he guided the flitter, called the *Ni’ela*, or “Goshawk,” so close to the base of the spear-tip that through his link with her spelljamming helm, he could feel the cold stone tickle her wingtip.

Madrimlian just shook his head; though whether from rueful amusement or just a touch of awe, Shaundar couldn’t tell. “All hands stand down,” he grumbled instead, and the two lads gathered up their things.

It was every bit as cold as it had promised to be, and most of the ice here was so thoroughly frozen that it was a deep blue instead of the translucent white he had been expecting. Technically, Permafrost was classified as a water world; just a frozen one. The sky was still black and dotted with stars which Shaundar knew to be glowing lights like faerie fire, scattered throughout the Void. At the edge of the horizon and the larger points of ice that jutted highest into the sky, there was more of that golden nimbus of refracted light, and the blue ice crystals, staggering about at impossible angles like bad abstract art, actually seemed to glow faintly as the whole disk of the world absorbed and refracted light from the other side, even through the snow cover there.

Or was it reflected? Glancing over in the opposite direction, Shaundar was struck dumb for a moment by a shimmering curtain of

aurora that filled the whole sky; mostly blue and green, but lightly shaded with shifting pinks, purples and the occasional teasing flash of yellow, like the skin of a veiled dancer, revealed just a little here and there in order to excite the audience. He had heard of such a thing, but never seen it before. His homeworld, Nedethil, was not only much more temperate, it was nestled in the roots of a giant tree known by spacefarers as Garden, and there was no aurora there. For a moment he forgot everything, even the cold, as he was transfixed by the amazing shifting colours. He was reminded of the Colour Spray Nebula, a beautiful hazard located back in his home sphere.

“You trying to freeze to death?” Yathar asked him eventually. His eyes met that of his blood brother. “Yeah, right,” he acknowledged, and he reached into his haversack to pull out a heavy, fur-lined cloak that did not look as though it should actually fit in the small bag, as well as a pair of fur-lined gloves; standard survival gear for Elven Navy officers. Yathar and Madrimlian, of course, were already wearing theirs.

The three of them trudged along, following Captain Madrimlian’s lead. They didn’t need to go far. He led them to another crystal formation – or was this one actually ice? – less than a hundred feet from where Shaundar had set their flitter down. At first Shaundar could only see his own reflection, ghostly transparent but perfectly clear in the blue ice, and then he noticed that what initially appeared to be cracks were actually too regular for that. They formed the shape of two doors.

Madrimlian held the palm of his hand out to them and spoke something in a language Shaundar did not know. The doors swung inward to admit them. A wave of warm air washed pleasantly over Shaundar. Weirdly, it smelled hot, damp, and earthy.

The entry was a passageway made of blue ice that told Shaundar not much about what else to expect. There was no artificial illumination, but their keen elven eyes made the best of the available light, enough that the faint luminescence of the ice itself was more than sufficient for vision. Another double door awaited them at the end of the corridor. This one was more obvious.

Again, Madrimlian put his palm to it and spoke some kind of command word. The doors opened to reveal a brightly lit reception area with a pretty elf maid in a red-and-silver Marine's uniform sitting behind a desk. Shaundar couldn't see the source of the lighting; it seemed to come from the walls, floor and ceiling themselves. The desk was possibly made of ice as well, or perhaps more of that crystal. There was a couch, a daybed, and two padded chairs lumped around an oval glass or crystal table.

The pretty copper-haired marine – a green elf, *Sy'Tel'Quess* – stood up and saluted as they entered. “Welcome back, sir,” she greeted Uncle Madrimlian cheerfully. Her eyes noted Shaundar and Yathar and she nodded to them in the manner of equals. Shaundar noted the single silver crescent at her collar. Yes, they were all *Teu'Ruani*; Lieutenants. He

returned the nod. “Are these the new recruits you mentioned, *quessir*?” she asked.

“They are!” Madrimlian returned with a smile. “*Teu’Ruan* Tiafel, these are *Teu’Ruani Quessir* Shaundar Sunfall and his blood brother, Yathar.”

“May we come together in love and light,” Shaundar responded reflexively; a formal elven greeting of equals, though technically, Shaundar’s noble title meant that he slightly outranked her. *Quessir*, used in that context, was kind of like “Squire.” He was the son of the Lord of his House, Vice Admiral Ruavel Sunfall of the Realmspace Fleet, who had been a good friend to King Zaor himself.

“May there always be harmony among the People,” Tiafel responded, familiar with the greeting, and a welcoming grin spread across her face. “I see why you picked them, Captain,” she nodded in approval. “Are you going to brief them here?”

He nodded. “Yes, so I’m going to need Captain Wintervale and Lieutenant Starwind. Would you fetch them for me?”

“*Av, quessir*,” she nodded, sketching the Imperial Navy salute, which consisted of putting one’s hand to one’s heart, then extending the arm forward with palm up and open. From my heart to yours, was the message. Shaundar smiled faintly when he thought about it. Even their military carried a message of compassion.

She disappeared behind a door marked with an arcane rune behind the desk. Shaundar contemplated the symbol and winced. He would not want to challenge the wave of destruction that would ensue if the wrong person attempted to breach that door!

“Why don’t you lads have a seat?” Madrimlian invited as he took one of the stuffed chairs and draped his snowy, booted feet on the table. Shaundar looked at Yathar, shrugged, and sat at one end of the couch, though he removed his winter gear first and replaced it into his bag. Yathar did the same and took the other end. Casually, Madrimlian sparked up his pipe and offered the tobacco to the boys. “Thank you,” Shaundar nodded, and he and Yathar brought their own pipes out to smoke companionably. Madrimlian’s tobacco was vaguely peach-flavoured. Shaundar thought he might have to find some of it for himself.

A few moments later, the door behind the desk opened, and Shaundar leaped to his feet, his pipe forgotten and his hands reaching into his belt pouches for his spell components. Yathar was in his full bladesong stance, his long sword extended in front of him and clutched in his mithril hand, with his left one raised in the splayed fingers that would release his magic missile spell.

Standing before them were Lieutenant Tiafel; a small but wiry elf maid with flowing honey-blond hair, clad in another Marine uniform with a single gold Captain's crescent at her collar; and an enormous gray-skinned orc. He was one of the orc leaders; a bigger, stronger and considerably more clever breed who called themselves "scro," wearing

their regulation black leather armour spiked with the horns and teeth of some predatory beast. Shaundar and Yathar were alarmed to see one of the enemy here, in what was obviously an inner sanctum of the Elven Intelligence branch!

But then they realized that no one was disturbed other than them, and they hesitated. What was going on here?

The big orc chuckled low in his throat, his great tusks flashing. "I see they have the right attitude," he rumbled in a powerful basso voice.

"*Quessira*," Madrimlian smiled, "I would like you to meet Captain Talisavia Wintervale –" the honey-blond elf maid nodded – "and Lieutenant Kylann Starwind; or, shall I say, Durok."

"Hanali's tits!" Yathar exclaimed in stunned disbelief. "Is he an *elf*?"

Captain Wintervale smiled. "Yes," she said.

"The Permafrost Project is a secret project to infiltrate the scro and assassinate their leaders," Madrimlian explained matter-of-factly. "We're hoping that if we eventually cut off their military's head, the body will follow. But the scro are far from stupid, so we are teaching elves how to do everything exactly as scro do them. Our volunteers spend more

time looking and acting like scro than they do like elves, until it becomes second nature.”

Shaundar nodded his understanding, awestruck by the scope of it. Elves and orcs had been at war since almost the earliest histories of his people, whose typical lifespans were a millennium or two. The loathing the two peoples felt for each other was almost instinctual. The swine would not expect “dainty, effete, vain” elves to deign to lower themselves to do such a thing; and for the most part, they would be right. It was brilliant.

“Our criteria are simple,” Madrimlian continued. “First, you have to be a mage of considerable capability; good enough to cast *polymorph self*, preferably several times a day.”

Shaundar nodded once again. Of course; that’s how they would achieve the transformation. *Polymorph* was the fabled incantation that changed a caster’s form. How long it lasted depended on how powerful a wizard you were. Shaundar’s would last nearly all day; Yathar’s a little less. Two such spells would see them easily through any twenty-four hour period.

“Second, you have to have a compelling reason to hate the scro enough to participate in this program.”

Yathar cackled a raw raven’s laugh. “No problems there; right Shaundar?”

A vision of five or six orcs holding Yathar down and pulling his pants forcibly around his ankles while he kicked and fought flashed through Shaundar's mind like a flash of lightning. He quelled it quickly. "None at all," he agreed.

Madrimlian declined his head just once. He knew this. It was why he had brought it up to the two of them in the first place. That was just after their escape from the Raven Talon concentration camp on Spiral, when they were still in the hospital, recovering.

Well, recovering the physical damage, anyway. Mostly. He rubbed absently at the whip scar on his pointed elven ear.

"Third," continued the Captain, "you can't be the type of person who does things by the book. We demand creativity, resourcefulness, and roguishness. Quite frankly, we're looking for scoundrels."

Shaundar laughed out loud. It seemed like he and Yathar had been constantly in trouble their whole lives. "You've definitely come knocking at the right door, Captain," Shaundar admitted.

Madrimlian smiled. "I thought so," he concurred. "So then, I take it that you remain interested?"

"Just tell me where I sign up," spat Yathar with venom.

Captain Wintervale nodded grimly in response to this. “Don’t jump in to this too quickly,” she cautioned. “The training is brutal. It’s both physically and mentally demanding. It takes about a year to complete. More elves wash out than not.”

“This doesn’t intimidate me, *etriel*,” Yathar assured her. “I’m ready. Bring it on!” He glanced at Shaundar to gauge his reaction. *Teu’Ruan* Starwind chortled. It was so odd to hear that laugh and realize that it came from an elf!

“If you choose to volunteer for the program,” Madrimlian interrupted, “you go through that door behind the desk. You go naked. You give your things over to me and I send them to your family in a box, thus confirming your death. And you don’t come out until your training is completed and we unleash you on the Orcish Horde. Your families continue to believe you are dead until your mission is finished or the War is over; saying you survive, of course. And I don’t guarantee that, gentlemen. It’s exceptionally dangerous.”

Shaundar accepted that. He had imagined that it would be. “If you change your mind at this point,” he went on, “we will wipe your memories of this place and the program entirely. You will be returned to your families and found another posting that suits your inclination. We may create a false memory for you, or we may chalk your amnesia up to a good clout on the head. You will never be approached by anyone regarding this program again. And if you wash out of the program, or

quit, the same thing will happen.” He met Shaundar’s eyes. “It’s up to you.”

Shaundar did consider it longer than Yathar had; but what did he have to go back to? That part of his life was over. This actually sounded appealing to him. He would lose himself in the training; become something and someone else. “I’m in, sir,” he said simply.

Yathar clapped him on the back. “Outstanding!” he cheered.

Captain Wintervale smiled. “The Navy thanks you, *quessira*. Welcome to the ranks of the *N’Velahrn*. Please strip and give your things to Captain Madrimlian.”

Strip, and place your belongings in this pile, echoed an orcish voice in Shaundar’s head. He shuddered, but he obeyed; as did Yathar.

Captain Wintervale’s eyes widened just a little. Shaundar had expected some reaction. They were marked with whip and burn scars over most of their upper torsos, along with the more usual cuts and nicks from axe blades and daggers. Shaundar’s forearms were peppered with flak marks and there was a large, ragged scar with indented flesh where a compound fracture of his right femur had pierced his skin. Yathar had the missing arm, of course, along with a thin slice from the razor edge of an axe running from his collarbone to his solar plexus. Then there were the other claw marks, and the deep impression of scro tusks on Shaundar’s right shoulder above his shellback tattoo.

"Yeah, that's part of the reason why we're here," snarled Yathar self-consciously. Captain Wintervale looked away, her cheeks flushed.

Lieutenant Starwind had an entirely different reaction. "Honourable scars," he grunted in a complimentary tone.

At Shaundar's raised eyebrow, Madrimlian elaborated. "The scro are a warrior culture and they value scars earned in combat. Sometimes they'll even rub natural pigments into them so that they're more like a tattoo. You might want to consider keeping some of those in your polymorphed form."

Shaundar was baffled by this, but accepted it and filed it away for later as potentially useful information.

"Shall we, gentlemen?" smiled Captain Wintervale sweetly, indicating the door.

"Good luck, *quessira*," wished Lieutenant Tiafel, saluting them. They returned it. Then they went in.

Chapter Three

A wave of damp heat was the first thing that greeted them when they passed through the door. It was like high summer on Nedethil. The walls, however, remained that blue ice; at least, in this room, which appeared to be an infirmary.

A green-skinned male scro (or, scro-in-training, Shaundar supposed) was sitting on one of the cots laid out in the room, while a female scro with gray skin examined what appeared to be a broken wrist. He looked up when they came in and nodded to Madrimlian and Captain Wintervale. “I would salute, *karr* and *karra*,” he said in a rich baritone, the Orcish words oddly nestled in the Elvish ones, “but as you can see, my hand’s in no shape for that.”

“What happened, Herod?” the Captain inquired.

“Oh, just a training accident,” he said ruefully. “I thought I was tough enough to parry a broadaxe. I was wrong. Who are the new faces?”

Captain Wintervale smiled. “This is Shaundar and Yathar; at least for now.”

“Good to meet you both,” he nodded. “Among scro, we would salute . . .”

“Actually, I know this one,” Shaundar interrupted with a smile. He thumped his right fist to his left shoulder, and then extended the arm with his palm open and facing forward.

The “scro” smiled around his tusks. “Not bad,” he said approvingly. “Where did you learn that, elf?”

Madrimlian explained, “Shaundar and Yathar captured Commander Dorin Bloodfist in the Battle of Leira.”

He gave them a nod. “A noble conquest,” he grunted.

The healer then glanced up from her work. Female scro didn’t look quite right to him, but then again, he hadn’t seen many. She had amber eyes to match her amber hair and tusks poked out from her bottom lip, though hers were smaller than those of the males. “Nice to meet you gentlemen,” she greeted them. “I’m Helga, and I’ll be conducting your entry exam. Find a cot and have a seat.”

Yathar and Shaundar exchanged a glance and did as they were told.

“Now for the love of Luthic, stay still while I set this,” Helga admonished her patient. He obediently waited while she shifted the bones of his wrist back into position, grunting again in pain. She then chanted wordlessly instead of intoning an elven healing prayer. Shaundar imagined that saying prayers in Espruar, the elven language, would be bad for maintaining their cover and it seemed to him that this was an

ingenious solution. Whatever she actually did say, it worked well enough. Light radiated from her hands and Herod's wrist knitted itself back together.

"Thanks!" he grinned in that strange, tusk-bearing way of orcish males, twisting his wrist around to test it. "Feels good," he confirmed.

Helga smirked. "Get out of here and try not to have more balls than brains next time."

He laughed. "Whatever you say, Helga," he grinned. He then saluted the party of elves still standing near the entry, as well as the two lads. "Welcome to the program," he said. "Look me up later, but make sure you remind me who you are, because I won't recognize you." And he headed out through a door on the opposite side of the infirmary.

Now they had Helga's full attention. Shaundar tried not to cringe as she made her way over to his cot and began conducting the exam. The last time an orcish female had touched him had been upon his arrival at Raven Talon.

"I'm just making sure you have no major physical concerns that will stop you from succeeding at this program," she explained as her thick-fingered scro hands went about their work.

"Not that I know of," Shaundar assured her.

“You have a lot of scars, soldier.” She indicated the indent in the outside of his thigh muscle. “Bad break?”

“It was,” he admitted.

“Does it cause you any problems?”

“Sometimes it still hurts when it rains,” he confessed. “That’s not going to block my entry, is it?”

She shook her head. “Not as long as it doesn’t randomly give out on you all the time or cause numbness in your leg or something like that.”

“It doesn’t,” he promised.

“Any other major injuries I should know about?” she inquired as her hands continued to move over his body, checking his bones.

“I have a mithril breastbone,” he informed her.

Helga cocked her head and studied him intently. “How did that happen?”

He shrugged. “An ogre kicked me and it didn’t heal.”

She began to examine his torso much more thoroughly then. “You don’t need to worry about that,” Shaundar said. “Honestly, it doesn’t hurt at all. Feels just like my natural sternum. I hardly ever even think about it.”

“I’d like to meet the artificer,” she told him frankly as she poked around the center of his chest with a firm hand. “It’s ingenious. If you hadn’t told me, I would never know.”

“You can find him on . . .”

Madrimlian interrupted by clearing his throat. “Sorry,” he forbade, “that’s not allowed. First rule is that we must never say anything to reveal information about the elves we know, especially those who are involved with the Navy.”

Well, that was going to limit conversation; but Shaundar saw the wisdom of it. “*Av, quessir,*” he agreed.

Helga chuckled. “*Gul, karr,*” she corrected gently.

“*Gul, karr,*” Shaundar echoed. “Right.” Shaundar remembered enough Orcish to understand that one. ‘*Gul*’ meant ‘yes,’ and ‘*karr*’ was ‘sir.’” It was how the elves imprisoned at Raven Talon were supposed to respond to their scro, orcish, and ogre captors. Shaundar had often used the elven “*Avavaen, quessir,*” instead.

“What happened here?” Helga inquired when she found the bite mark in his shoulder.

“A scro attacked him and bit him,” Madrimlian replied on his behalf, noticing his pained look.

“Hell of a bite,” she observed. “What was the matter with your healer, anyway? Most of these could have been prevented with a few minor cure prayers.”

“I was a prisoner of war on Spiral,” he explained softly to Helga. “They weren’t interested in healing prayers for a *gurt*.”

Helga winced. *Gurt* was Orcish for “twig,” a racist term for an elf. “I heard about Spiral,” she told him. “You’re not the first member of this program who came out of there. I’m sorry to hear it.”

Shaundar started as if spiked. “We’re not? Who else is here from Spiral?” he demanded.

Madrimlian smiled. “You would remember them as Marina and Marafel,” he told them, “but now they’re known as ‘Targa’ and ‘Lana’ respectively.”

“I’ll be damned!” exclaimed Yathar with a grin that Shaundar matched immediately. Both elf maids had escaped with them from Spiral when they had stolen a Dragonfly ship and fled the planet. He had thought about them often in the time since, along with all the other members of their makeshift crew. He couldn’t wait to see them again, no matter what form they were currently in.

She shushed them for a moment to listen to his heartbeat, and then nodded. “I think he’ll pass,” Helga confirmed to Madrimlian and Captain Wintervale. “Now let’s look at your friend.”

"Blood brother," Shaundar corrected. He scraped the dregs of his memory; he knew there was an orcish term for that. And then it came to him and he smiled. "*Na'kor*," he said. "He's my *na'kor*."

"Is this going to be a problem?" Yathar asked as he lifted up his silver hand.

She smiled. "I doubt it. *Polymorph* will make it look like a regular arm and I've seen those prosthetics; they function very well. Though I understand they don't quite have the same sensory input as natural limbs."

Yathar cast her a bittersweet smile. "No, sensation is definitely dulled. But I'm not complaining. I'm just glad to have it, to be honest."

Shaundar recalled how during the two years of their imprisonment in Raven Talon, Yathar had been missing his arm entirely, and how much more difficult that made everything. He'd never really thought about how many actions commonly performed in a day actually required two hands before that.

"All right," Helga affirmed after listening to Yathar's heartbeat as well, "you'll pass too. Get going, lads."

"Thank you, Helga," Captain Madrimlian nodded. They followed Herod through the door on the opposite end of the infirmary.

The next room was some kind of portrait hall. The images of about a score of scro lined the hallway. Shaundar assumed that the paintings must be war spoils that had been looted from their enemies. It was fascinating to see scro portraits. They posed for the painters by looking sternly out from their frames, their arms often crossed in front of them or grasping large axes. They always seemed to be wearing that spiked leather armour and odd runes were prominently displayed on their gear. Many even had those runes carved into their tusks and enhanced with gilt.

"Clan runes," Madrimlian explained. "There are twenty-four tribes of scro who represent the ruling caste. We know some of them, but not all of them. Clan Bloodfist you're familiar with." He showed Shaundar a portrait of a scro he recognised. It was Champion Dorin Bloodfist, their former prisoner. The artist's portrayal did not manage to make him seem any more or less formidable than Shaundar had actually found him to be in person, with his huge war-axe slung over one shoulder. The Bloodfist rune was four parallel vertical lines, with two parallel vertical lines, these more widely spaced, beneath them. They suggested the form of a raised fist.

Shaundar saw another rune he recognized, though the scro so depicted was not familiar to him. It was a crudely formed axe shape; a vertical central line with two lines extending at angles from the top of it on each side, which were each capped by a third line to form the edges of the double-headed blade. It was the rune of Clan Bloodaxe. A scro by the name of Garik Bloodaxe had been the Warden of the Raven Talon camp.

The portrait was of a gray-skinned scro who seemed almost as wide as he was tall, thick with muscle that baffled Shaundar's elven imagination. He had fierce red eyes and tusks that were enormous, even by orcish standards, extending to the edge of his cheekbones and protruding outward from his face. His suit of armour was of scale, leather and plate with huge shoulder pieces crowned by what might have been dragon's teeth; probably highly impractical, but certainly intimidating. His breastplate was a great skull formed of adamantite; a heavy, black-hued metal used by dwarves and sometimes dark elves. Upon sight of this painting, Durok (Lieutenant Starwind) saluted it in the scro fashion.

"Ah," Madrimlian nodded. "That's Narok Bloodaxe. We believe that he is the current Overlord of the Scro Empire. Their leader."

Shaundar nodded thoughtfully and did his best to fix that face in his memory; not that he figured that he would soon forget it. If he saw the orc, he would do everything in his power to take him down.

"Why we have these," Captain Wintervale interrupted, "is partially so you can fix the important scro that we are aware of in your memory, and partially so that you can get a good look at what different scro look like so that you can choose a form to use. We'll expect you to alter it from time to time, of course, to cover your trail. These portraits should give you some idea of the variety in features so that you can create a convincing alter ego."

Shaundar nodded again and examined the other paintings more closely. He had seen several dead scro bodies by now, but a closer look might be helpful.

Scro came in shades of green, gray, orange and black. Their hair and eyes seemed to be in every known shade of an earth-hued rainbow, though black or brown hair and orange, yellow or brown eyes seemed the most common, and as Shaundar recalled from having faced them in battle, those eyes often had a faint greenish glow in dim light. The distinctive tusks which extended from where bottom canine teeth appeared in other species ranged from about two to four inches in length on males, and from about one to three inches for the females. They also came in different widths and some even came in pairs, which might be of equal size or differing sizes. Some of them appeared to have mouths full of pointed teeth; others had more normal bicuspid and incisors. Their fingers ended in claws rather than nails, though most were neatly groomed.

Their ears were pointed like an elf's but somewhat more lupine in shape, and their squashed-in noses resembled pig snouts from a certain point of view, leading to epithets among their elven enemies like "pig-faces" and "swine." Hairstyles were an interesting variety of partially shaved, spiked, braided, brush-cut, or worn long in ponytails or shaggy manes. Unlike elves they had body hair, and males also had facial hair, something that had fascinated Shaundar about his captive because elven males did not. They wore it in a plethora of beards or sideburns, and

some were even clean-shaven. None of them seemed to have the moustaches that human males sometimes affected, however.

Shaundar knew from previous encounters that unlike elves, who were rather slender-built (one of the features that had led to the use of the term *gurt* among *scro*.) the males were thick-boned and powerfully muscled and the females were curvy. They were also very large. Shaundar was tall for an elf and not lightly built – about six feet in height and maybe a hundred forty pounds. But the females were at least as big as he was, if not bigger, and the males could range up to nearly eight feet tall and twice his weight or more. That Narok Bloodaxe might be as much as three times as heavy as Shaundar was.

“I’m going to need my spellbook, *karr*,” Shaundar pointed out, “if I’m going to change form.”

“As will I, *karr*,” Yathar added.

“And how do I address a female officer in Orcish, *etriel*?” Shaundar asked Captain Wintervale.

She smiled and replied, “That depends. *Karra* would be the equivalent title for a lady, but it has no military application because *scro* females are not permitted in the military. You had probably just better stick with *karr*. The plural is *karrek*. The plural of *karra* is still *karra*.”

Madrimlian handed their spellbooks to them which he had already acquired from their bags. “In three months,” he warned, “we’ll be

giving you a new spellbook. It will be a folding book that you can compress to the size of a pack of tindertwigs, so it's less likely it will be discovered."

"I've heard of those, *karr*, but why wait?" Yathar inquired as he flipped through the pages.

Durok laughed. It startled Shaundar; he had almost forgotten that he was there. "Because they're going to make us write it in Orcish," he chuckled.

"The only males in scro society who use arcane magic are their Warpriests," explained Madrimlian.

"*Tarrak'zabu* in Orcish, *karr*," Durok inserted helpfully. "There's no way that we think you can pass as Warpriests,"

Captain Wintervale added. "Their customs are a mystery even to most scro, and since they tend to serve as the healers of the scro military, you would be expected to use healing prayers; which, of course, you can't."

Shaundar nodded at the wisdom of this as he leafed through his book of spells. He was certainly no priest. As a matter of fact, unlike most elves, he wasn't certain that he believed in the gods at all. His mother was a priestess of Sehanine Moonbow, elven goddess of the moon, the stars, visions, dreams and reverie, passage between worlds (including death,) and mercy; and he had grown up with a belief in Her powers that

was innate. Certainly his mother was capable of some amazing healing work through her faith; she had healed Yathar’s broken tibia and fibula as a child, and his smashed and destroyed femur when he came home from the War. But he doubted that there could be an elven goddess of mercy who would permit the horrors he had seen in Raven Talon. Either She didn’t exist, or She didn’t give a damn.

“And so,” the Captain was continuing, “you will have to conceal your wizardry when you are on duty. If that becomes habit, you are less likely to be discovered. But if you are discovered, as long as your spellbook is written in Orcish, you might be able to come up with an unlikely, but believable story. If your book is in Espruar, you’re done and so is the Project.”

Yathar snickered. “Most of it will be written in Draconic anyway, *karr*.” Shaundar smiled; that was true. The language of most spell-work was that of the dragons; who, it was said, taught their people magic in ancient times. The Captain wrinkled up her nose at Yathar in a familiar exasperated, but not angry expression. Yathar received that look frequently. It was different from the look that Shaundar often received because Yathar was more charismatic. Mostly the expressions given to Shaundar when he made jests like that were just pained.

Shaundar found the spell in question. He remembered copying it into his book from his friend Garan Oakheart’s book when he had developed sufficient acumen with magic to cast it, and then Yathar had copied it out of his when his studies similarly progressed. *Polymorph self*

was a charm of some complexity; not something limited to the most accomplished archmages, but certainly not for beginners, either. It required nothing but the reciting of a precise arcane rune in Draconic. The pronunciation of this rune was exacting and difficult. Shaundar did not believe he had ever actually cast the spell before. He went over the phrasing to be sure he got it right.

What would he look like as a scro, he wondered? He glanced at the mirror strategically placed at the end of the hall to consider it. Well, there was no reason to change his hair or eye colour; they were a little unusual but not completely bizarre by orcish standards, though he knew the platinum elven sparkles would have to go and he might want to make his hair a little coarser. He figured that a green shade to his skin might work best with that combination of colouring. And he didn't see any need to be ridiculous with tusks; the average male length of just shy of three inches seemed sufficient to him.

He took a few moments to prepare the spell. Most arcane spells required some initial preparation before the moment of casting; drawing arcane runes (in this case, the one for change, the basis of the transmutation school,) anointing with particular oils (for this spell, the drawing of said rune somewhere on the body with vegetable oil of some kind, and Shaundar kept olive oil for just this purpose,) and the careful study and reciting of the incantations used; among other things. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that Yathar was doing the same.

When he was ready, he closed his eyes, visualized the new form to the best of his ability, and incanted the arcane phrase. He felt the words of power vibrate through his body, and the shift took place. Several physical sensations erupted all at the same time. Some places were painful; others itchy. He grunted in surprise, and was startled to hear the sound in a lower register. He had gone from a tenor to a baritone.

Shaundar opened his eyes. The transformation was better than he had hoped. Probably because he thought of himself as tall, since he always had been, he had gained about a foot and a half to reach seven and a half feet, nearing the upper limit of scro height. He had also put on about a hundred pounds of muscle. His skin had taken on a light olive green colour, his eyes had lost their glitter, and his hair had not only coarsened as he had envisioned, but it had darkened just slightly to a more golden-honey shade. His nose had turned upwards in that distinctly orcish manner, and ivory tusks sprouted from his bottom jaw; which had unexpectedly thickened and developed a slight cleft from somewhere, matching his new, thicker bone structure. He bared his teeth at his reflection and noticed that aside from the tusks, and slightly sharper upper canines, they seemed basically the same; which told him that scro who had pointed teeth must file them that way.

His hands looked all wrong. The veins and the bones were all in the right places, but they were so much bigger and the fingers were thicker, and they ended in those odd orcish claws instead of fingernails.

There were some surprises too.

Facial and body hair he had expected, but he was unaware that it would grow so thickly on his face, or that it would sprout from his armpits, arms and his shoulders (not that you could see it well because it was still blond, but he noticed); nor was he expecting a coarse bush of it between his legs, since elves didn't grow hair there. And speaking of between his legs . . .

“Good gods!” exclaimed Yathar in a somewhat familiar voice that had now dropped into a bass register. “What am I supposed to do with that? Bludgeon somebody to death?!” Shaundar glanced over at Yathar to see an equally tall, orange-skinned scro with his blood brother's green eyes (minus the gold flecks) and distinctive black cowlick. His tusks were smaller but his penis was not. Shaundar shook his head. He thought he had misremembered due to shock and horror; but he hadn't.

“No kidding!” Shaundar agreed in a new, rumbling baritone voice.

Durok chuckled sympathetically while Captain Wintervale laughed out loud and took a long, hard look. Shaundar was downright embarrassed by that expression.

Both of them had chosen to maintain some scars and their shellback tattoos, as well as their earrings, including the one with the black pearl that marked them as survivors of a downed ship, Shaundar

noted. Shaundar had not kept the bite or claw marks and Yathar's prosthetic seemed exactly like a natural orcish arm.

Durok nodded his approval; as did Captain Madrimlian.

"Excellent work, gentlemen," he said. "Now all that you need to do is come up with a scro name. There's a list if you want it."

They nodded and took the lists handed to them. Shaundar handled the paper gingerly. It seemed as though these larger hands with their sharp claws would tear it very easily. He glanced through it until he found something he liked the sound of in his head.

"Bolvi," he decided. "It means 'wise'. Let's hope I find some wisdom."

"I'll be Kyrok," Yathar determined.

"What does that mean?" Shaundar wanted to know.

Yathar shrugged and glanced again at the sheet. "It says it means 'fated'. I just picked it because it was the first thing I looked at."

They were issued scro clothing more suited to their new sizes. Shaundar was pleased to see that they also used old sailcloth for shirts and trousers when it was no longer in any shape to be a sail. He supposed that some things were universal among sailors.

The armour was going to take some getting used to, however. It was bulky black leather, studded and spiked. Adjusting straps and buckles seemed to take forever. For the time being it was not marked with any runes or sigils.

Durok nodded. “All right then,” he rumbled. “Are you ready to join the other scro?”

“Ready as we’ll ever be,” Shaundar nodded.

Behind the mirror at the end of the hall was yet another door. They headed in. Quickly they realized that what they had seen so far only barely scratched the surface.

For starters, the entire place was as warm and moist as a jungle. Madrimlian informed them that a mythal had been established to accomplish this. Shaundar was impressed and amazed. Mythals were the kind of magic that only archmages performed; the pinnacle of elven arcanology. They were complicated woven “nets” of continuous, permanent spell effects, requiring several wizards of legendary ability to create, and even then, there were serious risks to body and soul. The fact that such an effort had been expended was humbling, to say the least.

He assumed that establishing the climate was not the only effect woven into the epic enchantment, and that most of the rest were probably protective.

“This is the atrium,” Madrimlian announced, showing them a huge earthen-floored space, far too large to be called a “room,” teeming with plants, many of which Shaundar did not recognize. Most of them were foodstuffs, though there were a few trees, shrubs, and flowers. A medicine ball sized globe hanging from the ceiling glowed with the radiance of magical sunlight.

“I have made a habit of questioning the scro leaders we take into our custody,” Madrimlian informed them. “And because I am a telepath, I scan their thoughts while I’m questioning them. There are some things you can’t find out that way, but others become abundantly clear. I know that Dukagsh, the scro homeworld, is a jungle planet or at least, the area that the scro have chosen to inhabit is a jungle. I know this because they envision it in their minds when they are asked about it. But we still don’t know how to find it on a star chart.”

“Makes sense,” Shaundar grunted.

“Most of these plants are guesses,” Madrimlian admitted. “Scro don’t carry their greenery into the Void like we do. So I have done my best to find jungle plants that we are familiar with that at least look similar to the images I’ve seen in their thoughts.”

“Looks like a jungle to me, sir,” Yathar said encouragingly.

Madrimlian smiled. “Yes, but for all I know, the equivalent native Dukagsh flora is poisonous to elves. Or carnivorous.”

Shaundar nodded. “I understand the problem, sir. Fair enough.”

“The food we’re certain of, however,” the Captain continued. He frowned. “Except that we are having trouble reproducing their native mushrooms. They eat a lot of dried mushrooms and we just can’t make them grow. The druids assume it’s a quality of the Dukagsh soil.” He shrugged. “Intelligence gets first crack at anything taken from our enemies to learn what we can from it, and we’ve recovered all kinds of items from ship’s stores, including dried pepper seeds, which they seem to use for spicing. This enables us to put the druids to work growing them, and you see the result.” He indicated with his arm at the variety of growing vegetables. “I hope you lads like spicy food; we don’t think the scro eat anything else.”

The Captain led them through the atrium to an athletic facility that rivalled anything Shaundar had previously seen, including the equipment at Aces High, the elite flight academy where he had learned some of his very unique helmsman skills; such as preventing his magic from being instantly drained the moment he contacted a spelljamming helm. There were ball-playing fields, track and field equipment, climbing apparatus and weights and other strength-training gear. There was also a target range and a wide variety of practice dummies. Some were obviously designed for sword-work; others, like the one covered in bells, frankly mystified Shaundar.

“Scro are physically stronger than elves, and significantly so,” Madrimlian explained. Shaundar, remembering the prison camp, did not

doubt it. “Strength training will be part of the regimen around here; not that you lads don’t have a head start on that already. And we’ll also train you to kill, gentlemen.” His expression was grim. “You will learn hand-to-hand combat skills, anatomy, tactics, tracking, how to disable a trap and how to pick a pocket. There will also be lessons in culture, language, and behaviour. But you’ll have to be able to adapt, because while we do the best we can to make sure that our research is accurate, this is theory and you’re going to be the troops on the ground.”

Shaundar, who had learned well enough by now that the best way to ruin a perfectly good theoretical plan was to expose it to the enemy, made a non-committal noise of agreement.

Madrimlian then smiled conspiratorially and announced, “Here’s something I think you’ll appreciate, Bolvi,” and he pushed open a door. Shaundar grinned, just about biting his lip because he had almost forgotten about the tusks and he had to set his mouth differently. Inside was the largest, most thoroughly-stocked alchemy lab that Shaundar had ever seen. Cauldrons rested patiently on burners, just waiting for a hand to strike them into life. Beakers, bulbs and phials – some empty, some dripping with strange potions, not a few of which were emitting a soft smoke – rested on stands and shelves awaiting experimentation. He saw a cupboard filled with small alchemist’s ingots; gold, lead, silver, copper, iron, cinnabar. A jar of shimmering mercury sat next to them. There was a shelf filled with jars of exotic oils and minerals such as sulfur, and next to it, another shelf filled with jars that contained animal and monster parts; everything from snake fangs to dragon air bladders, which they used to

fuel their breath weapons but were also significant in alchemy when mixing gasses. Shaundar smiled faintly when he saw a jar that seemed to be filled with ashes labelled, “bat guano.”

“You can’t ever been seen working with alchemy in the field,” the Captain explained. “Alchemy, like magic, is considered the providence of Warpriests and women. But we thought you might enjoy brewing up a few concoctions to take with you. We also hope that some of them will be considerably more lethal than stink bombs.” Shaundar was startled into laughter. Ah, his uncle had heard that tale, had he? Yathar was snickering as well, sharing a memory with him of a happy time.

“This is great, sir,” Shaundar smiled. “Thank you.”

“Now, before you head off,” Madrimlian added, “I have something I have been saving for you, and the Navy thanks you for its use. It was exceptionally valuable to the creation of this program.”

He handed to Shaundar a dog-eared, somewhat tattered book that he recognized instantly. In Orcish, its title would translate to “*The Art of War*.” It had been a gift from Champion Dorin Bloodfist, from the time when he had been Shaundar and Yathar’s prisoner. Shaundar had almost forgotten that he had given it to the Captain when asked for it on behalf of Intelligence.

“Thank you,” Shaundar said, taking the book in his orcish green hands. He remembered how intrigued he had once been by the red

leather cover and the strange Orcish writing, printed with a brass printing press, which was a considerably higher level of technology than the elves usually gave the orcs credit for. He could see that some pages had been folded over to mark them, and often they had been inscribed with annotations or underscoring. Dorin Bloodfist had quoted a verse from it that he could about half remember which seemed particularly relevant to this Project; something about understanding your enemy to learn how to fight him better. He wished that he could remember exactly how it went.

But he supposed that he would be able to read it for himself before too long. And he also supposed that he knew everything he really needed to know about the scro; they were monsters, who tortured elves and sacrificed them in staggering numbers to evil deities. He suddenly found himself faced with the image, and rotting charnel scent, of an enormous pit teeming with smouldering, mostly elven bodies that were swarming with flies and ravens, and he shook his head vigorously to clear it. How could Champion Bloodfist have spoken to him so casually about a warrior making an accounting to his gods, while fighting to defend that place of horrors? His mouth filled with bile.

“You’ll have to leave that book behind when you go into the field,” Madrimlian explained almost apologetically, “just in case somebody makes the connection.”

Shaundar nodded. While he figured that this was unlikely, it was possible. Just as it was unlikely that scro would have any way to find out

which elven soldiers and sailors had conveniently gone missing before the Project, but the potential did exist.

Last, Madrimlian took them to their quarters, which were small and semi-private, designed to be shared by two people. It was actually more luxury than Shaundar had been expecting; being a sailor, he was used to things being cramped and he had anticipated a barracks. He told Madrimlian so.

The Captain laughed. "That comes later, when you're closer to graduation. At this stage, we find that our volunteers prefer a modicum of privacy. The only time we want you in your natural form is here, in your room. This way, you do have the option."

"That's thoughtful," Yathar ruminated. "I imagine that keeping up a false identity all the time gets draining after a while."

"Well, I'll let you lads get to it," the Captain said brusquely. "I'll have Supply send up your gear while you're eating. The mess hall is here."

"*Gul, karr,*" Shaundar returned smartly, and he remembered to salute like a scro. Uncle Madrimlian returned it and took his leave.

A buffet style meal was being served. There was an overwhelming smell of meat and spice. Shaundar recalled from Raven Talon that scro seemed considerably more carnivorous than elves were. He also remembered the hot, peppery violet-coloured beer that had

helped to sustain their lives when they had escaped the prison camp, which had also been poured into the compound fracture of his femur during an interrogation aboard an enemy ship. Ironically, the same peppers that had caused such excruciating pain had also disinfected the gangrenous wound and saved his life.

Scro (or elves polymorphed into scro) of all shapes and sizes were seated at long, wooden tables to eat, laughing and chattering. The language was a strange mixture of Elvish and Orcish. “Let’s go eat, lads!” Durok said cheerfully, clapping Shaundar on the back. Shaundar grabbed a plate and stood in the line. He wasn’t hungry but the military and imprisonment had taught him to eat when he could.

He realized that his unfamiliarity with tusks, combined with the scent of food, was causing him to drool. Having these big teeth sticking out from one’s mouth forced a different way of holding the jaw and lips. He wiped at his face and tried to seal his mouth together more effectively. He wasn’t especially interested in looking like an idiot on his first day, with saliva running down his chin!

Durok smiled at him (it was hard to tell when an orc was smiling because of the tusks, but Shaundar could see the corners of his mouth turning up) and said companionably, “I couldn’t stop drooling the first week. You gotta train the muscles to hold your lips differently. It takes some work. Don’t worry about it too much; people expect it.”

Yathar laughed as he wiped the saliva from his own jaw. “How long have you been here anyway?” he asked.

“About a month,” Durok confessed. “The Project’s still pretty new.”

“Can you tell us why you joined?” Shaundar inquired as something that smelled both meaty and spicy was scooped onto his plate. His stomach turned. It looked like blood gruel. He’d had more than enough of that stuff in Raven Talon. Well, that wasn’t exactly true. They never did feed them *enough* of it. But they had been fed it every day. Yathar sniffed at his with the same expression of distaste that was likely marring his own face.

“I really shouldn’t,” Durok resisted. “We’re not supposed to share personal details of our actual lives.” He sighed. “Let’s just say that I’m the last of my family and the scro are why.”

“I’m sorry,” he said simply. Yathar nodded his agreement.

A much more appealing salad, full of green leaves and topped with a variety of peppers, was added to their plates by a cheerful, shorter scro female (who was still almost as tall as Shaundar in his normal shape) with burnt sienna skin, a shock of black hair and amber eyes. “Thanks Lana,” Durok rumbled.

Shaundar and Yathar both looked up. “‘Lana’?” Yathar repeated.

She wrinkled up her orcish pug nose at him. “Like I know you or something?” she asked.

Shaundar smiled. “Yeah, you do,” he confirmed. “It had to do with leaving Spiral in a Dragonfly.”

Her eyes widened in understanding and she dropped her salad tongs. “Oh my gods! Sh – what are you calling yourselves now?” she cried with joy, and she ran around the counter and threw her arms around him.

Shaundar was surprised to be remembered quite so fondly, considering all that had happened, but very pleased. He returned the embrace and soon Yathar was mixed in there as well. A couple of “scro” looked up from their plates at the commotion. “I’m Bolvi,” he explained, “and this is Kyrok.”

She was grinning. It wasn’t too distorted because her tusks were small. “Damn it’s good to see you!” she exclaimed. “I’ll have to tell Targa!”

“Tell Targa what?” queried a gray-skinned scro female. She was a little taller than Lana, with almost copper-coloured hair and eyes of a warm hazel shade. Shaundar recalled that her hair had been exactly the colour of copper when he had last seen her as an elf. Lana had not changed her hair or eyes from when she had been Marafel, either.

Lana pointed at Shaundar with a manicured claw and beamed. “It’s the Captain!” she announced. Targa screwed up her face in

confusion. “From the Dragonfly out of Spiral!” added Lana with eyes that urged recognition.

That seemed to click. Targa clapped her hands to her mouth. “Captain!” she exclaimed. “Oh, it’s good to see you, *karr!*” She saluted him in the scro fashion. Then she turned to Yathar. “And are you the Matey?” she wanted to know.

“Yeah,” acknowledged Yathar with a tusky grin.

“He’s Kyrok and the Captain is Bolvi,” Lana proclaimed proudly.

“I understand it’s Targa now,” Yathar smiled. “Come give us a hug.” She did.

“I’m sorry, *karr,*” Durok apologized. “I thought you were a Lieutenant. I didn’t realize that you outranked me.”

Shaundar shook his head. “I don’t. I took command of a ship in the name of the Navy in an extreme situation.”

“And he saved our lives,” Targa informed Durok. Shaundar didn’t see it that way, but he let it pass.

Durok stared at them and blinked. “And they didn’t promote you?”

Yathar's lips thinned around his tusks. "No, they didn't," he replied sourly. At Durok's gaping stare of disbelief he added, "The Admiral is not fond of my *na'kor*. He was seeing the Admiral's daughter."

A twisting dagger pain settled into Shaundar's gut at those words. Yes, he had been seeing Narissa; no more now. Admiral Alastrarra was probably thoroughly relieved. He swallowed past the lump in his throat as he pondered his beloved's beautiful flaxen hair, ocean eyes and fey smile.

Comprehension flashed in Durok's eyes. "I see," he said. "You guys should go eat," Targa suggested.

"You're not joining us?" inquired Shaundar, disappointed.

Lana laughed. "Scro females do all the cooking and cleaning and so forth. We'll eat when we're done serving lunch."

It seemed bizarre to Shaundar that there should be such a firm separation between genders. Elves just naturally assumed or assigned tasks according to inclination and talent as they saw fit, and gender was not something they tended to consider in this. But then again, he did not presume to comprehend orcs. Much of what they did made no sense to him. He supposed that this is what he was here to learn. "Okay, I'll see you after, then," he smiled (which took some work around those tusks,) and went to join one of the tables as Yathar and Durok fell in beside him.

Shaundar poked dubiously at the blood gruel and finally managed to convince himself to put some in his mouth. He found that with the spicy taste of peppers added to it, it wasn't bad at all. He still wasn't fond of the texture but it didn't taste like snot. "It's actually edible," he informed Yathar, who was watching him with horrified fascination. He nodded and sampled it warily. "Guess it's okay," he grunted.

Shaundar tried the salad next. He bit into a pepper and chewed it enthusiastically. Immediately his mouth caught fire.

He swore and spat the offending vegetable matter onto the table, but it was too late. The roof of his mouth and his tongue were burning as though they had been dipped in a high-test acid. It wasn't long before his lips followed suit, since he was drooling around the tusks. He grabbed a glass of water and downed it. It didn't help.

Durok glanced over at him questioningly, and then looked down at the half-chewed pepper on the table and his eyes widened. "Oh, shit," he muttered. "That's one of the purple ones! Lana, are you trying to kill your friend here?"

Lana looked alarmed. "Oh, that should have been taken out of there! It was just supposed to be flavouring! Quick, Captain, drink more water!"

By this time his mouth felt as though it had been flayed. He seized a glass from someone beside him and downed that too. It was still no help. As a matter of fact, the burning seemed to be getting worse. As an alchemist, he knew what he needed. “Milk,” he hissed, “do we have milk? Or cream?” It hurt to speak.

“Here!” cried Targa, running from behind the buffet counter with a bowl of something white. “Yogurt,” she explained. Shaundar snatched it out of her hands and started shovelling it into his mouth with his bare hands, rubbing it onto his tongue, the roof of his mouth (which made him gag, but he ignored that,) and his lips. It took some time, because yogurt was nowhere near as strong a base as this pepper was an acid, but it helped to mitigate the burning. Women from the kitchen brought him more yogurt and sour cream. By this time he had, of course, gathered a crowd.

“Wow!” Yathar exclaimed. “Are you okay?”

“Ow,” said Shaundar.

Lana was contrite. “Oh dear, your lips are blistered!” she lamented. Shaundar was reasonably certain that so was his tongue, palate and throat.

“You’d better get that treated,” Durok suggested. “I’m amazed you can talk.” They took him back into the infirmary.

Helga shook her head at him. “You’ve been a scro for a little over an hour and you’re back to see me already?”

Shaundar tried to grumble, “Just my luck.” It came out as “*Us ai uck.*” She intoned a healing prayer, clucking at him with disapproval.

“What in the Abyss did you try to eat a whole purple pepper for?” Captain Wintervale demanded.

Perfect. Shaundar seemed to cultivate exactly two relationships with his commanding officers; they either loved him like a son, or hated him like a dagger in the genitals. He could tell what kind of relationship he was going to have with Captain Wintervale. “Thought I would show off in front of the other troops, *karr,*” he returned smartly. That’s probably what she thought he was doing anyway.

To his utter astonishment, Durok clapped him on the shoulder and laughed. “That’s the right attitude!” he cheered. “You’re a braver man than I!”

“Well, start smaller next time,” recommended the Captain, mollified. “Carry on, Lieutenant Bolvi.”

He began to salute in the elvish fashion – a habit ingrained from his childhood – but quickly changed it into an orcish salute. The Captain returned it and headed out.

Shaundar didn't bother to explain to anyone that he had been kidding. This was going to be interesting.

Chapter Four

“Wake up, sir,” Rathgar urged him gently.

The Clan Champion blinked and focused on the boatswain’s face. The scro was deeply concerned. “You were beginning to worry me,” he confessed. “You were just starting into space without blinking.”

Shaundar, now known as Bolvi Bloodfist, shook his head. He thought it was strange that he would reverie now, when it had been years since he’d been able. He wondered if it was the drain of the lifejammer. Perhaps his life was flashing before his eyes. He chuckled a little. “Sorry to scare you, my friend. What’s our status?”

“We’re three hours out of Borka,” he was informed. “There’s no sign of the Elven Fleet but of course we can’t be sure. Repairs are underway and the butcher’s bill is being paid in the galley. The Cap’n’s status is unchanged. How do you feel, sir?”

“Sleepy,” Shaundar admitted. He could only remember one other time in his life when he’d been this tired, and he tried to think about that as little as he possibly could. Sapped life energy, he imagined. Was he shortening his lifespan or simply depleting his vitality? Was there any way to heal what he was doing to himself?

“You asked me to ‘assist you with the personals,’ *karr*,” the boatswain gently reminded him.

“Oh, right.” In the EIN, it was part of the assigned duties of the off-duty helmsmen to see to the needs of the active pilot, but all the Warpriests were busy or dead. “I’ll need you to collect a urinal and a bedpan; there don’t appear to be any at hand. And I’ll need you to rig a shelf nearby so that I can access them.”

Rathgar shook his head. “You know, you don’t think about stuff like that, my lord,” he observed. “No one ever wonders how in the Hells the jammer takes a piss when he’s in the helm. The bridge is a mess but I’ll find something. Anything else, sir?”

“I could use a drink,” Shaundar added. “And do you think you could bring me my *nardek*? It would be good to have something to do.”

Rathgar frowned. “But your hands are bound,” he pointed out.

Shaundar smiled a little at his own foolishness. “Right. I forgot.” He sighed. “Well then, do you think you could find some time between your duties to play your *nardek* for me?”

“I would be honoured, sir.”

“At the change of the watch, I’ll want to see the senior command staff and the NCOs down here,” he commanded. “And give an all-stop to the fleet at that time.”

“*Gul, karr.*” He saluted and set out to fulfill Shaundar’s requests.

Shaundar shook his head. Who would have thought he would ever have absorbed so much of scro culture that he would learn to play the *nardek*? And that doing so would become so soothing to his soul that he would want to play when he was terrified to the marrow of his bones? He remembered how awkward it had all been at the beginning . . .

Shaundar awoke with a start, more than a little disoriented. Where in the Universe was he? “Rise and shine, Lieutenant,” an unfamiliar voice commanded. “The day begins at four bells of the morning watch around here.”

Now it all came flooding back. Yes, he was on Permafrost. He thought ruefully that it way too warm to be anywhere named Permafrost. As a matter of fact, he was actually sticky with sweat. Something smelled acrid and musty.

As he gathered his wits about him, he realized with some surprise that he had actually slept last night, and slept well. This was the first time that Shaundar been able to find proper rest since he became a prisoner of war, and he knew he probably could fall back into sleep for several more hours if he were allowed to. Certainly his body was eager to do this. Was it that he was finally doing something to get back at the swine that had eased his angry soul and troubled mind?

“I’m up,” he muttered groggily.

“We run a ten hex-length warm-up first thing in the morning,” the owner of the unfamiliar voice explained with sadistic smugness, “so you’ll want trousers and not much else. Then it’s calisthenics for twenty minutes and two hours in the gym. After that we get fifteen minutes to shower and shave before morning mess. I’ll be back to show you how to do that.”

Shave? Shaundar recalled that orc males had facial hair. He rubbed at his chin. Yes, it was bristled like sandpaper. Weird.

“Oh dear gods, what is that *smell*?” demanded Yathar as he dragged himself into a sitting position and wiped his face with his hand. He then glared quizzically at his palm.

“Orcs grow beards,” Shaundar explained.

His eyes widened. “Oh, right!” he exclaimed. Then he wrinkled his nose, sniffed at his armpit, and gagged. “Oh Hells, that’s *me*!” he cried. “That’s disgusting!”

Their would-be mentor shrugged. “Orcs have a musky body smell,” he explained patiently. “It’s better once you shower.”

Yathar scrunched his face into a pinched raisin of revulsion. His request was downright plaintive. “Can’t I use cologne or something?” he pleaded.

Shaundar shared his opinion completely. He couldn't stand the body odour of orcish male. It made him nauseous.

Their instructor laughed at them. "They'll call you girly and tease you about being homosexual, and both are considered insults and excuses for derision."

Shaundar shook his head. Elves did not share this view of the world. He couldn't imagine why being feminine, or being interested in one's own gender sexually, would be a source of ridicule. Shaundar himself wasn't, but he had experimented as a young Midshipman; most young elves did. He started to dress as the other Marine fidgeted impatiently.

They followed their guide, who was in a green-skinned scro form, into the atrium. Lana and Targa were already stretching. They were clad in something that resembled a two-piece swimsuit. Targa raised her hand and Lana waved cheerfully.

They ran around the enormous atrium, calling cadence. This was a new experience for Shaundar, who was in reasonably good physical shape for a spelljamming mage; but he was no ground pounder, and it was a challenge for him. His only consolation was that Yathar, Lana and Targa were not doing much better. They had withered away to nearly nothing in their imprisonment, and while they had been practicing exercises to regain their strength and flexibility, endurance running had not been part of the program. After the calisthenics he was puffing, and

salty orcish sweat was dripping off of his nose into his eyes and mouth. Captain Wintervale called out a constant barrage of abuse to urge them to greater levels of performance. She did not scare him, and so all this accomplished in Shaundar’s case was to irritate him.

They were already tired when they found their way into the gym. It was filled with all sorts of weights, medicine balls, sandbags, and other items intended for improving physical prowess. Yathar smirked challengingly at Shaundar. It was almost starting to look natural around those tusks. “You ready for this, wimpy?” he sneered affectionately.

Shaundar laughed out loud. “Bring it on, noodle-arms!” he chided back, and they went to it.

They started with a hundred fifty pounds on the bench press just to get warmed up. Then they switched it up to a hundred seventy-five and did three sets of ten repetitions. Apparently this was unusual and before long they had collected an audience.

“How much can you lift, sailor?” Captain Wintervale asked Shaundar curiously when he placed the last weight on its rack, with Yathar spotting for him. “I thought you were a spelljammer.”

“I don’t know, *karra*,” he huffed. “I’ve been doing physiotherapy and this is all relatively new to me.”

“Do you think you can manage two hundred pounds?” she inquired. Her eyes were alight with fascination.

He shrugged. That was probably his upper limit, but, “Maybe,” he replied.

“How about you, Lieutenant?” she asked of Yathar.

His blood brother offered her the same shrug. “I’m not sure, *karr*.”

The Captain nodded solemnly. “Why don’t you lads give it a try? Lieutenant Kyrok, you go first. I think Lieutenant Bolvi needs a rest.”

Yathar smirked again. “That’s because he’s a crybaby,” he jibed.

“When I get my breath back,” Shaundar was inspired to threaten, “I’m going to kick your ass for you.”

Yathar lay out on the bench and placed his hands in position as Shaundar added extra weights. Shaundar prepared himself to grab the bar if necessary. “Ready?” Yathar asked him.

Shaundar nodded. “Ready.”

Yathar grasped the bar and heaved it up with a grunt. His face turned an alarming strawberry colour. He lowered it and did it again, and he managed one more time before he let the bar half fall into its cradle, wheezing. The gathered soldiers applauded.

“Congratulations, Lieutenant,” the Captain beamed. “That’s a new record.”

“Your turn,” Yathar dared Shaundar cheerfully.

Shaundar was not at all certain of his ability to match that, but he stretched out on the bench and clutched the weight bar in his fists anyway. He exchanged a silent look with Yathar, and then he bore the bar up, making some kind of rough noise in the lower part of his throat. His arms trembled and his pectoral muscles burned with the effort of it, but he managed the burden. Lowering it without dropping it on his head was almost more difficult, but he succeeded; and then, blowing out air in a sharp whistle, he hefted it a second time. The iron bar wobbled dangerously as he brought it down, and Yathar readied his hands to catch it, but it wasn't necessary. Shaundar braced himself and found the reserves of his strength, and with a snarl he jerked it upwards for a third time, matching Yathar's record-breaking feat. The bar teetered as he brought it back down but Yathar helped him to steady it into its holder.

“Well done, gentlemen,” the Captain praised them as the audience applauded him as well.

Shaundar didn't think of it as being terribly impressive; he was reasonably sure that any of the three boatswains he'd served with would be able to top that on a warm-up. But then he considered it, and it occurred to him that in order to be part of this program in the first place, you had to be an experienced mage. The contemplation and study required was not conducive to physical exercise, and even in a combat situation, Navy spellcasters were either in the helm or protected at the back, where they could chant formulas and make the complicated

gestures of magic without being interrupted by the imminent threat of being shot or impaled. But even if Shaundar had not required extensive physiotherapy after his incarceration, he'd grown up on his father's ship, and Lord Sunfall required his son to work rigging and swab decks when he wasn't spelljamming. As to Yathar . . . Well, not only had he been through the same things that Shaundar had, but he was a bladesinger, a practitioner of an ancient elven martial art that combined swordsmanship and magic in a beautiful and lethal meld. So compared to most other mages, he supposed that they were downright burly.

Shaundar chuckled to himself. Marafel had given no indication that she had any kind of magical talents when they escaped Spiral. Perhaps she had been keeping that knowledge as a kind of "Paladin up her sleeve," so to speak. Given the circumstances, he could understand that.

Well, this explained the need to spend two hours a day pumping iron, he supposed. For an elven mage to reach anything approximating the physical prowess of a typical scro would require brutal training and work.

After the workout, he chose to try his hand at shaving before he did anything else, to be certain that he had enough time in which to do it before the morning mess. It was somewhat tricky but he was fairly dexterous and he had it figured out, at least passably, within a few minutes, though the so-called aftershave "lotion" was a bit of a shock to his uncomfortably stinging face. He managed not to cut himself too badly.

Shaundar could think of *one* occasion in his life when he had been more grateful for warm water in which to cleanse himself; but only one. He let the water run over his aching, sweaty green shoulders for several minutes, long enough that he had to run to morning mess and still only managed the rear of the chow line. Yathar had been similarly delayed, so they were stuck with the dregs of the meal; mostly more blood gruel. They were so hungry that they didn't even hesitate.

His *polymorph* spell started to wear off near the end of the meal. Durok grabbed his shoulder. "We try never to be seen casting spells," he informed Shaundar helpfully, "so that hiding it becomes habitual. You might want to go to the privy."

Shaundar excused himself and renewed his spell in privacy. It was strange to see the big green orcish hands diminish into his finer-boned, long-fingered peach-coloured elven hands, and then expand back into the thick-fingered mitts of a scro. Some things remained constant – the basic shape and form of his bones, the calluses from years of sword-work, the spider-webbing of his veins – but the contrast of scale, and those thick orcish claws, were very odd.

After morning mess they headed into the training room where Shaundar had seen the practice dummy with all the bells, and then they all strapped on gloves. What followed was the oddest martial arts class that Shaundar had ever seen. Completely in contrast to the stylized, specific, almost ritualistic “stanzas” of bladesong, this was a rough and brutal style of hand-to-hand combat. It looked to Shaundar like a bar

brawl; just a bunch of guys roughing each other up with whatever they had at their disposal. But then he realized that this “Whatever they had at their disposal” philosophy actually *was* the fighting style. Brawlers were interrupted and asked why they had made particular manoeuvres, why they had gone left instead of right, why they had brought a knee up into the solar plexus instead of bringing an elbow back. Alternatives were suggested and ideas put forward. He noted that Lana turned out to be a little scrapper, but Targa seemed completely lost. The only padding was on their hands.

A green elf with facial scars that ruined one intense amber eye demonstrated different options when fighting from a chair. Shaundar tried to pay close attention; you never knew when such a thing might come in handy. He learned that there were all kinds of things you could do to upset the attacker’s center of gravity, and that a table in a pub was full of improvised weapons. After the demonstration was finished, the instructor directed the group to pair off and strode over to where they were standing.

“My name is Kael,” he announced without preamble. “I’m a Marine Captain. You’re the new recruits? Has anyone ever shown you two how to throw a punch?”

“*Gul, karr,*” Shaundar nodded.

“I’m a bladesinger, sir,” Yathar informed him.

“Let’s see,” he said. “Durok, show ‘em how it’s done. Try not to hurt ‘em too badly.”

Durok saluted. “I’m just here to see what you can do,” he said as he faced off against Yathar. “Show me what you’ve got and we’ll go from there.”

“How rough should I be?” Yathar wanted to know.

“Give him what you’ve got,” Kael told him.

Yathar dropped into the graceful, poised defensive stance of bladesong, which looked wrong somehow on an orc and seemed awkward in those heavy war boots. Rather than holding up his sword, waiting to strike, Yathar hovered his hand up beside his head like a dancer’s. Shaundar had seen this drill and knew what was to come.

After a moment, when he realized that Yathar was not moving, Durok slapped aside Yathar’s hand and pressed in for the attack. But Yathar was too quick and he simply wasn’t there when Durok arrived. He took down the marine by an elbow to the face that left him dazed and bleeding.

“Not bad,” grunted the green elf in satisfaction. “It’s nice to not have to train a quill-neck for a change. But it looks too elven. You’ll have to unlearn that.”

“Are you all right?” Yathar asked Durok.

When he recovered his senses, he just laughed. “I’ve been through worse,” he said cheerfully. “Good shot!” And Helga healed his concussion, but his nose was still bleeding so she just stuck rag bits in his nostrils and he carried right on with practice as the blood turned the rags red.

Shaundar didn’t fare too badly when it was his turn. He had grown up in a military family and his father, who had been one of the legendary *Akh’Faerna* of Cormanthyr before he joined the Imperial Navy, had insisted that Shaundar not neglect his sword-work, even though he was a wizard. “You won’t always be able to rely on your magic,” Ruavel Sunfall had counselled his son, “especially as a helmsman.” Never had Shaundar been so glad of this advice. Having trained to use two swords as easily as one, the rhythm of brushing to distract, parrying the attack and returning one of your own was as natural to Shaundar as walking. It took him a little longer that it took his blood brother. He ended up with more than a few bruises and Durok almost had him with a sweeping kick that he didn’t anticipate, but a solid blow to the maxillary nerve with the side of his fist again caused Durok to reel while he blinked the pain-stars out of his eyes.

“Good job,” Kael observed. “A little more aggression and we’ll make an orcish warrior of you yet. Durok, go get a healing prayer before the concussion causes bleeding on the brain. You can’t afford it.”

Following that was a class that Yathar quickly dubbed “little assassin’s school.” It was a class on how to kill people more effectively. It

started with an anatomy lesson; where the major arteries were in the body, where the important nerve centers ran, how it all fit together. Shaundar had never made a study of this kind of thing before and he found it all intrinsically fascinating.

Then they put it to practical use. If you pierced the femoral artery, for example, a person would bleed out within ten minutes. If you stuck a knife just so at the base of the skull, you could kill a person instantly; and if you shifted it slightly and approached it from a different angle, you would completely paralyze your target instead. You could choke a person to death with a garrote, but you had to make sure that you held on for at least ten full minutes, because prior to that, the target was likely to simply pass out from the suffocation. Breaking a person's nose in exactly the right way wouldn't kill anyone, contrary to myth, but it would blind and distract an opponent with debilitating pain. Stabbing someone in the kidneys was almost invariably lethal, and had the added benefit of paralyzing the body and disabling any response due to the excruciating agony it inflicted. Slicing the throat to silence a person was much more difficult than it sounded, because the voice box was buried deep; it was easier to hook a blade behind the esophagus and tear out the cartilage there as though cutting through gristle – and then, of course, your foe was dead anyway.

Part of the class was study and theory, and part of it was practical application of knowledge learned. Some of this work also included training in stealth techniques. The bells were to teach them how to lift things from a person's body or clothing without being noticed. Lana

was brilliant at it, of course, and Yathar seemed reasonably apt as well. Shaundar didn't really know what he was doing, but his natural dexterity saw him through, and Targa seemed to have an innate talent. She also intuitively understood all of the academic instruction in anatomy and its relevance to the assassin. Shaundar resolved never to cross her.

Madrimlian faced them all sternly near the end of the class. "One of the hardest things you'll ever have to face as deep cover operatives," he said, "is that you will inevitably be forced into a situation in which you will have to kill an elf. *When* that happens –" he stressed the first word – "you must not hesitate. The war effort depends upon the success of your mission, and blowing your cover will claim your life. Consider them as what they are," he urged; "casualties of the war against the orcs, no different than the casualties of a naval engagement."

The ladies left early to make lunch. Shaundar asked the instructor, "Karr, doesn't that mean that our female soldiers are missing out on important training?"

"They're getting other training that's equally important, *Gor'tar*," Kael informed him (which, Shaundar had learned, was the scro rank that most closely approximated 'Lieutenant.'). "Scro women are expected to know how to care for a household, and many of our soldiers are not inclined that way so they need the practice."

Shaundar thought ruefully of the pepper salad yesterday. "*Gul, karr*," he nodded.

They were so ready for lunch that he and Yathar led the chow line. The main course appeared to be some kind of sausage roll, accompanied by a pile of bitter greens covered in an unbelievably hot sweet pepper dressing. Shaundar bit into the sausage rolls to discover that they were equally hot, both in terms of temperature and spiciness. They didn't cause blisters, though, so he did not let this stop him.

After the meal they were taken into a section of the base that Shaundar had not seen yet. It turned out to be an enormous hanger, under a domed roof with a visible seam down the center of it, which Shaundar assumed marked the opening in the hanger doors. And the hanger housed three ships. One was a Scorpion ship that was slightly scorched, the second was a completely undamaged Ogre Mammoth, and the third was a very battered Mantis ship. Shaundar had encountered all three ship designs when fighting the goblinoid and orcish forces, though he had never actually done battle with an Ogre Mammoth, and the only one he had been aboard was a Mantis; not something he cared to remember.

They were taken onto the Scorpion and encouraged to familiarize themselves with the details of the ship layout. Shaundar systematically went through each deck, starting at the Battle Deck with its enormous heavy catapults. He recalled how much damage one of those great big boulders could cause when they collided with the hull of an elven Man-o-War.

To his elven perspective, the scro were a much more Spartan people than Shaundar's race. Elves created everything as a work of art, even the most simplistic of objects. The best that could be said of goblinoid construction was that it was functional. The long hours over three years that he and Yathar had spent labouring in "the Factory" at the Raven Talon prison camp had given them some insight into the Scro method of craftsmanship. Mass production and bare bones basics were the rule. There were no elaborate brass railings, no decorative portholes, no embellished tapestries or furniture, not even any personal carving in the Midshipman's berth; though there was some graffiti in a bastardized Draconic script that Shaundar thought might translate to a highly improbable sexual act involving the Captain and the First Mate.

Relics of the ship's former crew had been left for the would-be infiltrators' perusal. Shaundar gathered that it was likely kobolds and goblins who shared the Midshipmen's berth, which was effectively a smelly rathole wedged in next to the ammunition. There were stinking blankets and filthy straw, mingled with the remains of horded food, much of which had been worried at by rodents.

Extra crew quarters spilled over into the mess, which struck Shaundar as a very bad idea, having been taught from his early childhood days as a young Midshipman to be fastidiously clean in order to prevent disease. The close living quarters of a ship were fertile breeding grounds for all sorts of poxes and fevers, and mixing them with the filth of a galley seemed to him a recipe for trouble. But then again, he understood that orcs whelped litters. Maybe life just wasn't as precious to them.

The Captain's quarters weren't even entirely private. His living area was sectioned off by a bamboo screen, and it was every bit as minimalist as the rest. A carved round oaken table, which was obviously elven work since it was decorated with filigreed tree patterns, was prominently displayed, however. Shaundar wondered if it had been taken from conquered Spiral and resisted the urge to drive his fist through it.

The helm room was even stranger. The helm itself appeared normal enough; just a big, overstuffed chair, really, though it was much more generously proportioned than the helms Shaundar was familiar with to accommodate the scro's larger frames. But the room itself appeared more like a temple than the hodgepodge pilot's home away from home that he was used to. He doubted that he would find drawers stuffed with erotic literature or copies of the Gnomish *Kama Sutra* in this solemn place, especially since one entire wall was dominated by two enormous inlaid phosphorescent green eyes, underneath which was some sort of shrine. Shaundar, like most elves, was comfortable with his sexuality, but even he would find it awkward to spend any quality time with erotic art and his hand in the presence of that!

The shrine itself, however, might have been at home on an elven ship, except that the altar cloth was black and green, adorned with the same piercing eyes. He supposed that he had been expecting something more barbaric, but it was very civilized; from the strange musky resin incense whose scent Shaundar didn't recognize (and he actually could identify several, since his mother was a Priestess) to the finely crafted brass censer, to the beeswax candles, formed of the same fine white wax

as the expensive temple candles he was familiar with from his youth. There was even an elaborate book stand, also crafted of brass, but the book had been removed.

The other chair in the room was considerably more menacing. It was a heavy wooden straight-backed monstrosity where the first was more like a recliner, and ominously, its solid armrests and sturdy legs were equipped with thick leather restraints.

A lifejammer. Shaundar had heard of them, of course, but never seen one. Just as a spelljamming helm converted magical energy generated by a spellcaster into motive force to propel a spelljamming ship, a lifejammer converted the life energy of a strapped-in prisoner into motive force. According to rumour, sometimes the strain was simply too much for the captive and he would just die outright. Shaundar wondered with morbid curiosity whether or not a lifejammer's victim would see things as if he were the ship like a spelljamming pilot would; not that he had any intention of finding out personally! He supposed that it must work in a similar way, or it would not be possible to fly such a ship.

The machinery that controlled the ship's "claws," which were actually deadly grapples, as well as the complicated mechanisms that ran the elaborate oars which were the "legs" of the Scorpion, required some special training to operate. They were all driven by a complex set of levers and working them was almost counter-intuitive. Pulling back on the levers, for example, thrust the legs forward. Shaundar and Yathar

spent the afternoon learning to drive the ship and manoeuvre the claw grapples proficiently.

Dinner looked promising but smelled as though there had been an explosion in the hold of a ship carrying peppercorns. It was some kind of noodle dish with strips of meat in it, and it was covered in a gritty dusting of cracked black pepper on some kind of oil-and-herb dressing. Durok was chuckling.

“What’s so funny?” Yathar wanted to know.

“It’s the *hargol*,” Durok snickered. “It’s a scro ‘subtle’ dish. Lana put too much pepper in it. That girl has got to be the world’s worst cook.” He speared a few noodles and meat strips on his tines, sniffed them dubiously and put them into his mouth. He chewed it almost reluctantly and with his nose wrinkled.

Yathar shrugged. He had already eaten about half of it. “It’s not bad,” he argued with a full mouth.

Shaundar picked up a meat strip and brushed some of the pepper bits off of it before he put it into his mouth. It actually wasn’t bad at all, in his opinion; though certainly, the sheer amount of pepper was more than a little overwhelming. He also thought he noticed green and red peppercorns and some cubebs as well.

“So, do you like it?” piped up a hopeful voice behind them. Startled, Durok inhaled enough pepper to trigger a coughing fit, and

Shaundar whirled around to see Lana behind him, smiling hesitantly. Shaundar was still chewing when Yathar replied, “It’s good!” and Lana went away beaming.

Durok took a drink of watered pepper ale and cleared his throat. “You shouldn’t have told her that,” he rumbled.

“Why not?” demanded Yathar as he scraped the last of the pepper sauce off of his plate. “I thought it was fine.” Shaundar wasn’t too sure about that, but he didn’t figure it was worth arguing about.

The last thing on the schedule for the day was a couple of hours of studies in the scro language. Shaundar was attentive and focused, though two hours of conjugating verbs in Orcish made his head ache. Still, he was very motivated; he really wanted to read the book that had been gifted to him by the Champion Dorin Bloodfist back in a time that felt like a thousand years ago.

Afterwards, the trainees were given a couple of hours of free time. Shaundar lit a pipe and tried to spend it reading, but he found himself unable to concentrate. It was not often that he could just sit and read for pleasure these days without thinking of Narissa. They used to curl up under trees or statues of elven deities on the island of Evermeet, Narissa’s slender form tucked under Shaundar’s arm in a perfect puzzle-piece fit, and study and discuss magic together. They were happy times but now the memory brought only pain. After a while, he gave up with a

sigh and went off to the gym instead. Keeping busy kept his mind off of things, he found. He did some stretching exercises and hit the weights.

Yathar came to join him after a few minutes. “What’s on your mind, *teu’revanthat*?” he asked softly. The elven phrase translated roughly to “soul friend” or “brother in spirit.” Shaundar supposed it was a little like the Orcish *na’kor*.

“Narissa,” he replied simply.

Yathar sighed sympathetically. “I miss Tyelatae too,” he confessed. Shaundar looked up, almost surprised to hear her name. Yathar had not mentioned Tyelatae since before their imprisonment. She was another Midshipman that the two young elves had grown up with, and like them, she lied about her age to join up with the Imperial Navy when the War broke out. In their ship’s first major conflict, the now-famous “Battle of Glyth’s Rings” in which they had defeated ten Scorpion ships in their single Man-o-War the *Queen’s Dirk*, a catapult stone crushed her leg and she was required to leave the ship for a time. She was to have rejoined the ship’s crew with her new prosthetic, but just before she did so, the Dirk was shot down and the survivors – Shaundar, Yathar, and Lieutenant Sylria, all that remained of a crew of sixty – were imprisoned at Raven Talon. Yathar and Tyelatae had been seeing each other since the start of the War, but he had not made any effort, to Shaundar’s knowledge, to find Tyelatae when they had, against all odds, made it home. Shaundar never asked him why not. Quite frankly, he was still so messed up himself from their experiences as prisoners of war that

it never occurred to him. Maybe Yathar hadn't been that serious about Tyelatae, or maybe he'd felt that he needed to get his own demons under control before he was able to be in a relationship again.

Yathar ran his hand over the orcish face he wore, where bristles were already beginning to reappear from this morning. It made an almost inaudible rasping sound. "I keep hoping," he said sadly, "that once we've taken some vengeance, once we've done something productive against these bastards, maybe we'll be able to carry on with our lives. But I don't know, Shaundar." He shook his head as if to clear it. "Or I guess I should call you Bolvi now. I don't know. I don't know if it will work. But I know that nothing was working right for me at home either. And you know, I feel better now that I'm here. I feel like I'm *doing* something. Don't you?" He looked at him with earnest eyes, genuinely seeking his answer rather than projecting one.

"Av," Shaundar nodded decisively. "Gul, I do." And it was true.

"You could go back anytime," Yathar urged him. "It was an accident and I'm sure she knows that."

Shaundar thought of Narissa's tearful, horrified face and shook his head. "No, I can't do that to her again. I can't. It would kill me."

The two youths sat in silence for a long time. Then Yathar clapped Shaundar on the shoulder. "Well, if we're going to work out, let's do it." They hit the weights together. His plan was successful. By the time

they found their way to their beds, they were both so physically weary that they dropped off right past reverie into a deep, and most importantly, dreamless sleep.

Shaundar was so stiff from the unaccustomed heavy exercise the next morning that he could hardly drag his aching body from his bed, but it sure was better than the muzzy head, weakness and pasties that had marked his daily hangover in recent months. He dressed quickly, renewed his *polymorph* spell and stretched.

"Move it, Bolvi!" Captain Wintervale bellowed as Shaundar brought up the rear of the morning run. He pursed his lips around his tusks and picked up the pace. He was not in the mood for Captain Wintervale this morning. The muscles of his thighs felt like they were on fire and they were quivering on the outside of his leg where the compound fracture had once torn his tendons and muscle. Not that he was going to let her know that.

Yathar pulled him along for a minute until he got his rhythm back and they finished the run somewhere near the middle of the pack. Captain Wintervale watched him with speculative but sparkling eyes.

Calisthenics were exhausting, and then it was back to the gym to pump iron. Shaundar and Yathar both struggled with the heavier weights that day, grunting and sweating. Both Captains watched closely, making notes and, they assumed, doing evaluations. Shaundar endeavoured to at least not lose ground, so they hefted those two hundred pound weight

bars first before moving on to the lighter weights with more repetitions. Shaundar wasn't sure, but he thought there was a smile lurking at the corners of Captain Wintervale's lips.

He spent a little too long in the shower, soothing his burning, trembling muscles with the heated water; a miraculous contraption, when you thought about it. Shaundar reasoned that the piping systems must have been designed by gnomes. He had only ever seen two such systems of hot running water; this one, and the system that had been part of the Crown of Corellon space station that the *Queen's Dirk* had been assigned to as a port-of-call. He felt a deep pang of sorrow as he thought of his ship, affectionately known as "Queenie" by her crew. And then he realized that he only had five minutes left in which to dry, dress and shave. He cut himself rather badly with the blade of the razor; the price of his woolgathering.

He was still wiping absently at the cut with his handkerchief at morning mess – some curry-spiced omelet that came in your basic options of rubbery and runny – when an unexpected feathery touch brushed Shaundar's neck. He whirled around and came to his feet, just about leaping out of his skin. Captain Wintervale was standing behind him with Shaundar's handkerchief in her hand. Her expression was deceptively guileless. "Let me help you with that, Lieutenant," she offered.

Shaundar hesitated, and then shook his head to clear it. That was exactly the kind of reaction that had driven him from his family. "Thank you, Captain," he rumbled in acquiescence.

The honey-blond elf maid dabbed gently at the oozing cut on his cheekbone with a bemused smile. Was it his imagination, or did her pale blue eyes and delicate fingers linger just a little too long? "You might try some sideburns," she suggested. "You wouldn't have to shave that spot and I think they would suit you."

"I'll consider it, *karra*," he nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you for the suggestion."

The Captain gave him a long, unreadable look before heading back to her spot at mess by Madrimlian.

"So you're next, I see," remarked the soldier who had been introduced to them as Herod on their first day in the infirmary.

"What are you talking about?" Shaundar demanded as he turned back to dawnfry. He had chosen the runny omelet option, better eaten with a spoon than a fork. He mopped it up with a piece of crumbly bread that he understood was made with rice flour. Wheat, rye and oats did not grow on Dukagsh, apparently.

"Oh, the Captain's got an orc fetish, I think," Herod explained. "Every once in a while she singles out someone and goes after him like a hunting cat. Isn't that right, Durok?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Durok responded primly, but his sparkling eyes belied his words. He shovelled a rubbery egg into his mouth and made a face.

"Have fun!" Yathar wished him cheerily. He was already scraping his plate.

"Not interested," Shaundar grumbled with a hint of resentment.

Herod raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

Shaundar nodded. "Really," he confirmed. She was beautiful, there was no doubt of that, but Shaundar had no desire to begin any kind of relationship at the moment. He had loved Narissa more than his own life, and her loss was like a dagger in his soul. Even if it was just sex, being that intimate with someone was the last thing he wanted. There were other factors as well. One was the hair-trigger reaction that had ended his relationship in the first place. He might do it again, and Captain Wintervale did not deserve that. And on top of that, he didn't think that he could bring himself to lie with anyone while he was in the form of an orc. The mere thought revolted him.

The rest of Shaundar's appetite deserted him. He put down his spoon and wiped his mouth. "I'll meet you guys in the practice room," he said, and he left the mess.

"What in the Hells is the matter with him?" he heard Herod ask.

Good question. He wished he knew.

Yesterday the instructors had assigned the soldiers to removing the bells from the practice dummy as quickly as they could without ringing any of them. Yesterday he had actually managed to take them silently, but learning how to do so had taken the whole session. He glanced at the expensive water clock that they were using as a timing device, and set to seeing if he could do it faster than he had the day before. By the time the remainder of the class arrived, he had done it thrice, with his speed improving by several seconds each time.

Shaundar's foul mood translated well in combat training. While the newer warriors were run through some basic exercises to demonstrate a proper fighting stance, how to fall and how to throw a proper punch, some of the more experienced fighters were directed to set up a "bear pit," in which two combatants would face off, then the winner would face the next opponent, and remain until she or he were defeated. Shaundar won his first bout and was not beaten for almost a dozen rounds, though finally exhaustion wore him down. By then he had a cheering audience.

Durok, who had finally struck the blow that knocked Shaundar dazed and winded to the ground, protested. "I didn't win that fairly," he insisted. "He's just tired. If he were fresh he would have destroyed me."

"You might be right," Captain Madrimlian agreed, "but in a real hand-to-hand combat situation, you will not be given any chance for a

break. It's good if you learn how to improve your endurance. You did well, *Gor'tar* Durok. But there's no question that *Gor'tar* Bolvi was impressive. Are you all right, lad?" he asked Shaundar as he staggered to his feet.

Shaundar wiped at his bleeding mouth and nodded cautiously so it wouldn't make his head swim.

"Good job, Lieutenant," he encouraged with a proud, almost paternal smile, and the other trainees applauded enthusiastically. "Nice job, Bolvi!" Herod called out. "Remind me never to piss you off!"

Shaundar glanced in his direction and smiled faintly through his swelling lip. He couldn't help but notice Captain Wintervale watching him with gleaming, predatory eyes.

Helga was their instructor for the study of scro and orcish religion. The other trainees seemed to take the information at face value, but Shaundar wasn't too sure. Where would she have learned all this, he wondered? He suspected that much of it was theoretical and that the applied practice might be very different. It was important because it was clear to Shaundar from the first couple of lessons that the scro believed strongly in their dark and twisted gods, and this belief was a driving force of their culture.

They believed that the scro had been created by an orc Captain named Dukagsh, said by some to be the son of Gruumsh One-Eye,

creator-god of the orcs. He was a veteran and survivor of the First Great War. He led a ragtag fleet of twenty-four tribes of orcs across the Universe, escaping the pursuing elvish fleet, to finally land on a planet which they named after their founder. There he laid the foundations of scro culture through his writings and teachings.

Shaundar assumed that aside from the veracity of Dukagsh's divine origins, these details were probably all true, though vague and shrouded in myth they might be. It would be consistent with what he knew of what the rest of the Universe called the "First Unhuman War" based on history class and the information he had absorbed through his father and Uncle Madrimlian, both of whom were veterans of that war. It struck Shaundar as very strange that the details seemed so sketchy, considering that the War was a mere four centuries ago, but then it occurred to him that orcs were a short-lived people, and their life-spans were as brief as that of humans. For them, it had probably been the equivalent of at least five millennia, and when taken from that perspective, it was amazing how much detail of their history had actually survived!

There on their new homeworld, Dukagsh had made a study of why the elves had defeated the orcs and various goblinoid races so soundly, and determined that it would never happen again. He taught the orcs who followed him how to read and write (and Shaundar could not help but wonder where he learned this, considering that literacy was not part of any other orcish culture with which the *Tel'Quessir* had dealt,) and he taught them a regimented military code of behaviour; tinged with the

orc penchant for brutality and ruthlessness, of course. Then according to Madrimlian (where he had learned this, and how, Shaundar did not want to know) the scro had spent the past four hundred years training and preparing to launch the Second Unhuman War, which they referred to as “The War of Revenge;” the War that they were all currently fighting.

Reverence of Dukagsh seemed to have largely superseded traditional orcish religion, so less emphasis was placed upon it in their studies. Still, they were given a basic grounding, just in case. Their creator god Gruumsh also valued conquest, strength, and survival. Most of the other deities of the pantheon were male. Aside from possibly Dukagsh, Gruumsh's only son was Bahgtru, god of strength, who was definitely better known for his brawn than his brains. Other gods in the pantheon included Ilneval or Karaash, god of warfare, who was possibly linked to some figure known to the scro as the “Iron Champion”; Shargaas, god of darkness, night, rogues and the undead; and Yurtrus, a rather sinister god of death and disease.

But the one that intrigued Shaundar the most was Luthic, Gruumsh's sole consort and mother of Bahgtru (though not specifically of Dukagsh, Shaundar noted.) She was the goddess of women, family and fertility in the faith of the orcs, and she was also the healing goddess. In many ways, her worship sounded similar to that of the elven creatrix Angharradh, who shared the fertility and family purview but who was also a warrior goddess and the full equal of her husband, creator-god Corellon Larethian. Luthic's worship, on the other hand, seemed to reinforce the subservient position of orc and scro females in their society.

She was said to fight with her exceptionally long claws, since only males were permitted to wield weaponry, though she was also thought to be a powerful priestess. Shaundar just could not wrap his head around why anyone would bow head to their spouse, nor why a powerful spellcaster would accept the rule of any warrior. In his culture, all the leaders were elders and almost always mages or clergy.

He was given time every couple of days to experiment in the alchemy lab, as “unmanly” as the art was thought to be. Not being inclined towards poisons, Shaundar spent his efforts working on compounds that could be used directly in a combat scenario. Pepper sprays were not likely to be as effective on scro as other races, he assumed, since they seemed to be accustomed to such overwhelming levels of spice, but he figured that if they were directly applied to the eyes or other sensitive mucous membranes, they would still create a suitable distraction. He focused on brewing an especially potent concentrate of those awful purple ones. He was unable to work without protective gnomish goggles and black dragon hide gloves to mitigate the acidic chemical burns. The advantage of this project was that no one else could be around him while he worked either, which effectively drove away the amorous advances of Captain Wintervale.

If he had any doubts as to the Captain's intentions, they were completely dispelled a couple of days after the shaving incident. He was just emerging from the shower after weight training, where he and Yathar had set a new record. He'd noticed the Captain observing him way too closely. Again he wasn't sure, but it seemed to him that her parted

lips and glittering eyes carried more than an intellectual interest, and he thought she'd hitched in her breath when he'd managed a 210 pound weight bar.

She cornered him as he stepped into the changing area, separate for men and women like the scro would have it. He was drying his hair and wearing nothing but a towel around his waist.

"Fine performance today, Bolvi," she complimented him with a cat-in-the-cream smile.

"*Nor lakaar, karra,*" he replied, which he had learned was Orcish for "thank you, madam," or perhaps more correctly, "my gratitude."

She sauntered over to him with a noticeable sway to her hips. "I think that weight training is doing good things for you," she murmured smoothly, and she pushed herself close enough to him that he could smell the faint odour of some lilac perfume; and she ran her hand firmly and almost possessively over his right arm, which was raised up over his head while he scrubbed at his damp hair. The other hand was clasping the towel around his waist. Her lips parted in a lascivious smile. "Very good things," she purred, as she gripped his bicep and squeezed it, like he was a bull she was considering at market.

Shaundar froze, entirely uncertain of how to react to this. Fortunately, at that moment Durok appeared and inquired loudly, "What's keeping you, Bolvi? You're late for morning mess!"

The Captain removed her hand and backed off. "I'll catch up with you later, Lieutenant," she promised, and she sashayed off.

"*Nor lakaar*, Durok," he breathed in relief when she was gone.

"She's a lot of fun between the sheets," Durok told him helpfully. "You sure you're not interested?"

"*Gul*," he nodded. "I'm sure."

Durok clapped him on a thick green shoulder. "Well, she doesn't take no for an answer, so I'll run interference, then."

"I'd appreciate that," Shaundar confessed gratefully.

Marks were posted at the end of the first week. In that time, five elves had voluntarily dropped out of the program, unable to tolerate the brutal physical training regimen. None of the Spiral survivors were among them. After the crippling labour of the Raven Talon Concentration Camp, this training didn't seem that rough to Shaundar, especially since they were eating so well. Actually, Shaundar was reasonably certain that he was putting on muscle weight. His uniform shirts were a little tight on the arms and shoulders. But it was hard to tell in his polymorphed scro form.

Shaundar was somewhat nervous about the postings. He had no idea where he stood in comparison with the other trainees and he was desperate not to be drummed out of the program. He really didn't know what he would do or where else he would go. He had definitely seen

improvements from his own perspective, but would that be sufficient for his instructors?

He needn't have worried. The postings were pinned to a corkboard in the mess, and it was Yathar who dared to look first at the rankings. He did a double take and his eyes widened. Then he grinned and clapped Shaundar on the back. "Well, how about that?" he laughed. "Congratulations, *na'kor*; you're the top of the class."

"Really?" Shaundar exclaimed. He looked at it now, if for no better reason than his own disbelief. Yes, there it was; *Gor'tar* Bolvi was at the top of the rankings. Durok was second and Kyrok (Yathar) third, with Targa in fourth place.

Breakdowns of the rankings in each class were also posted. Shaundar saw that his performance in the bear pit had put him slightly ahead of Durok in the hand-to-hand combat ranking, and Yathar was running a reasonably close third. Shaundar suspected, however, that the only reason he had not surpassed both him and Durok was that most of Yathar's combat training was in bladesong, which was as different from their freeform hand-to-hand training as night was to day. Yathar was, hands down, the superior combatant in Shaundar's opinion.

Lana was leading the pack in the "subtle" arts, but her abysmal combat scores were dragging down her overall mark significantly. The rest of them were doing well in the assassin training work as well. Yathar was ranked second in that department, which did not surprise Shaundar;

since he knew his friend was a professionally-trained bard. What did surprise him was that he was ranked third. He wondered if his miscreant's youth, or his attempts to commit sabotage at Raven Talon, had been responsible for that.

It was Shaundar's academic scores that had secured his place as the top student. He was astounded to see that he was well ahead of the curve in every class. Shaundar had always excelled in scholarly fields but he didn't realize how well this would translate to such unorthodox subject matter.

Durok gave him a long look and then smiled. "I'm impressed," he nodded. Did Shaundar detect a hint of hesitation there? Was there a little resentment or perhaps even jealousy?

Lana looked disappointed as she studied the marks, but then she came over to see what they were all looking at and beamed. "Kicking butt I see, Captain my Captain!" she grinned. "Well, that doesn't surprise me. Maybe you guys can help me with my hand-to-hand skills. I'm just not a good fighter."

Durok's mouth softened a little. "You know, I'm not sure that's as relevant to females," he grumbled. "Not to say that I agree with the attitude or anything, but no one really expects women to fight among our foes." Shaundar noted that like Lana, he had avoided speaking of "the scro" as the enemy. It seemed a good habit to get into.

“Maybe you should grow your claws,” Shaundar suggested. “I believe the Luthic priestesses do that.”

“You’re just not going to do as well at this style of combat,” Yathar agreed. “You’re lightly built and I think in this case, size matters.”

She studied her claws dubiously. “Maybe I should. Gods know I have to do something.”

Yathar smiled reassuringly. “You’re not in any danger of flunking out, Lana. Your other scores are far too high. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

She shrugged; but seemed comforted.

“Looks like we found another one cut of your cloth, Durok,” Captain Wintervale smirked pleasantly, having come up behind them while they were chatting. “Or maybe,” she added, “another two.” She gave Yathar an appraising meat-market look. Then her smile widened and her gaze passed steadily between the three males. Lana did not warrant a second glance.

Durok leaned closer to her and bent down to say in her ear in a stage-whisper, “I bet there’s at least one area we’re not being graded on that I’ll outperform these guys in.”

She chuckled low in her throat. But Shaundar couldn’t help it; he laughed out loud. “Me? Most certainly,” he confessed, considering his

limited sexual experiences; to date, two in which he was a willing participant. “But Kyrok? Not likely.”

Yathar snickered and shook his head. “I think you give me too much credit, *na’kor*,” he grinned. “According to rumour, Durok’s a machine.”

“How about I give you the chance to find out, marine?” she asked Yathar outright, running a hand down the front of his chest.

Yathar grinned. “Just name the time and place, *karra*,” he challenged cheerfully.

She smiled. “Now. My quarters.”

“*Gul, karra*,” he agreed readily. “Don’t wait up,” he smiled at Shaundar with an excited gleam in his eye. They left the mess, Yathar’s hand already moving down the Captain’s back to the curve of her shapely buttocks.

Targa, who had quietly joined them, snorted. “If I’d known he was that easily manipulated, I’d have bagged him right off the boat,” she sneered.

Shaundar shrugged and chuckled at the same time. He was glad his friend could find solace in the arms of someone else, even temporarily. He wished he could.

Sleep completely eluded Shaundar that night in his empty quarters without Yathar's presence. He was tense and anxious. Finally he gave up and went to the common area with the book they were studying on the Orcish language. It had taken him the week to get the characters right; unlike other interpretations of a written Orcish tongue, Dukagsh had apparently invented his own characters. They vaguely resembled Dwarvish Thorass runes, but they had their own rules and symbolism. Having studied Dwarvish tongues in his childhood, Shaundar found that he wanted to assign the same sounds and meanings to the Orcish letters, which led to some gross mispronunciations. He was determined to grasp the nuances.

"Can't sleep?" a familiar voice asked him, startling him from his studies.

Shaundar looked up to see Captain Madrimlian standing quietly to one side of him so as to not disturb his comfort zone. Shaundar appreciated his courtesy. People getting too close to him without announcing themselves made him jumpy.

"Too quiet in my quarters," he explained.

"Ah," Madrimlian remarked, non-committal. He sat down in a chair next to Shaundar and studied him with piercing blue eyes. "How have you found your first week?"

Shaundar smirked. “Interesting,” he said simply. He meant many things by that word.

Madrimlian seemed to know that and he smiled. “I have noticed that you’re both drinking less,” he pointed out bluntly. Madrimlian had not said a thing about this on the entire journey to Permafrost, which Shaundar appreciated. Was he letting them grieve in their own way? Or was he just being patient, waiting to see what effect the Permafrost Project would have on them?

Shaundar nodded. “Wearing myself out seems to be almost as effective as a sedative. And it really helps to be doing something,” he admitted.

Madrimlian smiled. This was the slightly relieved smile of a loving uncle, as opposed to the professional expression of a commanding officer. “I’m glad,” he sighed. They were silent for a few moments, and then the Captain remarked, “So far you’re performing far beyond anyone’s expectations. I’m impressed.”

The corner of Shaundar’s mouth twitched up in a half-smile. It was almost comfortable around the tusk now. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

Madrimlian put his elbows on his knees and folded his hands before him in a steeple. “And I see you were happy to be reacquainted with Lana and Targa.”

The young elven soldier in orc form chuckled low in his throat. “I was!” he agreed. “That was a surprise! It might have been nice to know that Marafel was a mage when we escaped Spiral; she could have taken a turn at the helm.”

“Oh, she wasn’t then,” Madrimlian clarified. “When I spoke to them about the Project on the Rock of Bral, they jumped at the chance, but it took some intensive magical training for Marafel to catch up so that she could participate.”

Shaundar shook his head. He was seriously impressed; that would have been no small feat. His training in the magical arts, though eclectic, had taken years. “Bright girl,” he said with admiration. “But she was then too.”

“They still look to you as a leader, you know,” Madrimlian informed him. “They still call you their Captain. They tell me that you saved their lives at least thrice.”

“So promote me,” Shaundar joked. “The pay is better.”

But Madrimlian chose to respond seriously. “I can’t,” he confessed. “Being just a Captain, I need to get one of the higher Mithril to sign off on the promotion, and they have some serious concerns about your command abilities – and your morale. But keep performing like this, and I can almost guarantee you an officer’s commission that would impress even your father.”

Shaundar sighed. He had despaired of ever impressing his father. He usually seemed to fall just shy of expectations. Sometimes, just for variety, he fell dramatically shy of expectations.

Madrimlian put a gentle hand on his shoulder and met his eyes. "I can see I have said the wrong thing," he realized. "But I mean it. Your father loves you, you know."

"I know," Shaundar groaned as he thumped his elbows onto his book and his face into the palms of his hands. "I just wish that something I did in my life would make him happy."

"He was happy when you joined the Navy," the older elf reassured him. "He was just scared for you. And he should have been."

Shaundar considered the wreck that had been left of himself and Yathar when they had made it to the Rock of Bral after their ordeal. Yes, he supposed his father had been right, and so had Narissa, who had been furious with him when he had taken his Oath. That thought brought yet another stab of pain, along with almost crippling guilt. Brave, radiant, compassionate Narissa, who had stood up against the bullies for him when they were small; who was the first girl he had ever kissed; who had worn his goldheart charm and accepted his betrothal; who had waited for him while he was at war, even when she had not wanted him to go. How had he rewarded her love, her strength, and her patience? By coming home from war to drown himself in a bottle. And then he had done the unthinkable, and in his own eyes, the unforgivable.

“Not all war wounds are visible, Shaundar,” Madrimlian counselled him gently. “But some of them are mortal. I invited you to join this Project because I hoped you would find some solace in the shedding of orcish blood, since you were unable to find it in the arms of those who love you.” His eyes were full of more compassion than Shaundar could bear.

He stood up and closed the book. “I hope I can too,” he concurred. “Good night, Uncle.” And he returned to his quarters. Madrimlian just watched him go with sad eyes.

Yathar was back by this time, freshly showered as he climbed into the bed. “You’re still up?” he observed questioningly.

Shaundar shrugged again. “Couldn’t sleep. Did you have a good time?”

Yathar shrugged too. “She’s as crazy as Tyelatae,” he admitted.

Shaundar understood that response. Yes, he had had a good time; but the reminder of Tyelatae had been painful.

“She tried to convince me to bring you along next time,” he divulged with a raised eyebrow.

Shaundar shook his head. “I can’t.”

Yathar nodded. "I figured," he said, "and that's what I told her, but she's pretty determined."

Shaundar laughed aloud. "Aren't you supposed to be the one that the ladies chase? I'm the sidekick, remember?"

Yathar looked stricken. "Is that how you feel about it?" he queried in surprise.

Shaundar shrugged uncomfortably. "It's always been that way. You were smart, good-looking, confident, strong, and everybody liked you." At Yathar's unhappy expression he assured him, "I never minded. It's not like I resented you for it. It's not your fault that I was so awkward and you were always just so good at everything. I was just happy that you were willing to be my friend."

Yathar shook his head. "I don't think of it that way at all," he mumbled. "I just don't think anyone ever gave you a fair shot. It's nice to see you getting your due at last, my friend. It's just too bad that no one at home will ever know."

Shaundar smiled happily at him, delighted by his friend's generous spirit. "*Nor drakaar*," he sighed, which loosely translated to "my appreciation." It seemed more fitting than any expression in Espruar that Shaundar knew.

Shaundar thought it was a fluke, but he was wrong. For the next six weeks, he continued to lead the pack in overall scores. His hand-to-

hand combat improved dramatically as his physical strength increased, though he, Durok and Yathar would interchange which one of them actually carried the top mark in that field in a strange shuffling dance. He found that his inborn grace made him a natural for picking pockets, working open delicate lock mechanisms, palming small items such as garrotes or spell components, disguising his spellcasting, and sneaking weapons out of the hands or sheaths of his opponents. Lana continued to outshine him, it was true, but when it came to practicing the slitting of throats or thrusting daggers into the kidneys of some pigs which then became part of the evening meal, Shaundar's combination of increasing physical prowess, dexterity, and scholarly study of anatomy made him the best assassin hands-down. He wasn't sure that he was entirely comfortable with that mantle; but he supposed that it was why they were there. Before long he found himself tutoring new trainees who were struggling. Yathar gloried in his friend's success and did his best to keep up, which included spending extra time studying in the evening, something he had never before done; when Captain Wintervale wasn't giving him an extra physical workout, that was.

Captain Wintervale was exceptionally persistent. It was almost as though she viewed Shaundar's obvious avoidance as a challenge. She dogged him at every turn. Even with his friends running interference, it was all he could do to stay out of her way. When his pepper spray project was completed in the alchemy lab, he took up working with potent explosive chemicals just to avert her. It got to the point that Lana offered to slip licorice powder into her food for him. "It'll decrease her libido,"

she explained helpfully, “and will have the pleasant side effect of giving her the screaming runs!” But Shaundar turned her down of course.

Things finally came to a head at the beginning of week seven. This time, rather than wait for him to exit the shower, the Captain climbed right in, naked as the day she was born and with a hunter’s gleam in her eye. Without a word she pressed herself against his naked green orcish body and started kissing his chest and his nipples. Her hand immediately found his groin and started stroking him.

It was exactly as he had feared. The unexpected, unwanted touch made him cringe, and before he realized it, by reflex he had shoved her away from him. It was too hard. She slipped and fell unceremoniously on her unclad rear end. He thought he heard something crack and they both yelled out in surprise and dismay.

Durok and Yathar, and a handful of the other male soldiers, came running into the shower, to see Shaundar standing over the Captain as she sprawled, spread-eagled, on the floor. What had happened seemed fairly obvious. And then someone laughed.

It was just bad timing, probably more fueled by relief than humour, but the Captain’s cheeks reddened as she pushed herself to her feet. “I see,” she said to Shaundar icily, collecting her clothes. Before he had a chance to explain she had stalked off.

Targa, who had also come running at the yells, guffawed. “Way to go, my Captain!” she cheered. “It’s about time Captain ‘Hanali’ got her come-uppance!”

But Shaundar could not help but think of his father’s insight, shared on a balcony long ago when Shaundar had just joined the Navy; that one should never humiliate one’s enemy or the cost would be eternal vengeance. And it turned out that he was right.

The next morning, Captain Wintervale was hostile and downright abusive during the run. She screamed a steady stream of vitriol into Shaundar’s ear. When it was finished she made him repeat it, “To exhaust his attitude problem,” she said. Targa braced her feet and drew in enough air to warn Shaundar that she was about to let the Captain have it, so rather than let her get herself into trouble, he simply saluted and added a firm, “*Gul, karra;*” then he did the entire ten hex run again as ordered.

He was exhausted by the time he was finished, of course, and he had missed the entirety of calisthenics and part of the strength straining portion. It was all he could do to manage anything approaching the standard he had been working at during the previous week; now a clean lift of two hundred and fifty pounds. He almost dropped it on himself at the last of the five repetitions that his pride demanded of him, and Yathar had to grab it quickly to stop the bar from decapitating him. The Captain noted this and smirked as she made her notes with her scratching quill. Yathar’s lip curled, but Shaundar shook his head. He could see bruises on the Captain’s wrists in the shape of orcish thumbprints peeking out from

under her uniform cuffs, and as a sick knot of shame snarled up his stomach and bowels, so he figured that she was entitled to abuse him a little.

When the class was dismissed to head to the showers, the Captain added, “Except for you, Bolvi. It looks like you need a little extra practice today.”

Shaundar’s expression grew as stony as it had ever been in Raven Talon when the guards were feeling capricious and cruel. “*Gul, karra!*” he intoned, and he went back to the bench.

Yathar halted in mid-step and came back to the bench as well, to rest his hands at the ready underneath the bar.

Wintervale narrowed her eyes at him. “Did I not dismiss you, *Gor’tar* Kyrok?”

“*Gul, karra,*” he admitted, his face as graven as Shaundar’s, “but regulations demand that we always have a spotter, and I don’t think anyone but myself or Durok is capable of spotting for Bolvi, *karra.*”

This was logic that the Captain could not reasonably dispute, so she snarled at Shaundar, “Give me ten.”

Ten repetitions were not something Shaundar thought he could manage with two hundred fifty pounds on the bench press, even if he were completely fresh. But he closed his eyes. *She can kick you out of the*

program, Shaundar, he told himself silently. Just think like you're back in Raven Talon and your life depends on your success.

"Gul, karra," he breathed as his eyes flew open; and he began.

Time seemed to slow down as he flexed his hands and grasped the weight bar. *One at a time*, he cautioned himself, and he drew the bar away from the cradle.

Anger gave him strength as adrenaline flooded through his veins. He hefted and dropped the bar. *One.*

His muscles relaxed and contracted again. *Two.* He brought it up a third time. *Three.*

He closed his eyes again and without any effort at all he was once more in "the Factory" in the prison camp, where his job for two years had been to pump a giant bellows. He could even smell the metallic scent of the molten iron with which the enemy's cannon shot was cast. He could feel the heat of it on his skin, his face. This movement was exactly the same; just the angle was different. *Four.*

Down with the bellows, up with the bellows. *Five.* Down and up. *Six.* Down again, up again. *Seven.* He could do this for hours. He could do it all day. He could do this as long as he had to. Back into the rhythm, back into the trance, on and on and on until the break was called . . .

Something tore the bellows from his hands. He opened his eyes with a start.

Yathar was standing over him in his orcish shape, the weight bar clutched in his palms, which he was guiding back into its cradle with wide eyes. Only then did Shaundar remember where he was and what he was actually doing. It was all he could do not to immediately burst into tears of relief. His arms and pectorals were trembling and musky sweat covered his body. His uniform shirt was soaked right through.

Captain Wintervale's red and furious face appeared above him. "Smartass!" she growled. "Next time I tell you to give me ten, you give me ten and *only* ten! Do I make myself clear?"

"*Gul, karra,*" he panted. His vision swam.

"You're late," she snapped. "Go get showered."

"*Gul, karra,*" he nodded, and he gave a wavering salute. She turned on her heel and marched out as Yathar helped him to his feet. "How many did I do?" he asked his friend.

"Fifteen," Yathar replied. His expression was an almost indecipherable jumble of horror, worry, anger and awe.

Shaundar shook his head and staggered off to the shower.

They cleaned up as quickly as they could, but Yathar had to help shave him because he couldn't lift his arms past the bend of his elbows. They were exceptionally late for morning mess; there was nothing left but scraps.

"What kept you?" Lana demanded, concerned. "You've missed all the bacon!"

Shaundar, noting the various nonplussed expressions of the other soldiers crunching firmly on strips of meat that were as hard as stone and vaguely resembled shipboard jerky, figured that was probably a good thing. "What do you have left?" he asked hopefully. That was a mistake. What he got was yesterday's leftover stew.

He forced it down his throat with dogged determination despite the fact that it had the texture of phlegm, and pressed on to hand-to-hand combat exercises, where his rubbery legs and stiff arms significantly diminished his performance. His inability to lift his arms properly also led to an ineffective upward block, which exposed his jawbone. He saw the hit coming, and managed to pull his face out of the way well enough to prevent his jaw from being broken, but he saw stars and his knees buckled.

"What happened out there?" Madrimlian inquired when his vision came back into focus.

"Just tired, *karr*," Shaundar groaned.

“What did you do to your arms?” he demanded. “I don’t think that’s just weariness.”

“I overdid it in strength training today,” he replied truthfully. Lying to Madrimlian, with his keen understanding of people and his psionic powers, was generally a waste of time.

Madrimlian looked concerned. “Are you sure you want to continue?” he wanted to know. “Maybe you would rather just do stretches today.”

Shaundar shook his head. Be damned if he was going to let Wintervale crash him that easily! “*Gul, karr,*” he growled. “I’ll continue. The enemy isn’t going to give me a chance to just stretch if I injure myself, are they?”

Madrimlian beamed. “That’s the spirit!” he encouraged, and Shaundar rejoined the fray. His performance improved after that; whether because he was more aware of the difficulties he was facing and successfully compensated for them, or whether because the other soldiers did, he couldn’t be entirely sure. He did notice that Captain Wintervale’s eyes were full of fury as she watched him battle.

“Little assassin’s school” was all about techniques of moving stealthily on foot that day. Since that had nothing, really, to do with his arms save balance, Shaundar did all right there, weary though he was.

Gods be praised, the afternoon class was mostly mental, not physical. They were starting to put some of their theoretical knowledge to work, and they were to spend a couple of hours crewing one of the scro ships as it flew close to Permafrost's dark side, speaking almost entirely in Orcish, working all the weaponry and acting like a scro crew. Shaundar loved these exercises, a new development of the last week, because he was beginning to go a little stir crazy and at least this got him off base and off planet for a while. Today he was directed to take the role of the Gunnery Commander on the Mantis. He glanced at the helm room with fierce longing. How he missed piloting!

He just about fell asleep over his dinner, which consisted of skewers of some promisingly spicy pork that was ruined by being salty enough to pucker his lips. He was almost too tired to eat, in fact, and contented himself to some of the hot-and-sour tripe soup that was served as a side dish. He forced himself to take an extra shower with some of his free time; knowing just how sore he was going to be the following day and hoping that would mitigate some of it, but even that did not prevent him from passing out over his language studies.

He startled awake when Yathar came back to their quarters earlier than expected.

"What's up?" he asked of his friend softly.

Yathar just stared at him for a moment; then he exclaimed in exasperation, “Well, I’m not about to sleep with her when she treats you like that, am I?”

“Why not?” Shaundar shrugged, wincing as he tried to move his arms. A shoulder muscle spasmed. “It’s my issue, not yours.”

Yathar blinked at him in disbelief. “She’s a bully, *na’kor*,” he explained, “no different than my father. You’re not doing what she wants you to do and so she’s going to force you into it. What’s worse is that she’s trying to force you to have sex with her! And that’s no different than what happened to us at Raven Talon. It disgusts me and I don’t think I could perform with her if I tried.”

“She’s in her rights as my commanding officer to punish me as she sees fit,” he sighed.

Yathar nodded. “*Gul*, we can’t do anything about that but what you did today, which is to endure and power through it. But I don’t have to scratch her itches for her if I don’t want to. And I don’t.”

“She might start in on you too.”

“And if she does,” Yathar retorted, “then we have something to go to Madrimlian about.”

Shaundar smiled and nodded. “Good to know that you have my back, *na’kor*.”

“Always,” Yathar promised. “After all that we’ve been through together? Always. Just like you’ve got mine.” He slung an arm around Shaundar’s shoulders and they embraced.

The following day, things got more interesting. As punishment for “smarting her off,” Wintervale ordered Shaundar to run the ten-hex circuit in full combat gear.

Shaundar stared at her disbelievingly for a moment, but when he realized that her sadistic smile indicated that she was serious, he saluted smartly and went to his quarters to don it. Black studded leather armour, the full suit, including helm, weighing about twenty pounds; two daggers, two short swords, a light crossbow and quarrels, a shortspear and an axe slung across his back, totalling about twenty-five pounds; a full pack weighing around a hundred pounds, including bedding, tarp, flint and steel, tindertwigs, mess kit and soap, spellbooks and magically-concealed spell component pouches, ink and quills, fishhooks and sewing gear, clothes, hammer, spade, silk rope, whetstone, grappling hook and climbing gear, healer’s kit, spyglass, thieves’ tools, camouflage for urban, dark, and jungle environments, oil, alchemists’ fire, caltrops, manacles, three waterskins, seven days rations, boot knife, a couple of map cases and a regular and stellar compass; and uncomfortable hard leather scro combat boots. He also kept a spare pipe and some tobacco in his gear, which they were permitted to do if they wished to. It totalled out to about a hundred and fifty pounds of equipment. When he had first arrived on Permafrost, Shaundar would not have been able to carry that and move. Now he could carry it, but running was highly unlikely.

He did it anyway. One foot in front of the other, he jogged the whole route, wheezing through those tusks and pouring sweat. This time the Captain made the rest of the company wait while she berated and slandered him through the full ten hex-lengths as he loped along like a crippled buzzard. ‘When she finally told him that he was done, he stood at attention as ordered while she lay on yet another series of abuse; though this one cut closer to home, as she let him know that he was a disgrace to his parents, and that his father would be ashamed of his worthless spawn; a point on which she and Shaundar were agreed. He was so desperate for air that he was seeing his vision pulse in shades of green, red and brown with the dubious rhythm of his gasping. How he maintained consciousness, Shaundar never knew.

Calisthenics had to be skipped and most of the strength training block had been used up by this time, which was just as well because Shaundar was only not falling over by the raw power of his will. He didn’t even try for anything resembling his previous efforts, knowing it to be futile. Yathar had to help him to shave again. He drank an entire waterskin’s worth of orange juice at the morning mess, but once more could not bring himself to eat anything save thin gruel.

Shaundar’s performance in combat training was, not to put too fine a point on it, abysmal. His blows were hopelessly weak and his blocks were far too slow. It cost him a black eye and a sprained wrist. And he failed at their stealth exercises too; he was spotted because they were directed to freeze in one place and his quivering legs simply gave out.

By lunch time he was ravenous, but an end-of-class “pep talk” assured that he was at the back of the chow line again. Fortunately, Targa had anticipated this and saved him a full plate. Thanking her profusely and resisting the urge to kiss her on the spot, he found himself drooling again as he sat down to it. The potato salad seemed to have something in it that had gone off, so he ate it first to get it out of the way, though most of the rest of the company, save Yathar, refused to touch it.

They were back to crewing the Mantis in the afternoon. Captain Wintervale, probably seeking to humiliate Shaundar, put him to work as the Cook’s Apprentice. This might have worked on a typical young scion of an elven house, but Shaundar was not typical. He had done worse, and honestly, because Lord Sunfall had expected such duties of the young Midshipmen on his vessel, it actually gave Shaundar some pleasant nostalgia. This did nothing for the painful muscle stiffness or fatigue that was setting in as he swabbed the decks, but Shaundar was used to closing off his body’s reports of pain and functioning anyway, and he did exactly that. He was ordered to clean the head too, but again, this did not bother him much. Cleansing bodily waste was nothing compared to cleaning up rotting corpses.

All week the harassment continued. Shaundar just took it stoically, not saying a word, determined that she was not going to beat him. He started to wonder whether sleeping with him was still her goal, or whether she was trying to drive him out of the program. Over the course of those seven days, he did the run again in his combat gear, did calisthenics in his combat gear, polished the brass of the Mantis ship with

his toothbrushes, pumped extra iron for not doing it well enough the first time due to his fatigue, and scrubbed every head and midden-pit in the place. But it wasn't until the marks were posted at the end of the week that the explosion happened. And it wasn't him who exploded; it was Yathar.

Shaundar had gone from first in the class to about fifteenth. Captain Wintervale had not given him a single point in any of the runs she'd made him repeat or any of the calisthenics sessions he had missed due to extended running. She had marked him poorly for the runs he had done with his combat gear, taking his completion time at face value rather than considering what he was running with. She had done the same for the calisthenics he had completed in full gear, and she had given him the hand-to-hand combat marks and stealth marks that his fatigue had earned. She had even marked him as having only done four repetitions of the quarter-ton bar on the first day of this, since he had struggled with the last repetition, and she had not counted any of the subsequent fifteen that he had managed at all.

He thought he would be disappointed, but he found that he was just numb. It figured. He was going to fail after all.

Yathar studied this supreme display of injustice for several seconds. He said nothing. Silence fell as the other soldiers gathered to check their marks and saw what they were looking at. Durok cleared his throat uncomfortably, but there was nothing for him to say.

Targa did not have this problem. She swore loudly and vehemently enough to blister their eardrums in both Elvish and Orcish. Lana just shook her head. “We can’t let her do this to our Captain,” she said softly to Yathar with pleading eyes.

Yathar’s jaw set in determination or rage and his eyes flashed with fury. “You’re right,” he agreed. “Come with me.”

“Gladly,” Targa growled; and Lana and Durok nodded and followed suit. Even Helga and Herod gave a nod and joined them.

Shaundar sighed and ran an exasperated hand over his head. He was sure this would only make the situation worse.

A minute or two later, Captain Wintervale entered the galley and sauntered over to where Shaundar was standing by himself with a self-satisfied smirk. “What do you think of your performance this week, *Gor’tar*?” she asked mildly.

The same demon that had conjured, “*Avavaen, quessir*,” from his mouth in Raven Talon instead of “*Gul, karr*,” made him snap before he truly realized what he was saying, “I think my performance was outstanding, *karra*; but I see that the marking system leaves much to be desired!”

He expected to be assigned some kind of grueling punishment for this; but he wasn’t. Her smile actually widened. “It’s not too late to change your mind,” she had the audacity to say in a feline purr.

Now the anger popped out from his numb interior like a macabre jack-in-the-box – surprise! His vision swam with red and his hands balled into fists before he could help it. He closed his eyes until the urge to punch her in the face had passed and he had forced his hands to relax. “Not if you were the last female in the Universe,” he snarled at last in clipped tones. “Not a snowball’s chance in Phlegethos.” He looked up and let her see the rage. Wintervale’s eyes were wide, and maybe even a little alarmed, when he was able to meet her gaze again. She looked away.

“Captain,” Madrimlian’s voice carried through the mess hall, and she turned to see him standing at the door on the other side. “And *Gor’tar* Bolvi? May I see you both for a moment?”

“*Gul, karr,*” Shaundar acquiesced with a salute. “Sure,” said Wintervale with a nod, but it was clear that she had a good idea what this was about.

Madrimlian closed the door of his ready room behind them and invited his peer Captain to sit. Then he indicated a seat for Shaundar. His friends clustered together in the room, all of them looking angry.

Instead of taking a seat, Madrimlian leaned the backs of his legs against the front of his desk and folded his arms. “*Gor’tar,*” he addressed Shaundar, “I was going to ask you what you had done this week to piss off Captain Wintervale, but these marines have answered my question for you. They tell me that you refused to have sex with the Captain, and then

embarrassed her when she accosted you in the shower. What I want to know from you is, is this true?"

Shaundar sighed. He met Madrimlian's deeply piercing blue eyes, so much like his father's save the shade. "*Gul, karr,*" he confessed.

He turned those same eyes on Wintervale. She cleared her throat uncomfortably. "I can explain, Madrimlian," she said simply.

He smiled entirely without humour. "I am not interested in your explanations, Talisavia. This stops. Now."

She drew herself up indignantly. "You don't command me, Madrimlian," she reminded him. "We're both Captains in this Navy, last I checked."

Madrimlian's smile widened and his eyes frosted over. "That is true enough," he admitted. "But there are some things you ought to consider. One is that your tactics against *Gor'tar* Bolvi will not work. I can assure you, *etriel*, that there is not a thing you can do or say to this lad that will intimidate or frighten him in any way, and no amount of physical punishment that you can assign will break him." His eyes became daggers of ice. "And if you *do* succeed, I will have you brought up on charges, because that would require acts that no elf should even consider, let alone do."

Her eyes widened at this.

“You should also consider that this lad, whom you are so hell-bent on molesting, is only eighty years old.”

Now her eyebrows raised and she looked aghast and, to her credit, mildly horrified. “*Eighty?* But you have to be at least a hundred to join the Navy!”

It was true. Elves came of age at about a century of life. Shaundar was the elven equivalent of about sixteen.

“He lied about his age to join up when the War broke out,” Madrimlian explained mirthlessly. “Incidentally, so did *Gor’tar* Kyrok.”

All the other marines in the room looked at them both with incredulity or unabashed surprise.

Yathar nodded. “It’s true.”

“Understand, Captain,” Madrimlian explained, “that I am well aware of your little fetish. I keep you around because you are a good instructor, and because I think that your perversion is generally good for morale. But you are not good for Lieutenant Bolvi’s morale. I may not be your commanding officer, but I am in charge of this Project. If you do not leave Bolvi alone, I will not only have you removed, I will spread tales of what actually went on here to every member of the Mithril I can.” She hitched in her breath in dismay and now it was Madrimlian who wore the predatory feline smile. It didn’t require any elaboration, Shaundar thought; but to drive the point home anyway, Madrimlian remarked in an

almost casual way, “I sincerely doubt that a Captain with a reputation for seducing orcs will have much of a military career to speak of, don’t you, Talisavia?”

“I imagine she might not,” said Wintervale quietly, her face pinched as though she had been slapped.

“Oh yes,” he added, almost as an afterthought, “there’s one more thing you ought to consider; and that is the dangerous game that you are playing. We are training these Marines to be assassins; ones that think like the scro and have all of their strength. You are an uppity female trying to force them into having sex with you. Think about it.” He leaned forward a little and said without any trace of emotion at all, “And if *Gor’tar* Bolvi decides to take exception to this treatment in a manner that would be appropriate for a scro officer, I for one will not discipline him.”

Yathar and Durok were agape, and Shaundar stared at him in disbelief. Had the Captain just given him permission to *hit* her?

“Now then,” Madrimlian said, leaning back, “just to make things perfectly clear; Kyrok, do you intend to continue to have a sexual relationship with the Captain?”

“Not on your life, *karr*,” Yathar replied sourly, his arms folded across his chest.

“And Durok? Do you?”

“No way,” he growled.

Madrimlian met Wintervale’s gaze. “Then stay away from them too.”

“Understood,” she whispered, looking at her feet.

“I am pleased that we have an accord,” he nodded, satisfied. “I’d appreciate it if you’d let me speak to Bolvi for a moment.”

Captain Wintervale nodded and took her leave. The other marines, recognizing the dismissal, saluted and filed out. Lana and Targa were looking smug.

Shaundar looked up at Madrimlian, who sighed and sat down beside him in the seat that the other Captain had occupied, draping his legs over the sides of the chair as he sat in it backwards as was his custom. “Damn it, Shaundar, why didn’t you come to me?” he demanded.

He shrugged. He wasn’t really sure why, other than pride and concern that Madrimlian would not believe him.

“Why wouldn’t I believe you?” he asked. He smiled just a little. “You really can trust me, you know,” he assured Shaundar. “I’m not Lord Durothil. I want you to succeed.”

“I’m sorry, Uncle,” Shaundar apologized, feeling a little stupid. “You’re right; I should have confided in you.”

The Captain's eyes brightened a little. "Please come to me if anything else comes up, all right?"

"I will," Shaundar promised.

He sighed again. "I can't change these marks, though. They're registered with the Mithril already."

Shaundar nodded grimly. "Are they going to flunk me out of the program, sir?"

Madrimlian shook his head. "But our top graduate gets a commendation and I figured that would be you."

"I really couldn't care less about the commendation," Shaundar told him; which was the absolute truth. "That's just a popularity contest anyway, when you come right down to it. I just want to do the job I'm training to do. As long as I can do that, I don't give a beholder's ass where I place in the rankings."

Madrimlian laughed. "Okay then," he chuckled. "Hopefully that solved the problem. But if it didn't, please come to me right away, all right?"

"*Gul, karr,*" he nodded.

"Dismissed, marine!" he smiled; and Shaundar saluted and left as directed.

Whether or not Captain Wintervale kept her hands off the other trainees, Shaundar never knew for sure. But he knew that from that point, she kept her hands off of him, and once again she marked him fairly and stopped singling him out for abuse. This didn't surprise him. Uncle Madrimlian was not one to ever make idle threats.

Chapter Five

The Clan Champion of the Bloodfists blinked at the command staff and his NCOs as they gathered around the lifejammer. “Good, you’re all here,” he nodded. “Listen; it occurs to me that we may have numerous survivors floating in Borka’s air envelope. And I doubt that the elves will try to save them. They’ll die of thirst because they won’t run out of air.”

Rathgar looked startled. Thorgir’s expression was grim. Katha nodded solemnly. Yes, what he said was likely true.

“Then there’s Potemkiz,” Shaundar added.

“What do you want to do about it, sir?” Thorgir asked.

“I think,” said Shaundar slowly, “that we probably still have some Goblin Blades aboard some of our Manti. Don’t we?”

“*Gul, karr,*” piped up the little albino goblin called Ghost. Shaundar had not seen him come in. “We do, anyway. I can find out how many there are on the other ships.”

“Do that,” he nodded. “Then I want you to ask for two volunteers to pilot each fighter, and go back and pick up as many as we can while dodging the blockade. And I think we’re going to need to take the weapons off the fighters to maximize the space.”

“That’s a great idea, sir,” Katha commended him. There was a murmur of assent among the gathered soldiers.

“I’d like to volunteer, my lord,” Ghost offered. “I can spelljam.”

“I’d hate to lose you, Ghost,” Thorgir grumbled.

Ghost just looked at Shaundar with plaintive pink eyes. A true albino, then. “You know this is likely a suicide mission,” Shaundar explained bluntly.

“I know who feeds me, sir,” said the brave little goblin.

Shaundar nodded. “*Nor drakaar*, Ghost. Get your gear. And have my yeoman carry my message to the fleet.”

Ghost saluted and went to execute his orders. Shaundar leaned back, his conscience assuaged. “Brave lad,” he observed. It was amazing what a little time and change of perspective could do. Guilt assailed him as he considered all the innocents among the goblinoid races who had died at his hands when he had first joined the Black Arrows . . .

Shaundar started awake and gasping for breath; and shivered in palpable relief. Yathar, in his orange-skinned Kyrok form was snoring softly on the bunk beside him. That meant that he was not in the brig of the *Vengeance*, a prisoner of the scro on his way to Raven Talon. He

wiped the sweat from his brow and it actually splattered against the ship's wall.

Being aboard a Mantis was taking its toll on him and Yathar both. He was just grateful that he hadn't screamed this time and awakened the whole crew again; but he was pretty sure that this had something to do with the nightmare. It was almost an hour before he could shake off the memory of holding his breath as long as possible and then longer, struggling desperately against an enemy seemingly made of sinew and iron; only to have his vision narrow to a tiny pinpoint as his lungs cried out for air; to have his mouth and lungs fill with water like acid; then to be brought back to a world of light and pain that he had no desire to be in. And repeat.

Knowing that there would be no more rest for a while, Shaundar stretched and meandered off to the head. Weirdly, there was actually some advantage to his struggle; he had learned to sleep, as opposed to reverie, long before most of the other trainees. Elves were capable of sleeping, as opposed to the meditative trance called reverie that most elves practiced, but usually only when under severe stress. Reverie was also thought to be better for preserving memories of an elf's life. This did not bother Shaundar when he considered it; there was much of his life that he would rather forget.

He stepped up on deck to lend his hand to sail, and realized that the Mantis ship was making its final approach to the teeming green planet called Adonia, named after the local goddess of nature. Their

progress seemed slower than usual to Shaundar; cautionary, even. Their training exercise had been completely uneventful so far, though there were contingency plans in place, just in case. Dragonspace was a hotly contested sphere by both sides of the War, with a significant population of both elves and orcs, so their ship was just as likely to run into either one. To complicate matters, there was a strong native spelljamming power in the Sphere; a race of draconic-winged humanoids who called themselves "allyri," who were generally friendly to the elves but refused to be officially involved in the War. Occasionally they would demand tariffs from everybody.

Shaundar wondered, and not for the first time, just how it was that the scro were getting into and out of the sphere. As far as he knew, it was almost a necessity to port in at Permafrost after the extended journey through the phlogiston, and it was primarily an Elven Navy port; one of the reasons, he was sure, that the allyri remained friendly. The scro must have a secret base somewhere close to the other edge of the crystal shell, he figured, where it was unlikely to be noticed in the vast Wildspace of this huge sphere.

Somebody had to pilot the helm, but much to Shaundar's chagrin, only the females were being permitted to do that. They were mostly rotating through anyone with clerical ability that was able to pass herself off as a priestess of Luthic. While he supposed it was reasonably fair recompense for the fact that the females of the Program had to cook every meal and clean everything, he was still disappointed.

It was six months into Shaundar and Yathar's training now. Their spellbooks had been traded for folding tindertwig pack-sized books written in Draconic and Orcish. They spoke only Orcish to each other except when in the privacy of their own rooms or when they were desperately struggling for a word, to be replaced with the Orcish version as soon as possible. Shaundar rarely saw his true form these days, but when he did, none of his clothes fit because he'd put on quite a bit of muscle mass. He wasn't sure if it was the high meat diet they were eating, or just spending so much time with orcish hormones running through his body, combined with the intense strength training. Fully half of the original volunteers had left or flunked out, but all of the Spiral survivors, and Durok, who had quickly become a good friend, remained.

Shaundar now read Orcish well enough to begin to puzzle his way through "*The Art of War*," which was required reading for all males in the program. And it was proving to be very interesting. In a way, much of the text reminded Shaundar of the *Hinue ath Tel'Kerym* "The Song of the Blade," the classic tome that detailed the practice and philosophy of the elven martial art of bladesong. The *Tethka Tarrak* seemed to be a philosophy and a code of behaviour, as well as advice on strategy and tactics for a scro warrior. Last night he had found a quote that amused him; "Understand your enemy as if you were wearing his skin."

The teeming green of Adonia was astounding. Nedethil was a little blue gem by comparison. The vegetation was so thick that he could barely make out the oceans, and Nedethil might have made a small moon for this jungle planet. According to local druids, the flora was also largely

carnivorous. Shaundar thought that this could prove to be a very interesting exercise.

"Stand to your lines!" cried the acting Boatswain in Orcish. "Pitch forty up and prepare for planetfall!"

"*Gul, karr!*" came the returning call, and the bow of the Mantis tipped upward at the correct angle to somewhat slow their descent without creating enough atmospheric friction to roast their ship. The temperature on and below deck still climbed, however. Before long, Yathar was bracing the mizzensail right next to Shaundar, his face also shining with sweat.

They landed without incident, although finding an open spot in the trees to do so was like trying to find a single star in a nebula. They finally settled on a marshy pool, since Mantis ships were capable of water-landing. It was an excellent touchdown; there was only the barest splash.

"Moor up!" the Boatswain commanded. Shaundar and Yathar wrestled their line into submission with the belaying pins.

Madrimlian, polymorphed for the moment into the form of a black-skinned scro by means of what Shaundar believed to be a ring, meandered over to their sides and the boys saluted. "I don't think I have any choice but to accept fifty percent stand-to in order to keep afloat, boys," he sighed. "Bolvi, take a team and go make camp. Herod, you too."

It took the soldiers under his supervision about two hours in which to find a dry enough spot within a reasonable walking distance of the ship to make lean-tos. Shaundar carefully gathered only fallen branches and dead foliage. Something told him that cutting branches around here might just be a bad idea.

"Only *spirra* do that, you know," Durok mocked him. Shaundar tried not cringe, but he still had trouble with the word *spirra*; another racist slur for an elf that meant "dandelion" or "weed." It was good that Durok was trying to desensitize him to it.

Shaundar shrugged. "Chop down the whole forest if you want to," he invited, "but I don't think I want to piss off these plants."

Durok snickered at him, then raised his axe and brought it down on a thick vine that might make good binding material.

The vines he was standing on coiled suddenly around both of his legs and yanked him to the ground. He let out a surprised yelp.

The soldiers leaped into action. Targa started chopping at the vines with Durok's axe while Yathar grabbed Durok's arms to prevent the vines from hauling him away. Shaundar began an incantation, then stopped and ran to grab Durok as well. This was a field exercise and he couldn't be seen casting spells!

It was Helga and Lana who saved the day. Lana grabbed a burning log from the fire and intimidated the vines by waving it around

Durok's body, and then Helga uttered a prayer which seemed to soothe the beleaguered plant. It released Durok's legs and slithered back under some tree roots, where it lurked.

Durok scuttled away from the tree on all four limbs like a crab, and then lay there, panting and wide-eyed. "Well!" he exclaimed, "I guess Bolvi was right! Let's leave the damn plants alone!"

"Bolvi is usually right," Yathar chuckled. Then he sobered. "At least about things like that. You'll live longer if you learn this."

Durok took his axe back from Targa soberly. "Maybe I should leave this with you," he suggested ruefully. "It might be in better hands!"

"I'd take it," she smirked, "but women are allowed no weapons save their claws, remember?" She displayed her clawed nails, which she was growing out, and had lacquered in order to preserve.

There was considerably less chopping and tearing going on for the rest of their bivouacking, which turned out to be very fortunate for them.

"Shh," hissed Lana, putting her finger to her lips, and all the marines automatically crouched low in the foliage, as they had been trained to do. It wasn't long before they heard what it was that had caught Lana's attention.

"Well, where in the Hells is it?" a baritone voice demanded impatiently in Orcish. It was practically on top of them. The thick vegetation must have muffled the noise of their approach, but Shaundar now heard their shuffling, gradual movement through the forest. He shook his head silently with a rueful smile. He had come to realize over the past couple of months that orc senses were, in general, not as keen as elven ones. They saw better in the dark, it was true, and they had an ability to discern heat patterns in a way that elves did not; but bright light was mildly irritating and their hearing was not nearly comparable to that of the *Tel'Quessir*.

On the other hand, it occurred to Shaundar that if they had been chopping up the forest, the other party would have heard them long before this. As it was, they had the advantage if there was to be combat, since it was evident that the other group were oblivious to their presence.

"No idea," another responded in a mild tone that seemed completely unconcerned.

"I hate this planet," a third voice complained. "The trees give me the creeps."

"Stop yer whining," grunted a fourth. "At least it's a decent temperature."

The first voice guffawed. “True enough!” he admitted. “All right, let’s check the compass again.”

“*Gul, karr,*” barked the third orcish voice.

Shaundar looked around at the group and made the hand sign that indicated that they should form up; which they did. Since Lana was the quietest, he pointed at her and then made a stabbing V gesture at his eyes. He didn’t have to, he was sure, but just to be clear he then jerked his thumb in the direction of the voices.

She nodded, flattened out and began to make a slow, crawling crab-like advance through the foliage to get a closer look at their enemies.

“Well fuck, I’m lost sir,” admitted the third orc reluctantly.

“What do you mean, *lost?*” demanded the first voice Shaundar had heard. He almost laughed in spite of himself. In Espruar or Orcish, he recognized the tone of a peevish commanding officer when he heard one!

“I mean that I have no idea where we are, *karr,*” the navigator clarified in the same precise, not quite smartass tone that Shaundar might have employed in response to such a question. “I can tell you that magnetic north is that way –” Shaundar, of course, could not see what direction he was pointing in – “but I have no frame of reference because I can’t see shit.”

"Well, can anybody smell smoke?" the leader asked. Shaundar doubted it. He certainly couldn't.

The other voices expressed various negations.

The leader let out an exasperated sigh. "I suppose we'll have to wait for nightfall, then," he growled, "and look for lights. Let's set some watches. And we might as well eat."

Shaundar drew his mouth into a line around his tusks. That could be very bad for the Permafrost elves. Their ship would no doubt be noticed. He had to lead them away from here.

Lana came shuffling back. Shaundar looked at her expectantly. She held up four fingers. No more than they had heard, then. That was good. She drew a glyph in the mud at their feet. It was a thin arrow shape on a stick; the rune of the Doomspear clan. Shaundar tried to remember what he been told about them. He thought he recalled hearing that they were often ground pounders; the kind of backbone-of-the-military soldiers that marched for days on end and held the line. Not known for their creativity, however. But they were indeed scro, not orcs, and therefore could not be underestimated.

Shaundar was torn. It sounded to him like they were looking for a larger group. Smelling for smoke and looking for lights suggested a sizeable encampment to him; which meant that their enemies were gathering here. It was possible that Madrimlian had known – he would

not put it past the elf to arrange something like this – but Shaundar didn't think so. Unless those scro were more advanced Permafrost trainees, he didn't believe that Madrimlian would be likely to risk his whole project on such an encounter. More likely was that the Navy really didn't know that they were here.

Shaundar indicated for his team to fall back, and then he wrote some coordinates in the mud with his finger and promptly wiped a leaf over it and camouflaged the spot. He was bringing them back to a berry bush near the river they had followed from the marsh pool their ship had made planetfall in. It was a fair distance back to the ship, and they would not be able to use the exposed riverbed to speed their return with the possible presence of more scro than they had yet seen, but the sound of the river would be good cover for their voices. The marines crab-walked slowly back through the undergrowth to avoid detection.

The berries, which resembled purple raspberries, were the size of gourds, which is why Shaundar remembered the bush so clearly. They hunkered down around it while Shaundar cast an incantation; a simple spell that let you transmit up to twenty-five words to somebody else at a distance, as long as you were on the same planet. Shaundar transmitted to Madrimlian: *“Small enemy party sighted. Believe they seek scro base. We weren't noticed. Too close to ship. Lead away, make contact, attack, eliminate, or follow?”*

He waited, and a few moments later he heard the reply in his head, which didn't require the full twenty-five words: *“Make contact or*

follow. Find the base. Recon, report, possibly sabotage and eliminate. I will keep in touch."

Shaundar relayed this quietly to his team. "Want to test out the training?" he asked hopefully. "See if they let us in?"

"Let's do it," Yathar grinned. The affirmative nods or grunts were unanimous.

"All right," Shaundar nodded, "that's our ship," he said, indicating the Mantis they had arrived in, "and we're traipsing through the woods looking for the base, just like they are. Let's go." And they started tromping through the trees, this time not taking care to be quiet about it.

"Well, damn," Shaundar swore loudly in Orcish when they were close to their original position, "we're going around in circles! I could have sworn I heard somebody just a few minutes ago . . ."

"Who goes there?" demanded one of the four Doomspear scro. He emerged from the trees with a crossbow aimed at Shaundar, but Shaundar noticed that the tip dipped a little when he saw for sure that it was another scro. He was a large orc with doubled tusks and red-orange skin. He sounded to Shaundar like the one who had remarked that the trees gave him the creeps.

Shaundar narrowed his eyes at him. “Put that thing away before you put someone’s eye out with it,” he said sharply in the irritated snarl of a commander. The tip of the crossbow dropped just a little more.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “Can’t be too careful.”

Another scro came to stand beside him. He was black-skinned and had a fuller *toregkh*. Shaundar got the impression that he was the leader.

“Are you in charge here?” Shaundar asked him boldly.

“I’m Captain Throk Doomspear,” he introduced himself warily. Shaundar saluted in proper scro fashion. “*Gor’tar* Bolvi of the Darkblade Mercenaries,” he replied smoothly. The scro wrinkled up his nose in distaste at the word “mercenaries,” but Shaundar knew that claiming to be from a particular tribe would be a dangerous proposition at best. Who knew what tribes might be represented here? And they would be completely lost as to internal politics or customs. Better to claim to be outsiders, even knowing they were not well-regarded. “Do you have any idea where we’re going, *karr*?”

The corner of his mouth twitched upward. “Not a clue, *Gor’tar*,” he confessed.

“Well, that we might have, sir,” offered Yathar. “We put down in a clearing and there’s a riverbed just that way.” He indicated behind him.

“The *Gor’tar* was thinking that maybe we would find the encampment if we followed the river bed.”

Shaundar held his breath. This was a calculated risk. Pointing out the ship might lead the scro to it. He had no doubt that there were more than enough of their fellow and sister marines on board to take out this little party, but it might draw attention. Just to be sure, he quickly assessed the other scro coming out of the trees. They were armed with axes and crossbows. It was the crossbows they had in their hands, not the axes. So if things went badly, they would close the distance and strike hand-to-hand first, with the ladies bolstering their abilities with spells; not because the ladies were less capable, but because somebody just might see the fight. There was one too many for this to be a foolproof strategy, but Shaundar trusted the girls to know to take out the spare before aiding the boys.

The Captain looked intrigued, if Shaundar had learned how to read orcish facial expressions well enough to interpret that. “Really?” he asked curiously. “You know, I could smell it, but you think I could find it . . .” He smiled conspiratorially. “Last time I was planetbound was during my Rite of Passage. And that was longer ago than I care to admit. Lead on, *Gor’tar* Bolvi.”

Shaundar was relieved. He saluted sharply. “*Gul, karr!*” he barked, and he immediately took point as commanded, though certainly having those crossbows at his back made him more than a little nervous. It didn’t take them long to lead the scro back to the riverbed. Contrary to

Shaundar's fears, the Captain hardly bore their Mantis a second glance, though you could indeed see its red paint through the trees. Shaundar turned them in the opposite direction and headed down the edge of the river.

About an hour passed as they continued to follow the water. The scro did not seem to detect anything amiss and for the most part, the elves kept silent so as to not risk giving themselves away. After a time, one of the scro came up on Shaundar's right shoulder. It made his skin crawl and he turned to face the scro with a flash of anger in his blue eyes.

The red-orange skinned scro was the one who had approached. Shaundar's glare must have been intimidating; he blinked and flinched just slightly. "I was just wondering," he began almost hesitantly; "your women . . . are they for sale?"

Now it was Shaundar who blinked. They really were that sexist, were they? Amazing.

To cover his hesitation he chuckled. "Well, that's my sister," he indicated Lana, "and that's Durok's sister," he indicated Targa, "and Helga is Kyrok's wife, so we're pretty protective. I'd rather marry them to someone who will take care of them."

The Doomspear Captain cuffed his man upside the head. "What in the Nine Hells is the matter with you, Talgor?" he demanded. "These aren't orcs! They're scro women! They're probably Priestesses!" He

turned to Shaundar. “I’m sorry, *Gor’tar*; he’s not the sharpest tack sometimes . . .”

Talgor did not take the rebuke well. “Pretty presumptuous,” he muttered sourly, “trying to marry off clanless females.”

Shaundar resisted the urge to punch him in the face. “Maybe to clan scro,” he said, his voice dripping with acid, “but mercenaries need wives too. Were you thinking long term or just for the evening? And would you claim any issue of the union?”

The scro scowled a little. “Just for the evening,” he confessed.

“Then piss off,” Shaundar told him unceremoniously. “Their maidenheads won’t be sold that cheaply.”

The orange scro scrunched up his face in obvious irritation and fell back. But the Captain inquired in a thoughtful tone, “Can they cook?”

Durok snorted involuntarily. Shaundar turned to look at Throk. “I’ll admit, Lana isn’t the best,” he said honestly. “But she’s sweet-natured and my companions tell me she has fine childbearing hips. And Targa makes a great *hargol*.” Lana looked hurt, for which Shaundar immediately felt guilty.

“Well, forgive me, *Gor’tar*,” he said in a semblance of politeness, “but my wives have to be able to cook, no matter how lovely they are.”

He turned to Yathar and Durok and asked, “And which one of you is Durok?”

“That would be me, *karr*,” Durok confessed.

The Captain said, “Would you be willing to negotiate for the hand of your sister? She’s quite beautiful. I have three wives from the clan already so it doesn’t matter if I marry outside of it. She would only be Fourth Wife, I’m afraid, but she would be a full member of the Doomspear tribe.”

Durok looked thoughtful. “Maybe we should discuss this tonight over drinks,” he nodded as though considering it.

Captain Doomspear nodded. “Excellent!” he grunted. “I have some pepper ale I’ve been saving for a special occasion.”

“I’d be honoured to share it with you, sir,” Durok concurred with what they hoped was a cheerful smile.

As they plodded on, the sky began to darken. Shaundar thought this was probably a good thing. It meant that soon the fires of the scro encampment, however large or small it was, would be visible, and he figured that they were far enough away from the ship now that it should remain, for the most part, undetected.

“Where are you from, anyway?” inquired the Talgor suddenly.

Startled, Shaundar snorted laughter. “Everywhere,” he replied honestly. “Why do you ask?”

“You have a very odd accent,” he remarked, his tone suspicious.

Shaundar shrugged but his blood pressure increased.

“So do you,” Yathar put in rudely.

“Sir! I think I see the encampment!” Durok called out, pointing ahead of them.

Sure enough, there were the lights of campfires burning through the trees. Shaundar thought that this was very good timing.

“Good job, *Gor’tar* Bolvi,” Captain Doomspear said, clapping him on the shoulder. “You found it.”

Shaundar didn’t really feel he deserved the credit – nothing but dumb luck had brought him here, really, though it did make sense that they would likely not be too far from a water source; that was basic logistics – but he accepted it. “Thank you, sir,” he responded with an ironic smirk.

Even the orange-skinned scro was suddenly cheerful and almost friendly. “I can smell dinner already!” he grinned. Shaundar sniffed the air dubiously; but yes, so could he. Someone was cooking something meaty

and spicy. He realized that he was actually hungry, and then it occurred to him that he had not eaten all day. His stomach made an audible growl.

The Captain laughed. “I concur! Let’s go find those cooks, shall we?”

They entered the camp, and Shaundar’s shoulders tensed as he prepared for the next stage. It felt so bizarre to just be walking into the scro military base as though he belonged there; for that is exactly what it was. There were cooking fires and pitched military tents. There were sandbag walls and a perimeter defense.

He started counting ships and was dismayed. Three Manti, seven Scorpions and even a couple of Ogre Mammoths being refitted with cannons instead of the more typical catapults that the Elven Navy was used to, and that didn’t even count whatever their companions had brought. A handful of scro were directing the activities of hundreds of common orcs, goblins, hobgoblins, kobolds, bugbears, and ogres. Mostly the chow line seemed to be the center of activity at the moment. Their companions muscled aside some of the smaller humanoids to push nearer to the front of the line. They grumbled but didn’t protest too loudly, almost as if they were expecting it. Shaundar just followed along and pushed into the line with them so as not to draw suspicion.

A very sour looking, gray-haired and wrinkled orc female with brown skin slopped something into his bowl that looked like chili. He grunted a thank you and moved along down the line. She twitched,

almost, and glanced at him with a discerning look. Not sure what he had done to draw her attention, he pretended that he didn't notice and kept going.

Shaundar was grateful that they had been accustoming their palates to spicy food. It had to be the hottest chili he had ever eaten. Even with his training it made his nose run and his eyes water. Fortunately he wasn't alone. "Good stuff!" Captain Doomspear proclaimed loudly as he sniffled and wiped at his leaking sinuses. "That'll put hair on your chest!"

Shaundar didn't think he needed more hair on his chest, but he grunted something that sounded vaguely complimentary and nodded. "So where do we bunk, sir?" he asked of the Captain. He was eager now to get some private space so that they could plan their strategy.

"Mercenaries?" jeered Talgor. "I think it'll have to be with the orcs!"

The insult, based on their knowledge of what scro thought of common orcs, was unmistakable. Yathar stood up. "You know, this pissant has been asking for a face full of knuckles all day. You want me to give it to him, sir?"

"No," said Shaundar mildly. He reached over and popped the orange scro in the face with his right fist. He wasn't expecting it and Shaundar heard something crack as Talgor fell right off his chair. The

Captain guffawed and the surrounding scro burst out laughing too as the scro, humiliated, picked himself up out of the dirt with a meaty orange hand clasped to his lower jaw.

Shaundar was a little shaken. He did not realize that he had hit the scro so hard. It was probably for the best, but he thought he could see a fissure in one tusk. He was unaware until then how physically strong he had actually become. Since he was not laughing, he went back to his chili with what he hoped was an air of nonchalance.

“You deserved that,” the Captain told his man as he helped him up.

“Yeah, I guess maybe I did,” he nodded reluctantly. “Sorry about that,” he apologized to Shaundar and Yathar. “You’re right, that was a little much.”

Shaundar shrugged. “Fair enough,” he said. “Apology accepted.” He continued to eat.

“I imagine you’ll be pitching your tents near the wall,” Throk Doodspear told him. “That’s pretty much standard procedure for mercenaries.”

“That’s fine,” Durok remarked cheerfully as he guzzled a tankard of something that smelled like spiced beer. “That way we’ll be at the forefront of any action; just how I like it. Right, sir?”

Shaundar nodded his agreement. "'When war is a way of life, the soldier is always at the ready,'" he quoted from Dukagsh's book.

The Captain nodded approvingly. "You're pretty well educated for a mercenary, *Gor'tar Bolvi*," he observed. "But I prefer *A Scro Manifesto* myself. 'My people are impatient – I shall teach them patience. My people are cowards – I shall teach them courage. My people think only of today – I shall teach them to think of tomorrow. My people lust for elven blood – this requires no teaching.'"

The scro surrounding him laughed out loud and applauded and pounded the table heartily. Shaundar shoveled chili into his mouth to keep it shut. Yes, that was exactly why they were here. He wanted to thank the Captain for the reminder.

The personnel officer had not been expecting the Darkblade Mercenaries. This did not bother Shaundar much; he was banking on his belief that military logistics were always a tangled skein of delays, red tape and bullshit, no matter which military it was, and he was not mistaken. The officer grumbled something about how "it would be nice if Command could find its ass with both hands and a chart once in a while," and true to form, he assigned them tent space near the perimeter. This, again, did not trouble Shaundar in the slightest. Actually, it was in their best interests to create a modicum of privacy. "I hope you brought tents; we don't have enough to go around!" he called after Shaundar.

“We’ll make do,” he replied; and within half an hour they had a city of tarps and branches set up to form a common area for their team, with the additional benefit of having mostly wooden walls and rustling leaves instead of canvas to buffer sound.

While Lana, Helga and Targa dug a midden-pit and set up a cooking fire, Durok and Yathar started a game of dice during which they catcalled and mocked each other loudly so that Shaundar could report in with minimal chances of being overheard. He sent: *“Infiltrated base. Count three Manti, seven Scorpions, two Mammoths, maybe a dozen small craft. Doomspear, Deathtusk, Grimcleave; but mostly goblinoids. Few non-combatants. Your orders?”*

It didn’t take long for the reply to come back: *“Scuttle the ships. Eliminate targets of opportunity. Get out alive, leave no one behind.”*

Shaundar nodded to himself and relayed Madrimlian’s commands to his team.

“Right,” confirmed Yathar. “Do you think we’re better off making the attempt at night or during the day?”

It was a good question. With the scro’s superior night vision, daytime might be a better bet. It was well after dark now, but the base felt like it was in the middle of its activity cycle. “I’m guessing they’ll be quietest at about ten o’clock in the morning,” he estimated. “Let’s aim for late morning tomorrow.”

“Good,” said Lana with wickedly twinkling eyes. “I’ll arrange a little surprise for the morning meal, then.”

“What do you have in mind?” Durok wanted to know.

She smiled beatifically. “Well, one sautéed mushroom generally looks like another,” she pointed out, “especially if they’re sliced in pieces. They’re a little bitter but in all the peppers, I doubt anyone will notice.”

Yathar snorted. “Okay, sounds good,” Shaundar agreed. “Do you think you have enough to accommodate the whole camp?”

“I’ll make sure I get to the scro for sure,” she promised. “That should create enough chaos that we can do what we have to do.”

“Okay,” Shaundar nodded, “you’re on, Lana. Now, can the rest of us get close enough to those ships to scuttle them?”

“Why merely scuttle them?” Durok inquired mischievously. “Yathar tells me you’ve been brewing up a little orcish surprise in the alchemy lab. Why not test it out?”

“Testing is exactly what it will be,” Shaundar told him frankly. “I haven’t had a chance yet.”

Yathar shrugged. “If it works, it’ll be a lot more effective than scuttling.”

Shaundar nodded again. “Okay, you’re probably right. I guess we’ll give it a shot.”

“And to answer your question, sir,” Durok continued, “I think we can. We could polymorph into one of their crew. Or maybe just steal the right clan insignia.”

“We might be able to just bluff our way on board if necessary,” Yathar suggested. “No one seems to be questioning the scro much.”

It was true, from what they had observed thus far; and their experience at the Battle of Leira bore this up as well, when Shaundar thought about it.

“One last problem,” Shaundar pointed out. “We need to find the smaller craft concealed in the forest if we want to strand them here.”

“Why?” Targa returned directly. “We do have a whole ship of Marines out there, don’t we? Seems like that’s something they could be doing while we’re taking out the base.”

It made sense to Shaundar. They were “toy soldiers” too, weren’t they? “You’re right. Contact Madrimlian and request it.”

“*Gul, karr,*” she confirmed, and Shaundar joined the dice game so that she could speak freely.

“Madrimlian says they’ve got it covered,” Targa informed them a few minutes later.

“Good then,” grunted Shaundar. “Let’s canvas the base a bit to plan our approach, and then we might as well sleep while we can.”

“*Gul, karr,*” the team agreed, and Durok made a show of having beaten the rest of them in the dicing.

“Well, go spend your winnings then!” snarled Yathar. “I’m going to find someone else to dice with for the evening. Maybe my luck will improve.” With similar excuses manufactured for anyone who might be listening, they split up.

The tour cheered Shaundar considerably. The goblinoid Navy was convinced that their foes had no idea that they were anywhere near the place, and subsequently they were lax and lazy. Half of them were drunk and the ones that weren’t were too busy worrying about chasing the plethora of camp followers on hand to be of much use for anything else. To be honest, he didn’t blame them. He didn’t know a single soldier that didn’t play hard when she or he had the chance; except maybe himself. He flirted casually with one of the orcish camp followers to keep up appearances, but allowed a scro of the Grimcleave clan to cut in on his action with only a token protest.

The scro, and their minions, seemed to enjoy hard drinking, gambling, and tests of strength and combat. They weren’t very discrete

about pawing the females either. Shaundar marvelled at what the females were willing to tolerate, because such behaviour directed towards elf-maids would get you court martialled or perhaps just shot in the groin with a longbow. But then again, he supposed that these women were mostly prostitutes and not soldiers, and everything he had ever heard suggested that orcs were prone to rutting like animals. Still, he found himself clenching his teeth more than once and resisting the urge to punch some lusty soldier with wandering hands in the face, especially if it was clear that the female he was groping was less than enthusiastic about this, whether they were orcish women or not. He sought out Durok and Yathar. "Find the girls and keep them close," he advised them.

"Good idea," Yathar agreed.

Within those two hours, two more small parties of scro wandered in. Shaundar decided to find out exactly what was going on. It was clear that they were amassing an invasion force, but for where? The primary world of the sphere, or Permafrost, or was it some other sphere, with this one being used strictly as a rendezvous point? He didn't think that the latter was likely, given Dragonspace's immense size, but he couldn't say for sure.

Someone in a Captain's uniform with Doomspear insignia on his lapels approached Shaundar. "You're with the Darkblade Mercenaries, *Gor'tar*?" Shaundar was asked.

He saluted. "I am, sir," he acknowledged.

"You're wanted in the Command tent," the Captain explained.

Now, why in the worlds would he be wanted in the Command tent? "*Gul, karr,*" he said brusquely, and he went to report as ordered. There were a couple of surly ogres standing guard and he declined his head towards them as he pushed past into the tent and offered a crisp scro salute to whomever might be in there.

It turned out to be six scro of various stripes, in pairs that displayed the same three clan runes on their studded leather uniforms that marked most of the other scro. One of them was Captain Doomspear; the second was the scro who had blithely explained to him that they were lost. Two of them – the Grimcleave leaders – seemed to have the place of precedence, though Shaundar was unable to glean why at first glance. Perhaps it was the numerous scars that covered the body of the larger of the Grimcleaves, including his throat.

Shaundar also noticed a chart of the sphere spread out like a cloth on the table in front of the commanders. He noticed with dismay that icons of several elven ships dotted its surface, and though he was not of sufficient ranking to know for certain, he thought their placement was reasonably accurate. There was a large flotilla patrolling the immediate space outside of the giant primary and its three moons; there were several smaller flotillas making their presence known in various places throughout the sphere; and there was a significant flotilla protecting Permafrost, but its patrol arc at the edge of the sphere was, by necessity, a little over-extended.

There were also several goblinoid, scro and orcish ship icons represented; right now they were clustered around the image of Adonia on the map, and there were a distressing lot of them.

"You're with those mercenaries that just came in?" the Grimcleave commodore growled at Shaundar, champing at a pipe.

"Yes, sir," he responded respectfully.

"So, how many are you?" he wanted to know.

"One Mantis, full crew," he responded immediately, figuring that this was something that he could back up easily enough.

The Duskblade commander narrowed his eyes. "How is it that a bunch of clanless sell-swords have acquired a Mantis?" he demanded with a self-righteous scowl.

"Scrounging, determination, and some brilliant shipwrights, sir," Shaundar flipped back quite truthfully.

"A full Mantis crew of sell-swords could be useful, sir," the Grimcleave second pointed out.

He nodded thoughtfully and took a long draw off the large oaken pipe that was fuming with a sour smelling spicy smoke. "Yes, I can see how that might be," he concurred. "All right, your Captain will answer to us directly."

"Gul, karr," Shaundar affirmed.

"We'll be on the direct Permafrost assault," he explained. He indicated on the chart to a white semi-circle that represented the disk of Permafrost at the edge of the sphere, with figurines representing the flotilla of elven ships that typically patrolled that area clustered around it. He then indicated a wedge of ships to the starboard side, from Shaundar's perspective, of the green circle of Adonia, marked with a flag bearing the Grimcleave rune. "Permafrost will be at perigee to Adonia in just over two weeks. The day after tomorrow, we'll set out to meet it." The commodore rummaged through a small box and came up with a lead Mantis figurine, which he added to the wedge of Grimcleave ships. Shaundar quickly counted; seven Scorpions, two Ogre Mammoths and now four Manti in that wedge alone; and there were two more wedges that contained various goblinoid man-o-wars and multiple cutters and fighters. There were more ships than they had anticipated. It was a full-out assault, then. He set his jaw grimly as the new Mantis model was placed near the point of the wedge. The commodore slid the wedge towards Permafrost with a ruler. Their defence flotilla was significantly outnumbered and out-tonned.

"Your ship and mine will lead the assault," he explained. "I hear a rumour that the *Ruamarillys* has been sighted around Permafrost in recent months."

That was Madrimlian's ship. So much for being discrete! "So I hear," he growled.

“There would be much glory to the crew that could sink her,” the Doomspear chief pointed out. He thumped Shaundar on the shoulder.

Shaundar had never thought about it really – he’d always just been Uncle Madrimlian to them – but Madrimlian was a veteran of both Great Wars and had commanded his own ship even four hundred years ago. How many scro ships had the *Ruamarillys* defeated, Shaundar wondered? “It would be a privilege to be a part of that crew,” Shaundar chuffed thoughtfully.

Though Shaundar was now able to differentiate between the grin that the Deathtusk leader flashed him, and the baring of his tusks that Shaundar might once have inferred, the smile was entirely humourless. “That’s the spirit,” he rumbled.

“What about the others?” it occurred to Shaundar to ask. “They’ll be engaging those other *gurt* flotillas, I take it?”

The Deathtusk commodore frowned. “Not that it’s really your concern, *Gor’tar*, but yes. We’ll be intercepting them to prevent them from aiding the Permafrost assault.”

That made perfect sense to Shaundar. Strategically, taking out Permafrost would deprive the Imperial Elven Navy of that all-important restocking point at the end of a long run through the phlogiston, and it would completely cut off the local elven outposts from any reinforcements. The next logical step would be to invade Alasia, which

was a large elven nation on the primary world of the sphere with an ancient spelljamming culture. After that, they could probably pick off the Navy outposts at their leisure. He thought quickly. “With your permission then, *karrek*,” he began, “my team and I will stay the day, and head back to our ship immediately at twilight to relay your orders. What time shall we set sail?”

“First bell of the first watch,” the Grimcleave commodore announced, blowing out a gust of that foul smoke.

He nodded his acknowledgement. “We’ll see you in the skies, sirs,” he promised. It was a promise he meant to keep.

They nodded to indicate their dismissal. Shaundar offered a crisp orcish salute and took his leave. He indicated to the cluster of grim polymorphed orcish faces around him to follow him when he left the tent, and they fell in step.

“How bad is it?” Yathar demanded when they were back in their encampment.

“Bad,” admitted Shaundar.

“What are we going to do?” Lana wanted to know. She looked up at him with earnest blue eyes that were so similar to her elven ones, just with less sparkles.

“We have to sabotage this fleet,” said Shaundar. “I’ll report. In the meantime, take those ‘orcish surprises’ out of my pack. We’re going to have to distribute as many of them as we can.”

“Where?” asked Durok. He loosened the leather ties on Shaundar’s pack and started removing paper-wrapped packages containing a pale, waxy substance.

“The man-o-wars, I think.”

Yathar snickered. “Bolvi, you’re an ass.”

Shaundar, thinking of the end result, agreed to himself that he probably was.

“Why does that make him an ass?” Targa inquired.

Yathar smirked. “Bolvi’s concoction isn’t flammable until it’s triggered by an electrical charge,” he explained. “Then it explodes. The man-o-wars are all metal. We won’t have to be anywhere near them as long as we hit the ships with a significant electrical force.”

“I hope you all have *lightning bolt* spells or similar prepared,” Shaundar advised. “You really don’t want to get close enough to this stuff to use a *shocking grasp*.”

The team nodded, their faces grim. All eyes glittered with the possibility of striking their first blows of vengeance.

"What are we going to do about the fleet commanders?" Durok asked, flexing his fists.

"They're targets of opportunity," said Shaundar. Durok nodded just once. His expression was almost eager.

Shaundar drifted off to offer his report. His message was simple: *"Full scale assault planned when Adonia at perigee to Permafrost. Other flotillas to engage our forces but Permafrost is the target. Awaiting orders."*

Madrimlian's reply came almost immediately. *"Proceed as planned. Will coordinate our attack on smaller craft with yours; four bells, forenoon watch. Passing word to Fleet Command. We'll be ready."*

Reassured, Shaundar returned to the group. "Ask the officer of the watch what time he has," he instructed Durok while the other members of the team double-checked their gear.

"Seven bells," he relayed to Shaundar a moment later.

It was almost the end of first watch, then. They had about seven hours.

"Let's pair off and deliver the packages," he commanded. "I'll take the flagship; who wants to come with me?"

Lana and Yathar both volunteered right away. He took Lana because he felt their skills balanced each other better. Yathar partnered with Targa and Durok with Helga.

“First the Manti,” Shaundar delineated, “then the Scorpions. We won’t have enough of these to worry about the smaller ships so don’t. We’ll get them if we can.”

“What about the Mammoths?” Helga wanted to know. Indeed. They were wood and not metal, of course, so Shaundar’s surprises would not be nearly as effective. But he supposed that a little bit of judiciously applied black powder and some strong spirits might do the trick. Certainly he had seen the effectiveness of that before. He blinked away the memory of elves blazing like torches.

The other problem was that Mammoths were almost entirely manned by ogres. For someone to get aboard, she would either have to be completely unseen, or bluff brilliantly. “Why don’t we regroup after we’ve set the charges on the man-o-wars?” he suggested. “Lana and Targa are the stealthiest among us; they’ll get aboard the Mammoths while the rest of us take out our ‘targets of opportunity.’”

Lana seemed strangely complimented. Targa just seemed disappointed. “Don’t worry,” Yathar told her, clapping her on the shoulder. “You’ll get your piece. Just think; it will be raining dead ogres!”

“I suppose there is something to be said for that,” she admitted with reluctance.

“All right; move out!” he growled.

It was a simple enough matter to get aboard the flagship. Shaundar figured that hiding in plain sight was his best option, so he searched for the Grimcleave flag, then brazenly approached the plank and bellowed, “Permission to come aboard!”

One of the Grimcleave scro poked his head over the portside railing. “Who goes there?” he demanded warily.

“*Gor’tar* Bolvi with the Darkblade Mercenaries,” Shaundar proclaimed. “I’ve been sent by the Commodore to fetch the rest of the Dragonspace charts from Navigation. And his pipe,” he improvised in a rueful tone.

The sailor laughed sympathetically. “Got you running messenger boy services, does he? Bad luck, friend. Come aboard.”

Shaundar did so and was sure to salute the bow sharply in proper scro fashion. Quickly he glanced around to assess strengths. The ship was well armed in what Shaundar had come to recognize as typical scro military fashion. The skeleton crew on board, however, seemed apathetic and faintly irritated in the manner of soldiers on garrison duty. He almost laughed aloud. That was a feeling he knew quite well!

Lana twirled a lock of her hair nervously.

“Follow me,” the spacer invited, and he led them into the interior body of the ship. A heavily armoured orcish soldier sidled by them as they both turned sideways to allow the other to pass through the doorway. When he was gone, Shaundar noticed Lana discretely push her package under a coil of rope with her toe.

They found themselves in a complex room that seemed to be doing several things at once. Against the far wall at what would be the center of the front torso of the ship was an enormous metal control panel spiked with several levers; the gearsticks and switches for the infamous ship-breaking claw grapples. There was also a long table displaying a full map of the sphere, which was speckled with more lead ship figurines. Shaundar caught a glimpse of a triangular marker near the edge of the sphere by the constellation the locals called “The Dragonrider.” Traditionally in Navigation, a triangle indicated a portal. Shaundar tried not to reveal his excitement. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that their lifejammer, which was under the stairs just like on the Mantis the Elven Navy had stolen, was covered with a canvas tarp.

The sailor marched up a ladder to what was obviously the bridge, tapped on the edge of the hatchway and waited. Eventually someone popped open the hatch. Their guide saluted and Shaundar followed suit with only a moment’s hesitation. “Cap’n wants the local charts again, *karr*,” he informed the face in the hatchway. Shaundar noticed that the face had only a single eye; the other was an empty

socket. He wore no eye-patch. He glared at Shaundar balefully with that one eye and then disappeared into the bridge without a word. Just as Shaundar gave up and assumed that he was not coming back, he reappeared and handed Shaundar a map case. Then he slammed the metal hatch back down without another word.

The spacehand with them twitched. “Fucking Warpriests,” he grumbled. “Give me the creeps.”

“You and me both,” confessed Shaundar.

They clambered down a second ladder, which Shaundar knew would lead to the main deck. Once they passed through the hatchway, everything appeared to be bolted to the ceiling. In space, this would simply be the other side of the gravity plane, but on planetside, the greater gravity of the planet overruled the ship’s gravity. Since all the ship’s living quarters were on this deck, there was no choice but to bivouac them.

Their guide led the way to the Captain’s quarters, which were behind the first door on the left, just as their stolen ship was configured. He had to pull himself up with the railing of the Captain’s bed to reach the top drawer of the desk, which he pulled open only a fraction and then rummaged around in with his hand. Despite his best efforts a couple of quills descended in a tailspin to the floor. He swore softly and dug deeper. In the meantime, appreciating the irony, Shaundar retrieved the quills and took advantage of their guide’s distraction to wedge his

explosive compound between the bed and the wall. When the sailor finally handed down a pipe, effectively surprising Shaundar who knew, of course, that the Grimcleave commodore had a pipe already, Shaundar handed him up the quills without a word. “Broke his favourite pipe; did he?” the starfarer asked conversationally. “That’s gotta be his spare, it was buried so far back there!”

Shaundar just shrugged noncommittally. “*Nor drakaar,*” he grunted.

“You’re welcome,” the spacehand grinned. He saw them to the gangplank and off the ship with a friendly wave.

Shaundar took a glance at the pipe. It was solid walnut wood and had a large, comfortably rounded bowl that fit perfectly in his bigger orcish hand. The mouthpiece was sturdy horn and it had a considerably longer curve to it than his elf-sized cherry wood briar; probably to accommodate tusks. He decided he might as well keep it. And as for the star chart; well, he knew that Madrimlian would just love to know what the scro knew about the sphere; and where the portal they were using was located.

That sailor had been very helpful. He almost felt guilty.

It was considerably less difficult to get aboard the Scorpions. Since most of them were crewed by common orcs, who answered directly to the scro, Shaundar just claimed to have been sent by the Fleet

Quartermaster to inventory the ammunition. One or two grumbled that this had already been done, but Shaundar just shrugged. “I have my orders,” he said stubbornly. They let him aboard. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time that the Navy had done anything redundant in Supply!

This gave them free access to the ordnance, and plenty of excellent dark nooks and crannies in which to hide explosives. Driven by a sadistic sense of irony, wherever possible Shaundar wedged them into the brass monkeys underneath the cannon shot. How many cannonballs had the elven slaves rolled out of the Raven Talon munitions factory during Shaundar and Lana’s two year imprisonment, despite his feeble attempts at sabotage? How many times had he and Yathar wished to do something exactly like this?

He was snickering when they returned to their makeshift tents, where he took a moment to renew his *polymorph* spell. Yathar and Helga were awaiting them, but Durok and Targa were nowhere to be seen.

“Not back yet,” Yathar answered curtly to his query. He seemed anxious.

Shaundar was anxious too. Light was in the sky by now and the sun was rising. What could have kept them? Had they been discovered? He peered fretfully into the gloom of the jungle sunrise as the watch commander called the first bell of the forenoon watch. Just two hours to go.

He had just about decided to risk searching for them when a sudden lurching movement to the west of the encampment caught Shaundar's eye. There was a crash and a loud string of cursing, and then Durok, supported by Targa, materialized from the undergrowth. Shaundar sent Helga to aid him, running a thousand possible scenarios through his head; Poison? Broken ankle? Shot in the groin with a crossbow? Snake bite or laceration from carnivorous vines? Then he smelled the liquor and noticed how Durok's eyes were blinking and blurry.

"Dear gods, Durok, are you *drunk*?" he demanded.

"Cap'n Doomspear cornered me," he slurred ruefully. "Wanted to talk about marrying Targa." He snorted. "Wouldn't take no for an answer! I finally told him something just to get out of there." He veered off course again and had to be directed into the entrance of their barricade before he collapsed the whole thing. "Those orcish spirits are potent!" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"Did you come to an agreement?" Yathar inquired with a grin.

"I think my hand was finally given for two ships and a fief on a colony world they called 'Nardak,'" she smirked, tongue in cheek.

Shaundar was much less jovial. "Did you manage to lay the charges on the third Mantis?"

Durok sat down; or, more accurately, fell onto his legs. “No,” he confessed. “I’m sorry, *Gor’tar*.” He did not try to justify himself with excuses. He seemed genuinely contrite.

This being his first official command, Shaundar resisted the urge to lay into Durok. He supposed that the only other choice would have been to step out of character and risk discovery; and would he have held his liquor any better? “We have two hours to take out that last Mantis, the Mammoths, and deal with the commanding officers,” he pressed on with a sigh to relieve some of his rapidly-mounting tension. “I am open to suggestions.”

“Deal with the Mantis first, sir,” recommended Lana. “I may be able to incorporate my plans for kitchen duty into that.”

“What do you have in mind?” Shaundar asked.

Lana blinked a little too innocently as she clasped her hands behind her back and dangled one toe behind her. “Well, I’m sure there must be something that resembles tea or coffee around here somewhere, and I’m sure the Doomspear crew would be most grateful to receive it, since watch duty is so dull. That would require me to be in the mess and the galley first.”

And that would give her a chance to toss her poison mushrooms into whatever passed as orchish dawnfry. Shaundar nodded. “Good call, Lana; sounds great. That’s a go.” He studied Durok intently. No, he was in

no shape to do anything useful at all. “Helga, can you do anything for him?”

“*Gul, karr,*” she grinned. “I was just waiting to be asked.” She made a gesture and intoned a wordless singing chant, and touched Durok with the palm of her hand. The blurry look faded from his eyes immediately.

He shook his head. “Sorry about that, Bolvi. And thanks, Helga.” He smiled ruefully. “If they do have some kind of bitter stimulant drink, I could really use some too.”

“Why don’t we head to the mess?” Shaundar suggested. “We should go for the morning meal anyway. Our absence might be noticed.”

“Good idea!” agreed Yathar with enthusiasm. “I’m hungry!”

Durok shook his head. “You’re always hungry, Kyrok,” he pointed out. But they did as Shaundar suggested.

They were serving rice, a fierce green coconut curry, and some sort of bitter and spicy liquid concoction that Shaundar was unfamiliar with. It was delicious, and it warmed the belly nicely. It tasted as though someone had dumped pumpkin pie spice and a pepper mill into a cup of coffee. They helped themselves to a couple of bowls and then commandeered a few carafes. Again, because it looked as though they knew what they were doing, no one bothered them. It disturbed Shaundar just a little to realize how easy this was; that is, until that

damned Talgor from the Doodspears came up to them and inquired plaintively, “You’re not taking all the *graf*, are you?”

Shaundar moulded his face into that bored, irritated expression that he associated with the scions of elven noble families being assigned to do something that they thought was beneath them. “We’ve been ordered to bring some to the skeleton crews still aboard the ships,” he griped. He noticed Lana out of the corner of his eye taking advantage of the distraction to slip into the galley.

“And you’re not getting the kobolds to do it?” demanded Talgor incredulously.

“Of course he is,” snapped Yathar, “but we had to organize it all first! You there!” he barked crabily at a passing kobold with a tray of dirty dishes in its talons. “Put those down and take this!”

“But sir,” the kobold protested, “me get in big trouble with head cook . . .”

Talgor booted him hard at the base of his serpentine tail and he collapsed face first into the tray of dishes. Two cups cracked like eggs and the kobold moaned in dismay. Some nearby orcs and hobgoblins hooted laughter. “You’re going to get in big trouble with us if you don’t do what you’re told!” he snarled. “Now get to it!”

“*Gul, karr,*” gulped the kobold. He left the dishes where they were and picked up a steaming carafe.

Shaundar decided that he had quite enough of this asshole and he was going to be the first to die after the commanders. They recruited a few more kobolds to carry carafes of *graf* for them. With perfect timing, Shaundar saw Lana hauling out a large egg and meat pie and adding it to the buffet. She was smiling. “You should try the *ryll*,” he recommended smoothly. “I understand it packs a punch.”

“I’ll do that,” his unwelcome companion promised. Shaundar hoped so.

They took their own *graf* and martialled the kobolds into a processional with them lagging at the rear.

“So much for doing this discretely,” a cantankerous Helga muttered. They put some more distance between themselves and the kobolds and lowered their voices.

“Not so,” Yathar disagreed with an amused twinkle in his green eyes. “Actually, this situation has inspired me to a whole new level of brilliance.” He cast an appraising look over. “You’re dressed pretty conservatively,” he observed. “Can you shorten that skirt a bit? Maybe tie your blouse a little tighter?”

“Why, Kyrok?” she sneered. “You needing something to jerk off to?”

He blinked. “Actually, that didn’t even cross my mind. But I thought you might be a good distraction while Durok distributes the last of Bolvi’s surprises.”

She seemed taken aback, but she nodded. “All right,” she agreed, and started rearranging her clothing.

“We still don’t have a plan for the Mammoths,” Targa fretted.

Shaundar considered the structure of the ships. The bad news was that they were almost impenetrable anywhere except the top deck. But then it occurred to him that those unorthodox cannons were on that same deck; and so were the shot and the powder-kegs. “I have a thought,” he told the team.

The watch commander called two bells of the forenoon watch. “Let’s hurry this up,” urged Shaundar. He split them into pairs again and brought *graf* to the other two Manti as well, just in case they were being observed. He was beginning to think that the orange Doomspear scro, at least, was watching them; their encounters were beginning to feel a little less than coincidental. Shaundar actually glanced around to see if they had been followed, but it didn’t appear so. From his vantage point on the Grimcleave Mantis, he could see Helga flirting outrageously and the kobolds moving amongst the Doomspear Mantis’ crew. They paid no attention to Durok whatsoever. The males waved at Helga with good cheer when she disembarked the ship, and one of them called out a proposition so loudly that he could hear every word of it even at this

distance. He cringed inwardly, but Helga just laughed. “Look me up later if you think you have the strength, lad!” she teased. The brave (or crass) scro’s buddies pounded him on the back as they took their leave.

Shaundar sent the kobolds back to the galley with a couple of coppers each for their trouble. They seemed astounded by his generosity and they cringed and scuttled away from him, clutching their coins as though they were afraid that he would change his mind. He scowled.

“Didn’t look like there were any problems,” remarked Yathar hopefully.

“None,” agreed Durok.

“Let’s hear this plan of yours,” Targa urged.

From Shaundar’s pack he removed half a dozen flasks of alchemist’s fire. From his belt pouches he retrieved the same number of heavily waxed gray pebbles. “This stuff is a form of phosphorus that explodes when it comes in contact with liquid,” he explained, “which is why I’ve coated them in wax. But alchemist’s fire is a solvent as well as an explosive, so it will dissolve the coating and release the catalyst.”

“How long does it take?” queried Durok after a moment’s hesitation.

“Less than a minute,” Shaundar informed him matter-of-factly. “How much less, I can’t say.”

Yathar pursed his lips. “Good thing there’s no cowards in the Marines.” But his gaze was steady and determined. He took a flask and a pebble.

“Bolvi, you’re a genius,” Lana breathed in awe as she did the same.

“Glad you approve,” he smiled a little self-consciously. No one had ever called him a genius before. “We’ll need to get these into the powder-kegs up there to maximize destructive potential. We won’t have much time.”

“Not a problem,” Durok promised.

Yathar clasped Shaundar’s shoulder and indicated with his eyes. A contingent of five armed scro displaying Grimcleave insignia was marching purposefully towards them, accompanied by that damned orange-skinned Doomspear. His stomach sank into his orcish war boots and his heartbeat started tapping out a staccato roll.

“Excuse me,” the leader cleared his throat. “*Gor’tar* Bolvi?”

“Yes?” he responded warily.

“Your sister needs to come with us,” he said uncomfortably.

Shaundar glared. “What is this about?” he demanded.

One of the others frowned back at him in irritation. “Your sister was seen bringing out a pan of *ryll* at the morning mess,” he explained. “Everyone who has eaten the *ryll* is sick. The Captain would like to know what she put into it.” The Doomspear scro folded his arms pointedly.

To her credit, Lana did not miss a beat. “Well, that’s terrible!” she exclaimed. “I hope the eggs weren’t bad. They didn’t smell bad . . .”

“All the same, miss,” the leader insisted – carefully avoiding the title *karra*, Shaundar noticed – “you’ll have to come with us.”

“Of course,” she agreed. She stepped forward.

So did Shaundar. “Absolutely, we’ll come along. Let’s get to the bottom of this.”

The second scrunched up his face in a scowl and bared his tusks a little. “The Captain said we were to bring only her.”

That was not a good sign. The game was up, then. “I insist,” Shaundar snarled. He displayed his tusks too.

“Come along, then,” snapped the leader in exasperation. “You can explain it to the Captain.” They fell in step with the patrol. Shaundar glanced ahead of them and noticed that they would pass behind a couple of the mess tents and a canvas tarp, providing partial concealment. It wasn’t perfect, but it would have to do. He glanced at Yathar and cast his eyes quickly up ahead. Yathar offered him a barely perceptible nod and

palmed his dagger. Shaundar eased the hilts of his short swords into his hands.

When they reached the shade of the tarp, the team exploded into action. Shaundar drew his swords and Yathar his dagger. No fools, the scro began to turn around with their hands at their own weapons, perhaps recognizing the sound of metal scraping hard leather, but Yathar grabbed the leader by one tusk and an eye socket, rammed the tip of the dagger into his throat and yanked it firmly through his esophagus. Blood spewed from the wound. In the meantime, Shaundar laid a brutal blow to the Doomspear in mid-spin, breaking his jaw and opening his carotid artery, while his off-hand sword found a weak spot in the armour and pierced his foe's belly almost to the middle of the blade. When Talgor fell from the force of the first blow, Shaundar's blade came free and black viscera spurted forth with healthier red. Shaundar was pretty sure he would never get up again.

Lana didn't even glance back to see what was happening. She grabbed the nearest scro's hand in both of hers, slammed her hips into his legs, and forced his elbow straight. He flew right over her head and hit the ground with an audible thud. She was on top of him in moments, clutching his face, and her hands were radiating black energy that crept over his head and drained his strength. He bleated out in a weak, agonized moan.

Durok stepped up and drove a knife hand into another scro's throat. He staggered backwards, giving Durok time to get his dagger free,

which he then thrust repeatedly in rapid-fire succession into his opponent's torso, tearing into lungs, ribs, sternum, diaphragm and heart. Blood bubbled from his mouth as he hit the ground. He made a strangled gurgle.

By this time the other two scro had managed to pull their weapons. But Targa laid a kick to one scro's wrist, disarming him; then she used his arm as a lever to pull him over, driving a knee into his groin as he fell. Her elbow to the back of his neck forced him to the ground faster than even gravity had intended. One tusk broke as his face hit the dirt. She leaped on top of him and before he could get up, she punched her dagger blade through the back of his neck. He lay still.

Since Lana's opponent was prone but still alive, Shaundar leaped in with his short swords slashing and carved him up like a roast. He managed to get his axe in front of Shaundar's swords once or twice – but not enough. In the meantime, Yathar went to Helga's aid. She had acquired an axe from one of the fallen orcs and was now engaged in a relentless duel. Yathar batted the scro's axe aside long enough for her to wind back and chop her blade into the muscles of the enemy's shoulder, between helm and besague. He fell howling to his knees, his arm dangling loosely by cartilage and tendon. Shaundar was hard-pressed after to decide if it was Yathar's mace or Helga's axe that decapitated him.

Just like that, it was over. The team looked at each other and gasped for a moment, making sure they were all still alive. There was blood everywhere.

“Only a matter of time before this is discovered,” Lana panted.

“You’re right,” agreed Shaundar. “We go now. Lana, tell Madrimlian.”

“*Gul, karr,*” she affirmed, and began to transmit the message spell.

“The ships first,” Shaundar decided, “then the leaders if we can or if we must. Three to port, three starboard. Go!” He veered off to the Mammoth that was to his left. Lana and Yathar were right behind him. Targa and Helga went with Durok.

He sheathed his swords and charged up to the side of the Mammoth. Without pause he leaped and began to climb. It was fifty feet, give or take. Fortunately, Shaundar was no stranger to scaling rigging and he skimmed from brace to bowline without much effort. Yathar was right behind him, but Lana struggled to keep up. “Go on!” she cried at last as they hesitated and started reaching down for her. “I’ll get the man-o-wars!” And with that, she released the line she was clutching, dropped the ten feet she’d managed to the ground, and after balancing on her haunches, she raced off towards one of the Manti.

There was no time to argue. Shaundar and Yathar finished the climb with the aplomb of born and raised sailors. The ogre on the upper deck standing by the battery was utterly astonished by their sudden boarding action. Yathar hit him in the torso with the full weight of his

shoulder, driving him right across the deck and directly into a powder-keg on the opposite side, which exploded into splinters. But the ogre just roared in rage. Knowing there was no time to draw his swords again, Shaundar grabbed a cannonball in both hands, and with strength he didn't know he possessed, raised it above his head and forced it down on the ogre's skull with all of his might. There was a sickening crunch, and the ogre's face disappeared in blood, tissue and bone fragments. He twitched but didn't get up again.

The boys looked at each other, more than a little stunned, but Yathar shook it off. "Come on," he said, and that broke the spell. They reached for their gray pebbles and dropped them into the flasks of alchemist's fire. There was an immediate hissing noise and a plume of smoke.

"Quickly!" Shaundar urged, and Yathar didn't have to be told twice. They both popped open a powder-keg with their daggers – one on each end of the ship – released the flasks into them, and slammed the lids down. To Shaundar's horror, the hissing began to sound like a whistling tea-kettle. This was not a good sign. "Jump!" he shouted, and he raced along the bowsprit and dove from the upper deck, crying the incantation to temporarily acquire the buoyancy of a feather. The explosion began before he hit the ground. Suddenly it was as bright as sailing near the cornea of a sun, and then it was as though a great sledgehammer slammed him in the middle of the back. He pinwheeled his arms in a desperate attempt to direct his flight as fire and flinders sprayed all around him. His spell (and desperate prayer to Aerdrie) had taken effect,

however, and he touched down with perfect gentleness. He rolled to put out his shirt and hair.

Water was dumped on him. Targa was standing over him with a bucket that she tossed aside. “Come on!” she mouthed, though he could barely hear a word, offering him her hand. He took it and staggered to his feet.

The camp was in chaos now, with goblinoids scampering desperately to and fro like disturbed ants. The Mammoth, Shaandar was delighted to see, was missing almost the entirety of its topsides; not a mast remained standing, and parts of the lower decks were exposed entirely to the air. He grinned. It might be able to fly, but it wouldn’t be able to steer, or to shoot anything. The other Mammoth was in a similar state. Cannonballs were imbedded into the hulls of some of the other ships and scattered throughout the base, and the blazing flak had set several of the tents alight. His eyes desperately combed the burning wreckage for a sign of Yathar, but he saw nothing.

A lightning flash went off, and then there was a light so bright it nearly blinded him as one of the Scorpions on the far end of the camp tore itself apart. Right, they had a job to do. He clapped Targa on the shoulder. “Blow up the ships!” he roared into the din and the cotton batten that had filled his ears, and he scrambled off towards the Grimcleave Mantis. As a cluster of scro ran by him with buckets of water, heading for the wreckage of the Mammoths, he hid against the iron side of the ship until they had passed, then he started the complex gestures of

an unusual spell that he had learned from his father years before. That’s when he realized that he could not hear the intonations of the spell on his lips at all. The explosion had deafened him.

He put a hand to his throat to be sure that his voice box was vibrating, enunciated the arcana, and hoped for the best. The gods were with him. A ball of electricity flew from each of his hands. He threw one to the uppermost point of the deck that he could reach on a nearby Scorpion, and slapped the other directly into the hull of the ship that concealed him. Then he ran, and when he saw the flash he hit the dirt. Even in his deafened state, there was a loud thrumming noise in his right ear like a very large dragonfly, and a cannonball came careening past him not six inches from his head, trailing flames like a comet. The other ship blew not two seconds later, and a piece of blazing sheet metal bounced by with an audible *krang!* It was followed by a red-skinned arm that seemed amazingly intact, aside from the fact that it had become detached from its owner.

He ducked behind a stack of crates and from his belt pouches pinched a bit of fur to rub against a small glass rod, and then chanted the Draconic word for “lightning.” This time he didn’t have to check that he was actually speaking; he knew the incantation well and he could feel the vibrations. He extended the glass rod at the last utterance, and lightning forked out to blast two more of the ironclad man-o-wars. Then he ducked behind the boxes to wait for the shrapnel to pass. Something rammed into his barricade, knocking the box at the top down on him and rocking the whole structure back. When the flames died down some he dared to

look, and found the lid of a barrel, otherwise undamaged, stuck firmly into the crate directly in front of him, buried up to the radius of the circle.

Pure panic now infected the beleaguered fleet. Those who could move scrambled every which way in raw terror, not knowing where the next attack would originate from, and those who couldn't lay on the ground moaning as they were trampled by their comrades. Shaundar saw a legless ogre; an entirely limbless hobgoblin; a scro with no face staggering around blindly with his hands stretched out before him; and a decapitated kobold, which actually gave him a pang of guilt. The other ships were all in pieces; his team had done their job. It was time to take the fight to the leadership.

Shaundar ran for the command tent and was met on the way by, thankfully, Yathar, looking none the worse for wear save a scrape on his forehead; and then Helga. She shouted a question at him but he just shook his head and put his hands over his ears. She mouthed something and placed her hands over his. There was a distressing ringing noise, then a loud pop, and the world was full of a cacophonous din again. He winced. He hadn't noticed the screams while deaf.

"Where is everybody, sir?" she repeated.

He shook his head. "I don't know!" he told her. "But they knew that we were headed for the commanders."

She nodded and they ran on. A scro lieutenant with Doomspear markings and shrapnel in his face tried to bark orders at them, but Yathar just knocked him down and charged by. No one seemed to notice.

They found Lana being manhandled by a very angry ogre with a bloody eye socket and busted tusks. He had her by the lower jaw and her feet dangled and kicked. Shaundar hurled his axe with both hands and the blade found purchase in the ogre's ribs. As he dropped Lana, howling, and whirled around to face the new threat, Helga called a pillar of flame down upon him. He was incinerated almost instantly.

Yathar picked Lana up off the ground. She was gasping and choking. There were thick red marks, already blackening, around her throat and jawline. Helga touched her neck and murmured a benediction. They began to fade immediately. "*Nor lakaar,*" Lana rasped.

"You're welcome," Helga smiled. They charged on.

Shaundar saw the war chieftains still boldly clustered together just outside of their pavilion, except that one of them – he thought it might be the Deathtusk lieutenant – was lying face first in a pool of blood, a shard of metal sticking out of the side of his neck. The scarred Grimcleave commodore was roaring commands over the chaos and successfully rallying his troops. They were fortunate not to have neglected this detail.

Lana led with a fireball. It detonated in the midst of them and they flew in all directions with their armour and hair on fire. The other Deathtusk scro seemed to get the brunt of it; he started rolling on the ground to put out the flames. The others recovered much more quickly, and they almost had their weapons in hand when the team descended upon them. Lana sprang onto the rolling orc with her dragger drawn and pounded it over and over into his chest as though she were tenderizing meat. Yathar let another one have it in the face with his mace, the results of which crumpled his enemy's jaw inwards and tore out an eyeball. He went down. Helga came screaming in like a banshee, windmilling her axe around in an upper cut aided by gravity that connected on the inside of her foe's thigh. He flew upwards about two feet and his pelvis collapsed in on itself. Blood poured out on the ground. He didn't get up.

Shaundar vaulted into the air and kicked out with both feet. They connected with the Grimcleave lieutenant's torso and knocked him over. Allowing himself to be carried down with him, Shaundar twisted his leading sword in hand and thrust it through the Grimcleave's trapezius, past his clavicle and into his aorta. The orc puked out black blood and collapsed. When he hit the ground, Shaundar rolled off of him, utilizing momentum to yank his sword free, and came up to face the commodore.

Surrounded by the four polymorphed elves, the commodore glared at them with fearless yellow eyes, spat, and drew a bastard sword and a hand-axe. "Who sent you?" he demanded furiously. "The Blackblades? The Hellguards? Who?"

“Shevarash,” snapped Yathar, his eyes burning. He charged the commodore, leading with his mace, but the scro successfully parried the strike. Shaundar came in next, and his quick-moving short swords kept the commander busy, but they struck mostly glancing blows or skinned his armour. Lana incanted a *magic missile* spell and five glowing green comets struck the commodore in the center of the torso. He grunted and winced. Helga lunged forward with her axe, but the Grimcleave’s sword was there to meet it, and he brought the hand-axe around and almost chopped Helga through her unarmoured flank. She threw herself backwards and rolled back up to her feet, bleeding from a mercifully thin cut on her ribs. The commodore whipped his sword back, surprisingly quick for such a long blade, and thrust viciously at Shaundar’s side. Shaundar, however, was wearing regulation scro studded leather, and though it damaged the boiled leather plate beyond repair, severing a strap completely, it didn’t pierce his skin.

Shaundar slammed his tricep down over the scro’s extended right arm to pin it in place, and mashed the pommel of his sword into the bridge of the commander’s nose. His eyes rolled in two separate directions and glazed over momentarily as he staggered. Yathar stepped up behind him with that mace and landed a crushing blow directly to their enemy’s kidney plate. The spikes didn’t penetrate that thick leather armour, but the commodore roared in obvious agony and lurched almost directly into Shaundar. He stepped aside, drawing his right blade across the scro’s throat as he did so but not quite cutting through the hard leather gorget, and then his left found the weak point in the armour that

had almost been Shaundar's own bane. His determined thrust to that point punctured the lateral muscle and scraped past a rib. Shaundar pulled it free as he continued the turn.

Lana blasted off another *magic missile*, but to Shaundar's surprise, it fizzled and died when it hit the orc like a guttering candle. He recalled that he had seen something like that before, when fighting the scro in the Battle of Leira. The commander grinned broadly, recovered from the head trauma, and jabbed his sword sharply behind him. Shaundar was not expecting it. The blade punched a hole through his armour and into his guts. The pain was excruciating and he was reasonably sure that the contents of his bowels voided themselves. He struggled to remain conscious through the white haze of pain that suddenly clouded his vision.

The commander then whirled on his heels, using the momentum of the turn to aid his swing, and the blade of the hand-axe found Yathar's arm; which might have been severed, were it not the prosthetic that he hit. There was a sound like the striking of a ship's bell and sparks flew. The commodore seemed utterly astounded by it. Helga used that moment of surprise to chop her axe into the scro's belly like a grizzly forester. He gulped and turned a ghastly shade of gray.

Lana, undeterred by her fizzled spell, grabbed a hold of the hand that clutched the axe with both of hers. She spoke a word and blue bolts of electricity shot from her fingers and up the scro's arm. He jittered and convulsed, foam leaking from the corner of his mouth. Lana tried to carry

through by flipping him over her with the lever of his arm as she had done before, but displaying frightening strength, he shook her off like a bad-tempered lapdog, and she had to roll to keep from sprawling face-first into a fire pit. Enraged, the scro hurtled the axe after her, and only luck kept it from embedding itself in the back of her skull. After that, he clasped the bastard sword in both hands, belted Helga in the breast with the pommel, and wound up for a mighty swing that might have crippled Shaundar, if Yathar hadn't put himself and the mace in the way. The mace's haft shattered and the sword smashed into Yathar's chest. Again, the armour was merely scored, but Yathar was winded and badly bruised.

Shaundar shook his head to clear it. He was not going to let them win! He doubled over and fell to his knees, risking exposure but gambling that the commander would assume him badly wounded (which he was) and no longer treat him as a threat. From his belt pouch he palmed a single leaf, gifted to his father years ago from the ancient tree-herders of the Cormanthor Forest, and muttered an incantation invoking the strength of the oak.

His gamble paid off. Lana released a bolt of black negative energy, which weakened the commodore considerably. As he reeled under the weight of this, Helga came in with her axe again. He dodged the blow but his distraction prevented him from rallying an effective attack against either Shaundar or Yathar. He stabbed at Helga but her proximity gave him no leverage and he accomplished nothing.

Power and strength flooded into Shaundar from the invocation. He lifted his head, sprang to his feet, and charged the commodore. The scro was not expecting the ferocity of the attack. He lifted his sword to parry the blows raining on his head, steadily retreating, but Shaundar was just too fast. The right blade was pushed aside in a clash of sparks, but the left slid off of the circular besague that bore the Grimcleave clan rune and into the scro's armpit. He smacked that aside, but then Shaundar's right blade slashed open the commander's left arm while his other sword came back around to bang loudly off of the scro's helmet, jerking his head back hard enough to cause whiplash. The commodore snarled defiance, blood and foam now flying from his jaws, and realizing he was outmatched, he put everything into an almighty cleave from above, assisted by his superior height. But Shaundar saw it coming, and he rolled aside. The commander, overbalanced, stumbled forward, and Shaundar came up underneath him with a well-placed thrust to exposed brown flesh on the scro's flank. The blade sank into the commodore's liver just as Targa brought her axe down with everything she had on the scro's exposed cervical vertebra. He fell on his face, his head lolling from his neck at a grotesque angle, and did not get up.

Pain and weakness returned when Shaundar realized that the commodore was, at last, dead. He swooned as light-headedness overtook him and he collapsed. Clutching his side, he could see blood running through his fingers freely.

Helga swore and went immediately to his aid. She uttered a prayer and laid her hands on his wound. It began to close and the

bleeding to taper off. The blackness that had begun to swallow Shaundar's vision receded. "You just like pain, don't you?" Helga sighed, exasperated.

"Not really," Shaundar denied peevishly. He still didn't feel quite right, but it sure was an improvement. He stumbled to his feet.

Targa and Durok appeared a moment later, running for all they were worth. Durok had a burn-mark on the side of his face and Targa was holding her arm at an awkward angle. They slowed when they realized that the leaders had already been eliminated.

"Sorry we're late," Durok apologized. "Ran into some hobgoblins with an attitude problem. They won't be bothering us anymore."

"Are you all right, sir?" Targa asked Shaundar with concern.

"Gul," he breathed. "Either one of you have any message spells left?"

"I do," said Yathar.

He nodded. "Message Madrimlian. Tell him, 'mission accomplished.'" He surveyed their surroundings. The dead and the wounded littered the ground as they had after the Battle of Leira. Every ship in the fleet was severely damaged, some completely beyond repair, and most of them were still ablaze, along with the majority of the tents and barracks. Even the crates of supplies were on fire or blasted to

pieces, and the bodies of the commanding officers lay at their feet. They had done it; this invasion was over before it had begun.

That night, as Shaundar lay in the infirmary of their stolen Mantis, recovering from his wounds, he slept better than he had in three years, and the night terrors and horrible dreams did not return. It seemed that the demons of his nightmares were expiated for a time by orcish blood.

Chapter Six

“Sir?” Rathgar repeated, shaking him.

The Clan Champion once again struggled with disorientation. “How long has it been?” he asked of the boatswain plaintively. He was drifting in and out of full awareness now; the pain had become a searing burn from which there was no escape. If he closed his eyes and thought about it, he could visualize his vital energy pouring from his body like water from a spigot, emptying the basin. But he must not have lost consciousness entirely yet, or else his spell would end, and the game, as they said, would be up. Which reminded him; when had he last cast the spell?

“Three days, my lord,” Rathgar informed him. “We’re about to have the funeral. We thought you might want to be present. Targar figures that without the bridge, one place is as good as another and so we might as well do it here. Did you want us to do that?”

“You can’t commend the bodies to the Void at spelljamming speeds,” Shaundar pointed out, “and I don’t dare stop.”

Rathgar nodded. “Of course not, my lord. Targar knows a charm that will preserve the bodies.” He swallowed hard. “We thought they’d prefer to go home to Dukagsh.” He lowered his head. Shaundar recalled

that one of the young Midshipmen who'd been killed was Rathgar's little brother Gardak. His heart ached; he had liked the boy a great deal.

Shaundar reached to clasp his friend's shoulder with his one free hand. They'd discovered that only three out of the four restraints were necessary to maintain the lifejammer link, thankfully. It had made eating easier but toileting was something that still required assistance; though by now they'd cut away his trousers and covered his lap with a blanket to facilitate the process. "I imagine they would," he said to Rathgar simply. He was careful not to sound too sympathetic; scro males tended to take that as an inference that they were not masculine enough to handle their emotions. "*Gul*, I would like to participate in the funeral very much. But there's not a lot of room down here and there's so many dead. I can see all of the ship if I concentrate on it. Go ahead and do it on the upper deck."

"*Gul, karr*. Do you need anything?"

"My drinking horn," Shaundar nodded. "It's in my quarters."

Rathgar looked chagrined. "Of course you'd need that. I'm an idiot, sir. I'll pack a pipe for you while I'm at it." He left and this time, Shaundar took advantage of his solitude to experiment with the newest, most powerful version of his *polymorph* spell. From his belt pouches he removed the dried skin of a rare chameleon native to Dukagsh, and after marking it with the appropriate sigils, he devoured it. He found a new concern to worry about; his hands had begun to tremble slightly.

But it worked. The chosen form of Bolvi Bloodfist congealed around him; and this time, it would last until it was dispelled. He supposed he probably should have cast it before this, but he had been reluctant; partially because the skin would require a risky trip to the depths of the Dukagsh Congo to replace; but partially because he'd wanted the flexibility to change his mind and leave his orcish form behind when needed. Now there would be no option to do that; nothing save a conscious choice to remove the spell, or his death, would accomplish this.

Such sorrow, such grief; and it was no less his own. Corin still lay in a coma. After three days even Targar was beginning to lose hope. He supposed it was only natural that he would have hated orcs so virulently after his experience at Raven Talon; but at the moment he could only think of the words of Corin's father, who had asked him once as a prisoner of war about the state of his soul. There was so much blood on his hands now that Shaundar thought they ought to have been stained crimson. What *was* the state of his soul, he wondered? He supposed he would have occasion to find out fairly soon.

When Shaundar and Yathar brought their Mosquito in to the Permafrost base, it was a little scored but still workable; kind of like them. Yathar limped in on a fractured foot, and Shaundar's arm was rigged up in an improvised sling. The door slid open at their touch as the glyph recognized their access, but once they were safely within the ice tunnel, they re-cast their *polymorph* spells in accordance with base policy,

Shaundar a bit awkwardly with his bound-up arm. They opened the second door and strode into the reception area with the ease of familiarity.

Sy'Ruan Tiafel smiled at them as they came in. "Welcome back, gentlemen," she greeted them pleasantly. "I take it you'll need a cleric as usual?"

"Just minor injuries this time," Yathar assured her, sticking a cigar into his mouth.

"I'll inform Captain Madrimlian that you're back," she offered. "He wanted to see you when you came in. I take it there were no major problems?"

"None," Shaundar promised, thieving one of Yathar's cigars. He still had the pipe he had stolen fair and square almost a year ago on that first 'field exercise,' but it was difficult to pack tobacco and light it with one hand. "Give me a tindertwig," he demanded. Yathar did.

Tiafel touched a silver orb on the desk. Shaundar now understood it to be a communications device; basically, it was a low-grade crystal ball. "They're back, *quessir*," she said simply. He heard Madrimlian's voice reply in a tinny tone, "Send them to my office once they've been to sick bay." "Av," she affirmed, and nodded to them. "You caught that, I presume?"

Shaundar nodded as he lit his cigar.

“See you later, Tiafel,” Yathar grinned. He patted her on the rear end as they headed through the door behind the desk. She giggled and blushed.

Helga clucked disapprovingly at them. “Darkening my door again, are you? Sit down and let me have a look at you.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” sighed Yathar as he sank down onto a cot.

She scowled darkly and ran her tongue over her tiny tusks in a gesture that had become a habitual expression of her displeasure. “You know you guys aren’t supposed to smoke in here,” she pointed out.

“Uh huh,” Shaundar grunted. Yathar took a drag off of his cigar.

She blew air past her teeth in irritation. “Where’s the problem?” she demanded impatiently.

“It’s my foot.”

Helga took his boot off and snorted. “How long have you been walking around on this?” It was swollen and an alarming purple colour.

“Two weeks?” he guessed.

“It’s a good thing you’re tough like leather,” she observed. “That might have gone septic at any time.” She murmured an entreaty to the powers, and the wound, and subsequent infection, began to heal.

“Ahhh, much better,” groaned Yathar, leaning his head back and exalting in pure relief.

“Your turn,” Helga told Shaundar. “Now what did you do to yourself?” She began to unwrap his sling, which had once been a piece of sailcloth.

“It’s the shoulder,” he explained. “I think there’s something lodged in it.”

She guided his arm gently into his lap, taking note of his missing spaulder, and cut his maroon-encrusted shirt free. He didn’t really know what the wound looked like because it was on the bottom edge of his trapezoid beneath his shellback tattoo, but Yathar had described it as a “bloody hole.” “This is going to hurt,” Helga promised, and she rummaged around in her surgical tools until she found the long-nosed pliers. She stuck them into the wound and poked around. He gritted his teeth. “Yep, something in there, all right,” she agreed, and the pliers gripped on to the offending object and tugged. Blood spurted out on Helga’s hand as a two inch wooden something-or-other was pulled free. There was an intense sensation that was both a sharp stab of pain and the sudden release of pressure, somewhat like an orgasm. He made an inarticulate noise.

Helga studied the item at the end of her pincers, and as the blood dripped off of it, Shaundar realized that it had metal at the tip.

“Hmm, crossbow quarrel,” she mumbled. She tossed it into the waste bucket.

“Thought we’d gotten that,” grimaced Shaundar.

“Sorry, guess I was wrong,” Yathar apologized.

Helga poured *quesstiasa* into it, which hurt, and intoned another prayer to close the hole. “Guess you’re going to get more *Drops* for these.”

Shaundar shrugged, happy that his shoulder no longer hurt when he did that. There had been a *Drop of Corellon’s Blood* medal awarded to each of them on that first mission, along with a *Bow of Shevarash* for their bravery and their “significant blow of vengeance against an enemy of the Elven People”; both of which had been shown to him and then hidden away in a box. There had been several more of the first since, and two of the second, all of which had also gone away in boxes. How many more, he couldn’t say; he had lost track. Of course, in his opinion, there was a big difference between, say, this, and the time Yathar had dragged him home with three large pieces of shrapnel in his torso and a punctured lung. That had been touch-and-go for a while. He thought perhaps they should prioritize a little.

“There,” she murmured in satisfaction. “You’re back in fighting shape. Any other injuries I should know about?”

“I pulled my groin,” Yathar offered hopefully, and Shaundar snickered.

She slapped him in the centre of the chest. “Sure you did,” she sniffed sarcastically, but she was unconvincing because her eyes were twinkling. “You *want* a pulled groin? I could arrange that!”

He threw up his hands. “Okay, okay, not necessary!” he laughed.

“Get out of here, you pain-in-the-ass!” she smirked. “You guys might want to find a shower before you make your report. You smell like boars in rut.”

“That’s what scro sweat smells like, beautiful,” Yathar returned with a not-entirely apologetic grin. It was a scent that was never pleasant, but one they had become accustomed to.

They did hit the showers, and grabbed clean clothing, before reporting to Madrimlian’s office. Yathar knocked and they waited at ease for entry. “Come!” called Madrimlian through the door. Madrimlian was at his desk, reading files. This was not something he did systematically, but instead he seemed to scatter things in front of him, cherry-pick through it and absorb the information in gestalt. Shaundar could see thin slabs of selenite with images on them dispersed through the field scrolls and maps. Intelligence often made use of a spell called *crystal portrait*, which captured the likeness of a scene the way it was at a particular moment in time, more accurately than any painting. These showed scro

in swashbuckler's garb, a harbour in darkness and a Scorpion with a strange jack – a white orcish skull and crossed axes over a black field. It reminded Shaundar vaguely of the tattoo of the Permafrost unit, which was now known as the "Black Arrows."

Since Madrimlian did not look up, they saluted and waited to be addressed.

"*Quessira*," he nodded after a moment. "How was Nardak?"

"Hot, sir," was Shaundar's reply. "But our problem there has been solved."

"Glad to hear it, but now I have another job for you."

"Thought you might, *karr*," Yathar remarked calmly.

Madrimlian looked up at them then and indicated that they should have a seat. Then he frowned. "Why are you not in uniform, soldier?"

"It's in for repairs, sir," Shaundar informed him. He pulled out one of the chairs and sat. Yathar grabbed the other one.

"Ah." He shrugged it off. "Well then. Gentlemen, how many missions have I sent you on?"

Shaundar thought about it. They tended to get assigned something every couple of weeks, with very little leave time in between.

That was just the way Shaundar liked it; keeping busy kept the nightmares away. “Eleven, sir,” he decided. “Twelve if you count our first ‘field exercise’.”

“And how many confirmed kills do you have on major targets?”

Again, Shaundar had to consider it, but Yathar already knew the answer. “Twenty-two, sir,” he replied. “And Shaundar has twenty-six.”

Had it been so many? Shaundar calculated and the count sounded accurate. He hadn’t really thought about it. It sounded pretty impressive, when you put it that way. He nodded his agreement.

Madrimlian leaned back in his chair and folded his hands into their characteristic steeple. “That makes you two our most experienced, and deadliest, soldiers. Which is good; you’ll need to be.”

“What do you have on the plate, sir?” Shaundar wanted to know.

“They call themselves the ‘Blacktusk Pirates,’” he explained, handing him one of the sheets of crystal; the one showing the Scorpion with the jack. “They’re mercenaries who moonlight in a little pillage and plunder.” Shaundar passed the selenite slab to Yathar as Madrimlian handed him the next one; sort of a rogue’s gallery of orcish buccaneers. He made a point of fixing their images in his mind. There was one with dark brown skin, a bushy black beard and relatively small tusks for a scro

male that seemed to be the center of attention. He had great big gold hoop earrings and he was pounding on the bar for a drink.

“Okay, and?” Yathar asked impatiently.

Shaundar glanced over at him. “They’re mercenaries,” he pointed out. “They’re clanless.” Intelligence had greeted the news of the intertribal rivalries they had brought back from Adonia with glee; it meant that the scro were not nearly as unified as they appeared, and the Black Arrows had taken advantage of that many times, sowing discord and increasing tension between them. But a lot of clan protocols were still sort of a mystery to Intelligence. They still had no idea how one became part of a tribe. It limited what the unit was able to accomplish. “You want us to infiltrate them,” he said to Madrimlian. It was not a question.

He nodded. “I do,” he agreed. “We’ve learned that they’re sailing for Skullport. We want you to meet them there.”

Shaundar had never been to Skullport, but he had heard of it, of course. Located beneath the fabled city of Waterdeep on the world of Toril, where Shaundar’s family originated, it was an equally legendary refuge of villains and general scum. Its primary exports were contraband and slaves, according to the rumour mill. “What are they doing in Skullport?” he asked warily.

“We’re not sure. We think they’re intending to acquire kobold slaves for their lifejammer helms. Maybe some bugbears and ogres for

muscle. But we've also heard a disturbing rumour; we've heard they intend to purchase magical weaponry from the duergar."

"Oh, we've got to put a stop to *that*," Yathar groaned.

Madrimlian's eyes flashed. "Exactly."

"That's our mission, then?" inquired Shaundar. He stood up.

Madrimlian and Yathar stood too. Shaundar had mostly become accustomed to the immense size difference between scro and elf, now, but he could not cease to be amazed at how he hulked two feet over Madrimlian in this form. He had a childhood image of Madrimlian as being a tower, he supposed; which was silly, since Shaundar was still taller than him now, even in his original shape.

"There's one more thing," the Captain added. "Our Intelligence also says that the Blacktusks have been hired by the Overlord for a special project. Supposedly, they're headed back to Dukagsh."

Shaundar met Yathar's gleaming gaze and they nodded in unison. The Navy knew about Dukagsh, but so far, any ship or Captain captured had managed to destroy the charts that would reveal its location. To find the location of the scro homeworld . . .

"Outstanding," Shaundar grinned.

“You’ll be travelling to Draconia and taking the Arakhor Portal to facilitate speedy access to Realspace,” Madrimlian informed them. We’re going to teach you a new spell for the purposes of this mission because it’s such a deep cover operation and we have no idea how long you’ll be in the field. It’s a variation of the *alter self* transfiguration. The difference is, you’ll only have to cast it once in a standard day. And it’s completely undetectable by magic.”

The lads nodded. “Okay then,” Shaundar agreed, seeing the wisdom of it. *Alter self* was not as effective as *polymorph self*. It only permitted about a twenty-five percent weight adjustment and maybe a fifty percent change in size. The change would put them on the small side for scro; just under two hundred and fifty pounds. They wouldn’t be much bigger than the women. It would likely lead them into frequent violent conflicts to prove themselves. On the other hand, there was always a risk that Warpriests would sense the magical energy and see right through their disguises, or that they would be discovered while casting the spell. The trade-off was probably well worth it.

“Any questions, *quessira*?”

“Just one, sir,” Yathar piped up. “Why aren’t you sending the girls on this? Quite frankly, they’re better infiltrators than we are.” And, Shaundar reasoned, the limitations of the new spell would be less restricting to them.

Madrimlian raised an eyebrow. “Because these pirates are not known for their gentle or respectful treatment of women,” he replied.

“Ah,” remarked Yathar.

“Any further questions?”

“Not until the debriefing, sir,” Shaundar shook his head.

“You won’t be leaving for a couple of days,” Madrimlian assured them, “so you have a little time if you think of anything else. In the meantime, you are dismissed.”

Yathar didn’t bother to renew his *polymorph* spell that evening when it wore off. They were already in their room and not planning on going anywhere. Like Shaundar, he had probably put on about eighty pounds of muscle since the beginning of the program, and that in his elven form. Shaundar wondered vaguely if all the other soldiers he worked with were similarly changed. He didn’t know; aside from Lana and Targa, once known as Marafel and Marina, and of course Yathar, he had never seen what they looked like as elves.

Yathar rubbed absently at their unit’s identifying tattoo on his right tricep; an orcish skull over the crossed black arrows of Shevarash, god of retribution, with their motto beneath it in Espruar: *sasshra ath tel’quiet*, “Vengeance is mine.” Then his hand slipped down past his

elbow, about halfway down his forearm, where it turned from a gilded warm sun elven shade to blue-tinged metallic silver. He spoke the command word to detach the mithril prosthetic and put it aside on his cot. Yathar rubbed more vigorously at the end of the stump with a grimace. Shaundar blinked away an image of Yathar thrown overboard, his arm severed by the line he had grabbed to save himself, the blood spraying out in a plume.

“Still got those phantom pains?” Shaundar inquired softly, sympathetically. Sometimes those pains woke Yathar from a sound sleep and wrung tears from squinting eyes.

“They come and go,” Yathar sighed.

“For something that no longer exists, that arm sure has a lively ghost!”

Yathar chuckled and nodded ruefully. He held it up and studied the severed end with a critical scowl. The scarring was clean, all things considered. Shaundar never was quite sure why Yathar had recovered so quickly from such a serious injury in their captivity, when he had nearly perished from infection in his broken leg. He supposed it could have been the messiness of the break, and he supposed it might have been the filth and viscera that he had crawled through after the break to take the dying ship’s helm. Maybe it was just that Yathar had always been stronger than he was.

Yathar wrinkled up his nose. He got immediately to his feet, poured some water in the washbasin and scrubbed the stump briskly with soap and brush. "I never clean this," he confessed. "I'm never in my elven form so I sometimes forget that I don't have an arm there anymore. And you can tell; it reeks." He also washed out the cup on the end of the mithril that was enchanted to mold around the remains of his arm.

"You ready for this assignment?" Shaundar asked.

Yathar shrugged. "Doesn't seem that different from what we've already done." His gold-speckled green eyes met Shaundar's platinum-flecked blue with some concern. "Why? Are you?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I have a funny feeling about this one."

Yathar raised his eyebrows in some alarm. "Do you mean that you have a bad feeling about it? Because I'll tell Madrimlian to go to the Abyss if that's the case . . ."

"No, not exactly," he assured his friend. "Just . . . something feels different. Something's not quite right."

Yathar nodded. "I'll tread carefully," he promised in all seriousness. He dried his arm and the prosthetic, pressed the cup to the end, and incanted the word to rejoin it. They blended smoothly. Were it not for the colour, you would not have known where one ended and the other began. He flexed and wiggled the fingers. Seeing it had reattached

properly, he finished undressing, and they shared a last pipe before resting.

Shaundar stared at the mirror's reflection for a while after Yathar fell asleep. His own face was beginning to look odd to him somehow. He still thought of Narissa all the time and he wondered what she would think of the person he now saw in the mirror.

Perhaps groundlings might find Skullport exotic and strange, with its perilous construction in a dark stone chasm, the plethora of exotic races with unsavory reputations (beholders and illithid looked to be fairly common, and Shaundar swore he saw a spider-shaped building dangling from the ceiling, limned in faerie fire,) and the hodgepodge construction that seemed primarily of scavenged shipwrecks; but the seasoned starhands did not. If anything, it reminded Shaundar distinctly of the Rock of Bral. Passage up and down the chasm appeared to be formed of extensive catwalks, ship rigging and ladders, which of course, the boys had no difficulty navigating. Naturally, the harbour was at the lowest level of the cavern, and that was the most likely place, they assumed, to find pirates; so there was a long descent ahead of them.

They eventually found a small tavern and inn district built into numerous enormous stalactites and negotiable by more catwalks and bridges, although these were less sturdy than the ones in the upper levels. At some point, one of the narrower paths they chose became soft

and pliant beneath Shaundar's foot. He looked down to see a toothy maw appearing in the wood. Reflexively he grasped the rope guiderail and kicked down again and again with all the force of his formidable scro warboot. The mimic plummeted into the void with an inhuman shriek.

They found refuge in a small neighbourhood tavern, drawn by the scent of baking bread. A comfortably normal human couple served them decent beer, good stew, and the best mushroom bread they had ever eaten. After slugging through Undermountain on orcish rations, this was a temptation simply too strong to resist. Fortified by their meal, they headed back into the fray, and almost immediately were drawn to a nautical-themed boarding-house with the unlikely name of "the Keel Hall." Seeing that much of the city still lay beneath them, the boys decided that it was time to call it a night, and they purchased a room (which was available both hourly and nightly) and spent the evening dodging the attentions of the friendly but plain escorts and the enormous, half-orc female bouncer. Fortunately, traffic from the nearby casino diverted most of the unwanted attention, but eventually, in order to avoid the increasingly persistent bouncer, who had kissed Yathar full on the mouth unbidden, they secured the services of one of the prettier young human maidens, and the boys both enjoyed a bath and massage before Yathar gently bedded her and sent her on her way.

"It takes talent to kiss with tusks, you know," Yathar informed Shaundar as he put his pants back on. "And then there's this tusk-rubbing thing that orcs do. You should practice."

“And just how am I going to do that?” he demanded grouchy.

Yathar wordlessly indicated the door through which the escort had departed.

“No judgment on you, *na’kor*, but hired companionship just doesn’t interest me.”

He shrugged. “So neck a little.” At Shaundar’s incredulous expression, he insisted, “I mean it. What are you going to do if we’re drinking with the Blacktusks and some barmaid plunks herself on your lap? If you refuse her, people are going to think you’re *garra*, and then we’ll have to fight our way out.”

Garra was a derogatory orcish term meaning “homosexual.” It also meant “effeminate,” “weak,” “soft,” and “cowardly.” Any right-thinking orcish male would kill the person who used that word in connection with his name. Shaundar sighed; Yathar was right. “I’ll work on it,” he promised, resigned, and Yathar smiled a little. They renewed their transformation spells and shared Shaundar’s pipe, and their dwindling supply of tobacco, before they crawled into the first real beds they’d slept in since Permafrost.

They carried on the next day before the proprietors were awake. There was an immense water-clock – an amazing feat of engineering that Shaundar could not help but admire – which informed the boys that local time was about six-thirty a.m.; a little more than halfway through the

morning watch. The city seemed to be waking up and vendors wound their way to some kind of market, as did several people who dressed well and surrounded themselves with servants.

The boys had heard of the Skulls, of course – literal glowing skulls that flew around the city, supposedly the spirits of undead archmages who gave the place its name and were what passed for “law” within its confines – but it was something else to see them in person. He couldn’t say that people didn’t seem to notice them. Actually, people watched them warily as they floated by, but they appeared to be used to them.

Almost everyone was headed in the same direction as the vendors and the moneyed crowd. Disturbingly, a pod of illithid and a coven of real-life, snake whip-wielding, drow priestesses, scantily clad in unholy arachnid vestments and jewelry, fell in with the rest of them, chattering together in a dialect of Espruar so corrupted that Shaundar could only make out every third word, as their hapless male servants tended to their needs. He had never seen the feared and hated drow before and had to resist the urge to gawk. Yathar did not, but he didn’t think that his lusty friend was gawking for the same reasons. Shaundar stomped on his foot. “Don’t be an idiot,” he admonished, and directed him down a different street.

Most of the vendors set up in an open market area with foodstuffs. Encouraged, the boys bought a morning meal. You couldn’t exactly call it dawnfry because it was some kind of skewer. There were

small red fruits and large mushrooms, but Shaundar didn't dare ask what the meat was.

They assumed that was the crowd's destination when they found the open market; but it wasn't. And as a matter of fact, Shaundar noticed a band of duergar tromping determinedly into the lower levels of Skullport along with them. He nudged Yathar and they fell into step behind them.

Along and down several more catwalks, they found themselves in a market full of reeking fish of various stripes. Shaundar was grateful that he had already eaten. The duergar carried on without a second glance; and they met up again with the drow and the illithid in a narrow corridor on the other end.

The passage opened up into an enormous and chaotic market crammed to the brim with people. The plethora of races was comparable to the most frequented freeports in Wildspace. There were several raised wooden platforms, and people of all races, bound in shackles, were being displayed in lines of ten or twenty. Now Shaundar understood; this was the infamous Slave Market, one of the main reasons for Skullport's continued existence.

Now it was Yathar who nudged him to get his attention and pointed. One platform was entirely devoted to kobolds, and there was a full crew compliment of scro gathered around it, distinguishable from common orcs by their greater size and parts of their hodgepodge

buccaneer's gear. Unfortunately the duergar were heading off towards a platform full of orcs and bugbears.

"Skip the duergar," Shaundar decided. "If the Blacktusks are dealing with them, we'll catch up with them later."

"Right," Yathar agreed, and they made their way to the kobold platform.

The scro buccaneers were circling the shifting, nervous kobold slaves and inspecting them with jaundiced eyes. One of them – a massive scro with green skin and a ring through his nose – was moving between them, grasping legs and ankles in his meaty hands and giving them a firm shake. They flinched at this treatment but seemed to know better than to argue. A proud dusky-skinned half-elf and his band of bugbears stood watch over them.

"It's a good stable," the half-elf promised them. "They're strong for kobolds, and they're hard workers."

"I don't know," the burly scro growled. "They look pretty scrawny to me."

The illithid contingent started to make their way over to the platform. One of the kobolds, noticing this, squeaked out, "Not scrawny. Hard worker! You see." He watched the approaching mind flayers with obvious terror.

Another scro stepped forward. Shaundar recognized the black-bearded pirate from Madrimlian's crystal portraits. "They'll do," he decided. "How much?"

The half-drow looked pleased. "A bargain! Two gold apiece."

The scro snorted. "You call that a *bargain*? I think you've spent too much time drinking the poisoned swill they call ale in this place. Eight silver for each is all I'm willing to pay you. But, I will take the lot." He folded his burly arms across his broad chest and waited, his slightly phosphorescent yellow eyes gleaming fiercely. Shaundar knew that he wouldn't budge.

The man licked his lips and considered it, realizing the same. Would he take the reduced price in the interests of assuring complete and speedy, liquidation of his stock? "Done," he agreed; and he touched fists softly with the pirate, which was evidently the equivalent of a bow or a handshake here. "Grugg, fetch a clerk so that we can write up a bill of sale."

One of the bugbears grunted a response and made his way into the crowd. In the meantime, Blackbeard counted out sixteen gold pieces into the slaver's hand; then he nodded to the massive grey scro, who began to berate the kobolds into movement. The dusky half-elf unfastened their chain from an iron ring on the platform and handed it to the black-bearded pirate. The clerk arrived in short order and scribed three sheets of parchment. He took one, and one was given to each of

the participants in the transaction. With that, they marched the kobold line off of the platform and into the street.

The bearded scro noticed Shaundar and Yathar watching them then, and snarled in Orcish, “You lost?”

Deciding on the direct approach, Shaundar replied, “That depends. Are you the Blacktusks?”

“We are,” the pirate admitted warily. “Do we have a blood debt to settle, then?”

“No,” Shaundar shook his head. “We’d like to join you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Join us?” he echoed. “Interesting. Why? What clan are you with?”

“Do we look like clan scro to you?” Yathar snapped in a perfect *what’s-it-to-you* tone.

The hulking grey scro came to stand at the bearded one’s side as the rest of the crew loomed around them. They seemed to appraise the boys carefully. “No, I guess not,” Blackbeard decided at last. “What happened? Speak plainly. Are you lads illegitimate or are you criminals?”

“Let’s just say that someone had to die and the clan disagreed,” Shaundar answered quite truthfully.

“Won’t be the first time that’s happened,” the grey scro observed, and the rest of the crew laughed heartily.

“Good!” Blackbeard chuckled in appreciation. “Means you won’t balk at spilling a little blood. We could use that. What clan do we deny your existence to, if they come looking?”

“Reaver,” Yathar replied without missing a beat. Shaundar nodded. That was their last target; made sense.

The bearded scro nodded thoughtfully. “Right then,” he decided. “I’m Captain Arga. This here is my bo’sun, Dargak. If you can put in a good showing against him, I’ll take you lads on.”

“Sounds fair to me,” Shaundar agreed, pleased that things had gone so well. Yathar also grunted his assent. “I’m Garrik,” he introduced himself, “and this is Tharr.”

“Well met, lads,” Dargak responded, thumping his chest. Shaundar recognized this by now as a clanless scro’s greeting and returned it.

“Let’s get back to the ship and get the new slaves situated,” the Captain commanded, “and then you’ll have your shot.”

“*Gul, karr,*” the boys affirmed and they fell in step with the pirates.

“Cap’n,” Yathar inquired, “may I ask how the booty’s divided?”

The boatswain snickered. “Got his priorities straight, I see!”

The Captain met his gaze. “One share for each scro, two shares a Lead Crewman, ten shares an Officer, and forty for me. That’s strictly coin, mind you. Officers and myself get first pick of jewelry and art and then that’s divvied according to seniority. Live booty is strictly shared.” There was some hearty laughter with a note to it that Shaundar didn’t like.

They made their way further down towards the dark waters with the kobolds in tow. Shaundar saw a large island below them with a great stalactite tower and fencing that reminded him distinctly of Raven Talon. There were people toiling at lifting boulders back and forth across the compound, and it seemed like nothing more than make-work. Whips cracked over them and Shaundar winced.

They crossed the docks near the island and made their way to what was unmistakably a black-painted Hammership nestled among the various groundling seafaring craft. There was also a Tradesman docked further down. Obviously Skullport was a known spelljamming port on Abeir-Toril. That worried him somehow.

There was a half-crew stand-to on board, and it seemed as though the "*Starshark*" had a full compliment. There were kobold slaves moving about, swabbing the decks. Shaundar couldn't tell if the ogres

were slaves or fully-accepted pirates; certainly they didn't appear servile. He was also dismayed to see that the two heavy catapults that were the standard armaments of a Hammership had been replaced with cannons. If even the dregs of scro culture were beginning to gain access to those fearsome weapons in place of the catapults and ballistae that were standard, then the Elven Navy was in some serious trouble.

“Clear the deck!” the Captain bellowed when he stepped on board.

A Hammership was shaped like a hammerhead shark, up to and including two metal protrusions which formed large windowed rooms beneath the fo’c’sle. Most of the early spelljamming ship designs were adapted from nautical vessels, and most of those designs were since used only by those who couldn’t afford better; but like groundling sharks, the Hammership was something that didn’t require much improvement in its ancient design. It still resembled a seafaring ship, with its open main deck and the sails that looked somewhat like fins, but its few decks and long body resulted in a gravity plane that was level and upright in a single direction throughout the ship; probably one of the first such designs in history. For this reason it was easy to land the craft, and thus it was favoured by those who needed to make frequent planetfall; like, perhaps, pirates.

The crew cleared their bodies and the debris from the open main deck as commanded; and quickly, Shaundar noted. At this, Dargak removed his armour – a cobbled-together collection of black scro leather,

chain mail, and thick cloth – and piled it up in a coil of rope so that it was out of the way. Noting this, a smaller, orange-skinned scro with disproportionately thick arms and shoulders made his way up to the aft-facing deck of the fo'c'sle and began to beat a large drum with sticks that looked like belaying pins. The kobolds – all save the new ones – flinched up with immediate nervousness.

"Rules of engagement?" Shaundar inquired as he shuffled off his own armour and Yathar followed suit.

"I'd still like my crew to be useable afterwards," Arga said, "so it's hand-to-hand. First one to give or first knockout."

Yathar nodded as the boatswain swung his beefy arms around to limber them up. "*Gul, karr,*" he agreed. "Which one of us should go first?"

"As you like," Dargak smirked confidently. "I figure I got enough power to handle a couple of little wet-behind-the-ears lads like yourselves!"

Shaundar smiled faintly as the crew gathered to watch the festivities; clinging to the rigging and dangling from the fo'c'sle. "Well, guess we'll just have to do our best," was his simple reply. "Do you want first crack, or should I have at it?" he asked Yathar in a pleasant tone.

Yathar bowed and extended his arms towards the bo'sun as though revealing a magician's trick. "He's all yours," he offered generously.

Captain Arga smirked a little more at this display.

“At least you lads have the right attitude,” Dargak admitted, “but you’re still going to regret this experience.” He began to circle as Shaundar moved into the center of the deck while he stretched out.

“Are you ready, lads?” the Captain asked.

“*Gul, karr,*” they chorused.

The Captain nodded once to the drummer; who sounded the drum solemnly three times with one of his great wooden drumsticks. “In Bahgtru’s name, begin!” Arga roared into the silence, and with that, the drummer began to roll out a more sophisticated staccato beat than Shaundar would have thought possible.

The hulking boatswain bullied into Shaundar, probably hoping to use superior size against him; but Shaundar was ready for him. He slapped the scro’s extended right fist to the side with his left hand and curled his right wrist around it firmly, locking the hand. With that he stepped to the side in a wider stance and pulled the arm taut while simultaneously landing an elbow to Dargak’s ear. He followed it with a left jab and a knife hand to Dargak’s left shoulder, then a palm strike to the solar plexus. The orc crumpled unceremoniously to the deck on his back with a grunt. Shaundar was over top of him in an instant. Before the boatswain could get his wind back, Shaundar had boot-stomped him in

the head and torso two or three times. Something crunched. “Yield!” Shaundar growled.

There was no response from the boatswain. He was unconscious.

The drums fell silent. It was a few moments before the shocked spectators erupted into a frenzy of cheering and applause. Some of that noise sounded downright gleeful. Shaundar guessed that Dargak was not exactly popular with the crew. Some of them dragged him away; presumably to whatever served as the infirmary.

“Well,” said the Captain after a long, thoughtful pause. He jerked his thumb in Yathar’s direction. “Does he fight like you do?”

“*Gul, karr,*” Shaundar affirmed.

“Hmm,” he grunted. He scratched at his beard. “Garr,” he said, and a bugbear looked to him from his perch on the fo’c’sle. “Get in there.”

“*Gul, karr,*” the bugbear agreed – a trifle reluctantly, it seemed to Shaundar – and faced off with Yathar.

This fight didn’t last much longer than the first. After the invocation to Bahgtru, orcish god of strength, the eight-foot tall goblinoid moved in to bear-hug Yathar. This was a mistake. Yathar dipped adroitly beneath the strong but clumsy reach, and then the hapless swallow-

skinned creature was assaulted with a knee to the groin, a right cross to the solar plexus, an elbow delivered to the back of the head on the way down, dropping him to the deck on his face; followed by about a dozen kicks to the ribs. “Give, give!” it coughed desperately.

“Meet our newest marines, lads!” the Captain announced, and the crew whooped and hollered their approval. Several of them came forward to clap the boys on their backs and shoulders. Shaundar didn’t know whether to be relieved or terrified. For better or for worse, they were in.

Chapter Seven

The funeral was beautiful. They laid out all the bodies together on the deck, scro and common orc and goblin alike, wrapped up in canvas as sailors had done since they had invented sails. Shaundar watched from the lifejammer, glad to have something to distract him from the agony in his body. Thorgir brought Shaundar the Tears of Luthic, and as the commanding officer, Shaundar had the dubious honour of being the one to break the wax seal. One by one Targar dripped the water from the temple spring, mingled with tears from the women of the clan, on the faces of the dead; and then they took their axes and formed a pyramid with their hafts, over which Targar offered a red dinosaur-tallow candle to signify the collective blood of the clan shed for Ilneval. “War Maker!” he cried, “you have taken your price, and this time it was a heavy one. Welcome our sons into the Hall of Warriors! Their names will live ever in our memories.” With that, he donned the white skin gloves of Yurtrus, the Death-Bringer, and one by one he passed them over the faces of the dead soldiers. When he reached the body of the smaller Midshipman, Rathgar choked audibly on his tears.

The chant of the clan warriors, the *tarrak’za*, began next. To the best of Shaundar’s ability to discern, this was the equivalent of a unit’s military drill. There was a series of ritualized gestures, calls, facial expressions, ceremonial phrases and manoeuvres with their axes. It was supposed to look and sound fierce, and Shaundar thought it might have

its origins in orcish tribal customs. Shaundar called the chants and stomped in time with the steps, but of course he could not leave the helm. He offered a silent apology to the spirits of the dead and hoped they would understand that he meant no insult.

As the candle burned, the finest pepper ale of the clan was poured (Graak, the cook, ran Shaundar's down for him) and they toasted the dead with wishes of honour and glory, or stories of their great deeds. "He risked his life to save the lives of others," Shaundar said of Sarga. And of Gardak, he said, "He was full of joy and laughter. He lightened my spirits and made the voyages less long. *Harak'tar, nor lakaar!*" The traditional toast was chanted by all present after each acknowledgement before they took a good long draught of their ale. Loosely translated, it meant, "Honourable warrior, thank you."

When the candle had finished burning, and everyone was so drunk they could barely see and celebrating as well as mourning, the axes were pulled apart and given to their next-of-kin to be taken to the wives or mothers of the fallen soldiers. When Gardak's axe was given to Rathgar, he could hold it in no longer, and he sobbed helplessly. But now they were drunk and there was no shame in it.

Shaundar had a moment of unreality when Sarga's axe was brought down by Targar and given into his hands. The butt was placed carefully into his bound left palm before he grasped the upper haft with his right. At Shaundar's mystified expression he explained, "I can't give it

to the Captain right now, and you're the only other clan noble, aren't you? Wasn't Sarga a clan noble?"

"Gul, you're right," Shaundar confirmed. Sarga was indeed a lesser cousin of the clan scions. "I just didn't realize that I was his next-of-kin." He thought about bringing that axe to Sarga's mother and now a tear rolled down the side of his own face. He remembered the day he and Yathar were given the assignment that had ultimately led him to this, and wondered if he would have believed anyone if they had told him.

Madrimlian returned to Permafrost after piloting the lads to Arakhor with some trepidation. Orders awaited him. The seal was the emblem of Lionheart Command itself. His heart sank. He supposed he'd been hoping against hope. Yet here it was, as inevitable as gravity. Madrimlian broke the wax seal and unfolded the parchment, to read:

Attention: *Captain Madrimlian, Black Arrows Marines. FOR YOUR EYES ONLY.*

18 First-Month, 5046 O.C.

To Captain Madrimlian, Commanding Officer of the Black Arrows Marines, Grand Admiral Lylanna Nuliaque, Lionheart Command sends greetings:

You are hereby requested and required to attend a hearing regarding an audit of the Marines' Special Forces program coded the "Permafrost Project." This hearing is scheduled to commence on the First Day of Third-Month, 5046 O.C. If possible, you should attend in person; but if it is not possible, you may attend via telthukiilir from your current assignment. We appreciate your cooperation.

Lylanna Nuliaque, Grand Admiral, Imperial Elven Navy

He sighed and pulled at his ear in an unconscious gesture of frustration. The Grand Admiral had "significant concerns" about the rate of attrition in the unit; and also, he ruminated bitterly, the cost of training. He knew that part of this was a legitimate worry, but part of it was fueled by the political machinations of a Cabinet Admiral named Belryn, who had the Grand Admiral's ear and was painting the project in the cruelest light possible. He knew that much of the motivation for this was personal; he and Belryn went way back. A couple of skirmishes over methodology during the First Unhuman War were the catalyst for a bitter rivalry that outlasted the conflict. Belryn supported the bionoid project – something that Madrimlian had been bitterly opposed to – and also the Armistice Agreement, which Madrimlian had argued vehemently against. Madrimlian supposed that his acts of insubordination were, in retrospect, ill-advised. Otherwise, he would likely be the Admiral now, and Belryn a mere Captain, and this situation would not have developed.

He did not trust Belryn's conscience; that was the problem. The Admiral was always eager to find the winning solution, ruthlessly and in

utter disregard of the costs. Madrimlian knew that Belryn would not be nearly as concerned for the well-being of his people; just their utility as living weapons.

The message had taken a month to reach him, so there would be no time for a response. He would also have to make the journey via Gate. Madrimlian began making a mental tally of his political supporters, and found them to be discouragingly few. Given the top secret nature of the Project, only the Cabinet and the Fleet Admirals had sufficient clearance to even weigh in on the meeting. The Admiral of Greyspace was a dour grey elf with inclinations that ran close to Belryn's position on elven superiority, particularly gold and grey elven superiority; no help there. Admiral Icarus of the RealmSpace Fleet was a personal friend and likely to be supportive; but Admiral Yerthad of KrynnSpace was sort of a wild card. He wondered if Serin Ghar still thought of him fondly, or if their affair many years ago had left her embittered enough to oppose him on principle. And it was hard to say whether or not the Cabinet would recognize Admiral Silmara as worthy of being in the know, since her command was technically Spiralspace and all that remained of the Spiralspace Fleet since the disaster of the opening salvos of the War, was their base on the notorious mercenary pirate port known as the Rock of Bral; which had abandoned Spiralspace entirely. Only the gods knew what Silmara would consider "acceptable measures" to counteract the scro threat after the horrors of Spiral. Belryn's compatriot, Lord Thelanthys, was the Admiral of Caer'Thunspace, so that was a wash. He didn't know the Admiral of Darnannospace at all, and the Dragonspace

Admiral, Telthas Celestis, resented having the classified project in his sphere but being left out of its operations; so Madrimlian could pretty much count him out too.

Not for the first time, he wished keenly that Admiral Leafbower had not chosen to resign his commission after the War. They could have opposed these warmongers in their midst together. But Aldyn was simply too angry and disillusioned by the Cabinet's corruption of his carefully-negotiated peace agreement; and Madrimlian couldn't blame him.

Well, there was no point in delay. If he took the Gate to Lionheart now, he would have more opportunity to hobnob and garner allies before the audit meeting. Madrimlian packed his personal gear and made for the portal.

Life with the Blacktusk Pirates turned out to be less difficult than Shaundar anticipated. They quickly fell into a routine. He pulled less sails than the rank and file of the crew because his work with weaponry, both siege and personal, was considered to have priority. After a while he became accustomed to the smell. The food was even tolerable, now that he'd acclimatized to large quantities of spice. The only problem was the slaves; or rather, the slavers. The drummer from his battle with the boatswain was both the Taskmaster and the Yeoman, and the slaves were treated cruelly indeed. And then there was the Helm Room. Every few days a kobold slave was taken in there, after the previous body was

removed. The more time he spent with orcs, the more he came to believe that the kobolds, generally believed to be nasty-tempered, vile reptilian little monsters, were as much victims of the scro as anyone else. Having to witness their abuse and degradation, and being unable to do anything about it, made his skin crawl. He contented himself with the knowledge that what he was doing might lead to the defeat of the swine and the eventual end of this treatment; not just for his kobold shipmates, but for everyone.

Shaundar learned the ways of pirates. They waylaid ships along the major trade routes to resupply. Mostly it was merchant vessels, but once they managed a thinly-defended illithid slave barge. The boys participated in five boarding actions and, regrettably, were forced to take the lives of seven innocent people between them. They chose to inflict their wrath upon armed opponents; the rest of their shipmates were not so discerning. What the crew did to the women would join the realms of Shaundar's nightmares, but he supposed that they were fortunate in that none were taken along to sweeten the journey. Neither Shaundar nor Yathar could bring themselves to participate in that part, no matter how it threatened their cover. Unable to stop it, they retreated into the hold, purportedly to count the booty, where they could avoid all but the loudest screams. "I'm going to kill every one of these bastards as soon as we reach Dukagsh," Yathar promised, his face a rictus of divided conscience. Shaundar could not have agreed more.

Their male victims were collected as part of the booty. They began their service aboard the *Starshark* as sail crew and labourers, and

ended it being carried from the Helm Room in stitched canvas. This haunted him less somehow. He wondered if he was becoming calloused towards death, having seen so much of it, and wondered what Narissa would think of that. The bitter taste of self-loathing filled his mouth like bile.

They also learned some of the ways of orcs that had not been part of the information provided by Intelligence. For one thing, though the *Starshark* had a ship bell, its purpose appeared to be to communicate with other ships and harbours. The instructions to the crew were given in the form of drumbeats. Fortunately for the boys, each ship had its own internal system of drum tattoos that had to be learned by the crew, so the fact that the lads were unfamiliar with their meanings was only to be expected. Shaundar took note. Was this further sign that the scro were not as unified as the Navy had feared?

Food, as a result of their lifestyle, varied greatly. Sometimes it was fresh meat; sometimes bread and cheese; sometimes bowls entirely filled with olives or figs. When supplies were thin it was soup or hard tack. The boys ate whatever they were served without comment, and much of the time, without looking at it.

It was a month to the crystal shell, and it took them an extra week and a half to raid other ships along the way. Shaundar knew this route well. They were headed to the portal that would take them to Spiralspace. He slept poorly; and so did Yathar.

He woke bolt upright from one rest cycle with the sudden horrifying thought that they just might be passing close enough to Yggdrasil's Child to be able to see Nedethil. He wasn't sure because he hadn't been home in a long time, but he thought the timing was about right based on its orbital rotation. A chill ran down his spine. What would he do if the forces of the Navy boarded the *Starshark* and arrested them? He doubted that anyone but perhaps his father was aware of the situation, and this mission was far too important to imperil for some contraband; even if that contraband was in the form of people.

He crept off to the head to renew his spell and took the opportunity to contact Madrimlian. "*Taking Spiral portal,*" he messaged. "*One week out. Will we pass near Garden?*"

It took only a few moments to receive the reply. "*Fortunately no,*" responded the Captain. "*You have just missed her. Position noted. Chart route to Spiralspace and Dukagsh.*"

Chart it? Well, he supposed the Navy had to get the details of the route to Dukagsh somehow. Shaundar decided that keeping his own parchment chart was too dangerous and far too impractical. He hoped his memory was up to this formidable task. *This is a job Sylria would be much better suited for,* he mused, and his heart and bowels twisted with an entirely psychological pain. He finished his business and made it back to the Crew Quarters. He was almost able to convince himself that he wasn't as disappointed as he was relieved that they would just miss Garden's perigee to the portal.

Yathar was waiting up for him, but there was no privacy in their quarters, so he would not be able to relay their orders until their shift began at First Watch. He tossed in his hammock restlessly and did not sleep.

While they went about their morning practice – an informal process that mostly consisted of pell work and beating up on each other – Shaundar explained the situation to Yathar. "I have to get into the Chart Room, and I'll have to get in there every time there's a course correction."

"I can create a distraction if necessary," Yathar volunteered. "But there's no point in charting anything until we're in Spiralspace. The Navy knows how to get there; they just can't."

"If that's the route to Dukagsh," said Shaundar, "and they know where to go once they've crossed the Sphere, they will find a way." Even this secret conversation was entirely whispered in Orcish, in case someone within range detected the strange sibilants of Espruar. "Maybe I should double-check the Flowcharts too, just in case they use a different portal than the *Vengeance* did."

Yathar started at the name of that ship. They never spoke of it. "They don't tend to be in there during shift change," Yathar pondered. "It wouldn't be long, but you might just have a few minutes if I create a distraction or better yet, an alibi."

“Five minutes is all I will need,” he told Yathar comfortably. He just needed to get any new co-ordinates. He could always run the charts later, and he was certain that there were better Navigators than himself in the Navy who could make better sense of the information, anyway. He was a capable navigator, but Garan and Sylria had been so much better.

“Look alive there, lads!” Captain Arga called, and they went back to work without any further discussion.

When the tattoo rolled out to signify that they were to enter the phlogiston, this time Shaundar was ready. Every flame-striking object and flammable liquid in the place was carefully stowed. Nothing had to be secured against the gravitational shifts because of the design of the Hammership, and he even had looted both snuff and chewing tobacco from the last Tradesman they had boarded. The chewing tobacco was just in case of emergencies; he really couldn't imagine sticking tobacco in his mouth and squishing it around in his teeth until it yielded disgusting brown juice to be spat out.

The helmsman, being a prisoner strapped into the lifejammer and not a professional spelljammer, struggled against the change to watery currents and the boat just about capsized. “Hard to port!” bellowed the Captain, and Shaundar flew to his line and hauled on it hard. Whatever else the Blacktusks might have been, poor sailors they were not. They managed to right the vessel and even caught a rapid current, once they'd braced the mainsail.

If they were to use the same portal that the *Vengeance* had found when Shaundar and Yathar’s ill-fated ship had been in pursuit, then he recalled it was three days to Spiralspace. He looked behind him and watched the crystal sphere of Realspace vanish into a mere marble with desperate longing. Having passed so close to Nedethil, he felt somehow he had missed an opportunity he would never regain. It was a ridiculous feeling – there was no way he could have made contact without being derelict in his duty – but there it was nonetheless.

“You Reaver lads,” the Captain muttered, “I see that you’re shellbacks. How many phlogiston voyages do you mark?”

“Just one, sir,” Yathar lied. How many phlogiston crossings had they been through, Shaundar wondered? Greyspace, Dragonspace, Spiralspace, some Sphere the scro called Orishspace . . . “And it was this Flow too, so no Silver Shellbacks for us ‘til we’ve crossed through the other side of the Sphere.” They had been instructed to not call it “Spiralspace” when speaking to the scro. Intelligence suspected, quite logically, that they had a different name for it since Spiral was the elven name for the Sphere’s primary, and they didn’t know what that might be.

But they were about to find out. “No ‘Crossing of the Flow’ ceremony until we clear Vorrspace, lads!” Arga announced. This pronouncement was met with disappointed grumbles.

The Captain put a poke of tobacco in his mouth. “I don’t suppose I have to show you lads how to use chew, then,” he observed.

Shaundar seized the opportunity. “Actually, I’d appreciate the instruction, sir. It’s not a long trip. We just went without.”

Arga just blinked at him. “Weren’t you going snakey, boy?” he demanded.

“Climbing the walls, sir,” Yathar agreed.

The Captain shook his head. “You’re stronger men than I,” he said with admiration. “Okay; you see how the leaf is longer on the chew, and the tobacco itself is wetter?”

“*Gul, karr,*” Shaundar affirmed. It also seemed a little darker than the pipe tobacco he was used to, but he supposed that might just be the lighting of the phlogiston, which produced a diffuse luminescence like the moment before sunrise.

“That’s because you’re supposed to line it between your gums and your cheek,” he explained, “and then you just let your spit do its work. You kinda move it around with your tongue when it gets dry or irritating. And you need just the smallest bit! Most of us pack in too much the first time. Then you can’t talk and you look bloody ridiculous. Kinda like those tree-climbing rodents on elf worlds.”

Squirrels, his brain added to itself, *or maybe chipmunks*. He took a careful pinch and placed it with his forefinger as the Captain had instructed. A few moments later the bitter, sour flavour of it hit him. “You

know sir, that's revolting," he said mildly. It was every bit as vile as he had feared.

"It's that or do without," Arga shrugged. "You become accustomed to it. Tastes pretty good after awhile."

He supposed he could see the Captain's point. He sighed and nodded, "*Gul, karr.*" The pirate clapped him on the back and headed up the deck. As Shaundar watched him leave, he found himself wondering how someone could be so helpful and mentoring towards a lad whom he believed to be of own race, but still violently rape a human girl with no apparent twinges of conscience.

Shaundar was not incorrect in his assessment of the length of the voyage, but there was no way to share this information until they were back in Wildspace. There simply was no extraplanar access in the phlogiston of any kind.

A rapid staccato drumbeat, followed by the clanging of the ship bell, rolled through the ship and all hands stood to their lines. It took Shaundar a moment to dredge his memory, but then he recalled that this was the signal that they were about to enter a portal. He saw the crystal ball that was the Sphere rapidly filling his vision until its curvature seemed flat and a dark impression appeared on its surface. Shaundar broke into a cold sweat and his breath came in rapid bursts. The last time they had gone through this portal, the *Vengeance* had come about and turned them into flinders and hamburger; all of them, that is, except

himself, Yathar and Sylria, who spent the next two years in the Raven Talon Concentration Camp. “Are you lads all right?” the boatswain asked with concern.

“I’m fine, bo’sun,” he lied through the staccato heartbeat in his breast. He was amazed that no one could hear ringing like a ship bell coming from his sternum, where the vigor of his throbbing heartbeat was hammering for all it was worth on his mithril breastbone.

Dargak took a step closer. “No, really, you don’t look well,” he insisted, his eyes wide. Shaundar knew then what was bothering him; he feared that eternal demon that terrified all sailors from the dawn of time – plague.

“Think it was something we ate at dinner,” he temporized. “We’ll work through it.”

The boatswain’s shoulders lost a little of their tension with this much more palatable explanation. “Carry on then,” he nodded, and he left them.

“You too, huh?” Yathar asked quietly. His orange orc skin was sallow and covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Shaundar imagined his own olive green was probably even more ghastly.

“I hate this place,” he hissed. “May it rot in the Abyss.”

“It probably is,” Yathar pointed out. “We should try to get some intel while we’re here. Like what happened to Minial’s Arch, Numeliador and Ironpiece.”

That helped; it gave Shaundar focus. “You’re right,” he agreed. “They probably have no idea, do they? I’ll find out when we’re through the portal.”

“What are you two jaw-jacking about?” demanded the boatswain. “Look lively over there!”

Suitably chastised, the boys went back to work and spoke no further until the end of their shift.

At shift’s end they were sent to the shaman for examination. Shaundar was not at all comfortable with this; what would the shaman see that would risk their cover? But he needn’t have worried. The shaman was a battered old brown-skinned orc with greasy grey cornbraids, long yellow claws and a missing ear. His face was creased with so many wrinkles that he might have been a mummy. He squeezed their eyelids open and poked and prodded them; then he cast some bones on the floor, the meanings of which were completely beyond Shaundar’s comprehension, and read some omen in them. “Do you lads get Flowsick?” he queried at last. Shaundar nearly burst out laughing.

Some starhands did get ill from the liquid movement of the phlogiston, it was true, but after the past several cycles of broken sleep and his fear of discovery, that was an excellent joke.

Yathar looked pained. “Don’t tell the lads, all right?” he asked in a plaintive tone. “That’s the last thing we need.” Shaundar could not help but admire his straight face and even tone. Yathar’s bardic skills made him the superior liar, no question.

The old shaman smirked. “Your secret is safe with me, lads,” he assured them as they got up and left; and sure as the stars, it was all over the ship in a matter of hours, subjecting them to affectionate (and not so affectionate) mockery. But it covered the real cause of their distress, so Shaundar endured it with little difficulty.

They both had a bad moment heading into the gaping maw of the portal, and the ship nearly tore itself in half as the rapid Flow combined with the inexperienced helmsman to make a harrowing passage. As it was, something significant tore on the larboard side and wood and sail careened off into the ether. “All stop!” roared the Captain when they had cleared the portal and entered the darkness of Spiralspace. “All stop!” the call repeated down the line, and the drummer rolled out the appropriate signal, and the anchor was dropped. A spelljammer’s anchor was never a sure thing, but they would at least minimize their drift while they assessed the situation.

“Damage report!” the Captain called. Shaundar went to the larboard side to see what he could see. Sure enough, the fanlike sail along the *Starshark’s* gravity plane was shattered. “We’ve lost most of the larboard fin, Cap’n!” he shouted back.

The colourful epithets that Arga uttered blistered even Shaundar’s jaded ears. “Make repairs on route!” he commanded. “Carpenters, get up here!”

“*Gul, karr!*” a handful of scro and an ogre responded, and while some brought wood and canvas up from the hold, the others leapt over the side and rappelled to the broken fin. They lowered the supplies carefully over the rail, taking extra care to guide down the load of delicate servos that were intended for the mechanical portions of the damaged sail. On an elven ship, Shaundar noted, this would have been a very different operation. Carpenters would have grafted a temporary framework repair job onto the living wing of the ship, and then druids would have called upon divine powers to aid and accelerate the natural growth of the plants to form into the appropriate shape over the next several days.

Dargak indicated to a couple of his ogre enforcers and they disappeared below. A few minutes later the ship trembled, and a semi-conscious middle aged human male was hauled up to the main deck. Dargak carted him to the aft castle and started wrapping a lifeline around his neck in coils. “Ready when you are, Cap’n!” he announced boldly.

Shaundar wasn't certain as to what was supposed to happen next, but Arga smiled cruelly. "Navigator, have you plotted our course yet?" he yelled out.

"Ten down, fifteen starboard, *karr!*" cried a voice below.

"You heard 'im!" the Captain bellowed. "Bring 'er about; ten down, fifteen starboard, and weigh anchor!"

"*Gul, karr!*" all hands responded. Shaundar lent his back to crank the heavy starmetal anchor back up onto the ship, sneaking peaks aft out of the corner of his eye. The man just sagged against the railing. His skin was almost grey and it draped loosely on him, as though he had lost a lot of weight in a very short time. "Stand to your lines!" Dargak ordered when this was accomplished.

When all was in place, Captain Arga stroked his black beard and with his eyes firmly on the aft castle rather than their heading, he grinned and commanded, "All ahead full!"

The drummer beat out a rapid rhythm to the calls of "All ahead full, *gul!*" and the *Starshark* leaped into motion. At the same time, Dargak picked up the hapless human and heaved him directly over the side. There was a brief scream before it was cut short, and an unmistakable cracking noise as the rope drew taut. A split second later, Dargak hacked the rope free with a mighty cleave of his axe, and the man flew off into oblivion as the *Starshark* left him behind. The crew cheered. Shaundar

realized that the only one who was looking where they were going was likely the jammer.

“That’s how we deal with incompetence, lads!” Arga declared with a tuskly grin, and more cheers and enthusiastic applause greeted this proclamation.

Shaundar clenched his fists hard enough with the force of his rage as he hauled his line, that his calloused sailor’s hands showed rope imprints and began to bleed.

They were stopped by an enormous scro blockade a bell later. The Captain chomped at his pipe with irritation but answered the questions of the swaggering Bloodaxe Captain directly. “You’ll not want to delay me,” Arga cautioned. “We’re on a special mission for your Clan Leader.”

“Common pirates and mercenaries?” the arrogant Bloodaxe exclaimed incredulously. “Do you have papers to prove it?”

Sourly, Arga produced some kind of documentation while Shaundar and Yathar, like most of the crew, took the opportunity to smoke. The Bloodaxe Captain looked over it and his eyes widened. “Sorry to hold you up, Captain,” he apologized immediately. “Please carry on.”

Once pleasantries were exchanged and the Captain from the blockade had returned to his ship, they got underway again with a course correction. “Fucking clan scro,” Arga growled between his clenched teeth.

“Nothing better to do than harass people.” He turned to his First Mate, an elderly scro named Tarth who said little, and confided, “I don’t like this course. It takes us real close to God’s Marbles.”

Tarth shrugged. “It’s fastest, Cap’n,” he argued.

Arga sighed in resignation and commanded the crew to follow the heading given by the navigator. Shaundar met Yathar’s eyes and his blood brother nodded just once.

At evening shift change, Shaundar made as if to go to the head on the Cargo Deck, but diverted at the passageway and ducked behind it. Making the signs for a quickened invisibility spell to aid him, he snuck past the so-called “spelljammer’s quarters” (slave pen, was more like it, he thought bitterly,) and towards the Helm Room, where the charts were kept. As arranged, he put his hand on Yathar’s shoulder, who was apparently scrubbing the floor. Upon that signal, Yathar stood up, cocked his ear, bellowed, “*Gul, karr!*” and made for the helm with Shaundar pressed against his back, just in case they ran into anyone. He knocked on the door with a firm hand.

When it opened, a smell that Shaundar knew better than he cared to know assaulted his nostrils. It was the reek of sweat, feces, urine, blood, and death. A sour scro with a scar across his face stuck his mug outside. “What?” he demanded.

“Cap’n wants to see you,” Yathar told him.

“What for?” he wanted to know.

Yathar shrugged. “I’m just a marine! You think I ask the Cap’n about the details of his business? Just relaying the message. He was calling you from up deck.”

He cursed. “Well, guess you’ll have to watch the jammer for me for a minute.”

This was better than Shaundar had hoped. “Sure,” Yathar volunteered immediately. “Better go.”

The scro pushed past him, pressing a bloody cat-o-nine-tails into Yathar’s hand, and headed up the passage. The boys entered and shut the door firmly behind them, trying not to gag at the smell.

The man they had strapped to the helm was covered in blood and his face was a frozen grimace of agony. Shaundar could see that his shirt – or what had been left of it before today, anyway – was in tattered bloody rags where the cat had ripped his back open. He was muttering softly to himself and moaning low in his throat. The helm was glowing like a coal in the pits of the Nine Hells, and evil tendrils of that sinister red light snaked up to link with the victim’s major arteries. It was pulsating with a macabre heartbeat as it drained the life from its victim.

“Do what you need to do,” Yathar told Shaundar in a strained voice. “Let me know when you’re done.” Shaundar checked the charts and the stellar compass and noted heading and bearing. He could barely

concentrate in the thick haze of his horror. He tapped Yathar on the shoulder again to let him know when the task was completed. Yathar indicated the door with his head. “Go!” he hissed at Shaundar, and he lifted up the whip.

“Lip me off,” Yathar begged the helm’s victim. The cat hovered above the man in Yathar’s trembling hand.

The man looked slowly up at him with bleary eyes, barely comprehending.

“Lip me off,” Yathar repeated. His eyes were huge. “Give me an excuse.”

The light of understanding dawned in the man’s eyes, then resolution. He nodded once. “Thank you,” he whispered; then he summoned the last of his failing strength and swore at Yathar with a depth of redirected hatred that Shaundar understood completely. Yathar brought the cat down, screaming, again and again. Shaundar managed to get through the passage just in time to avoid the first spray of blood. He crouched behind the stairs and watched the scarred scro return, then run to fetch the boatswain. They clapped Yathar in irons and took him to the brig; but the helmsman slumped over dead in his restraints with a broken neck. Shaundar was happy for him.

Shaundar found his way to the head; muttered the invocation to open the channel, and cast his whispered message across the planes to

Madrimlian: “Entered Spiralspace called Vorrspace. Heading forty-five nor’east, ten down from Starbeast Portal, passing near God’s Marbles. Expect a blockade; full compliment. Hope it’s worth it.”

Madrimlian’s reply was immediate and filled with gratitude. “Well done, marine. Keep reporting in when you get the chance.”

He took the opportunity to renew his *greater alter self* enchantment so that he wouldn’t have to find an excuse to vanish later and headed topsides.

Crew discipline was swift on the *Starshark*, but lives were cheap when they weren’t crewmen. Yathar was sentenced to ten lashes for “wasting resources.” He protested loudly that he wasn’t going to take insults like that about his mother from anybody, but they fastened him to the mainmast and delivered the sentence. They had received worse in training and Shaundar knew he would handle it. Tensing and releasing his back at just the right moments was effective if it wasn’t more than a few lashes. Shaundar remembered when ten lashes, his first experience with ship discipline at the tender age of forty, had felt like he was being murdered. He smirked at the irony.

As they passed God’s Marbles, there was a harrowing moment when a small round meteor just about took out their topsail. Then they made a beeline across the Sphere, with only one stop for shore leave on a world that had once been Minial’s Arch. The fantastic elven stonework that the planet was named for, a monument to the Seldarine, the elven

pantheon of deities, was lying in crumbling pieces crawling with green mould; something the occupying forces, the Warguard Tribe, took great pleasure in pointing out to their visitors. Shaundar saw the broken half-face of Corellon Larethian partially buried in the ashes of the trees, and he shivered. Was this an omen for the *Tel'Quessir*?

Position charted and troop movements reported, the boys, unwilling to touch the second-hand camp followers, sat together and drank on a sandbag barricade. Apparently the locals were still providing some resistance; a fact that Shaundar did not hesitate to pass on to Madrimlian.

"I miss trees," Yathar remarked softly as they contemplated stars they hoped never to see again; though they were not in the same positions as they had been on Spiral.

Shaundar just sighed. "Do you ever question all of this?" he asked. He had been thinking a lot about home recently. "Do you think we're doing the right thing?"

"You don't?" Yathar pressed.

Shaundar shrugged. "I find it frustrating that we don't seem to be able to stop the horrors that go on all around us," he admitted. "And I miss our family and friends."

Yathar put a hand on his shoulder. "*Na'kor*," he said grimly, "didn't you understand what this meant when we signed on? They think

we're dead. We can't go back. We fight until we fall; that's all there is. And then the nightmares stop."

Yes, Shaundar had understood this completely. For the first time tears came unbidden at the life they had lost. He swept angrily at his eyes with an orcish hand. That was the last thing they needed, was for one of their crewmates to see him snivelling.

"For what it's worth though," Yathar admitted, "I'm glad you're with me. I don't think I could do this without you."

Shaundar nodded and smiled. "Me neither, *na'kor*," he admitted, and they clapped each other on the back in what passed for an orcish male hug.

"Well, if it isn't the two lovebirds," sneered Dargak. Where he had come from, the boys could not say, but he reeked like ale and the sweat of a thousand days in Wildspace. "Isn't this sweet?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" snarled Yathar.

Dargak flumped himself down beside them on the barricade, and a waft of body odour and alcohol washed over them. "Took me a while to figure out," he muttered, "but you lads just don't think like everyone else. Won't fuck the women, won't have a little fun with the prisoners, don't want whores. You're *garra*, right? You're not friends, you two are balling each other in the cargo hold, am I right?"

Yathar stood up and belted him so hard in the face that he fell right over the side of the sandbag pile in a drunken heap. “Guess again, you pile of dung,” he growled. “And if I ever hear that word come out of your mouth again about me or my *na’kor*, here, I will rip your head off and use your skull for a piss-pot.”

Dargak didn’t answer. He was unconscious.

Shaundar considered putting him in his bunk and making sure the shaman saw him; then he decided that he didn’t give a damn, and as a matter of fact, he had to resist the urge to smother him with a sandbag. The burly boatswain never knew how close to death he came that night.

As far as Shaundar knew, he never said a word about the incident to the Captain either; whether because he was humiliated at his sound defeat, or whether it was because he didn’t remember it, Shaundar couldn’t say.

It took twenty-one days, including their one-day’s planetfall, to cross the length of the Sphere. Shaundar reported their movement diligently. They took no booty and didn’t even lay ambush, and that disheartened the boys more than another pirate raid would have; it meant that the orcs controlled the Sphere completely. He informed Madrimlian of this with a heavy heart. But at last their goal swam into sight. He guessed it a week from the shell, and confirmed it four days later.

Spiralspace had a zodiac of sorts that made a clock face on the edge of the crystal shell. According to rumour, each one had its own portal to different currents of the phlogiston. Shaundar remembered how they had tried to use sight of the Beholder constellation to find the Gnomish world of Ironpiece in their escape from Spiral, but were intercepted by illithid before they made it there. It was the Eagle Portal that marked the passage to the scro homeworld. Shaundar's heart leaped into his throat and trip-hammered there until he managed to make an excuse to disappear and report this to Madrimlian.

His uncle's mind-voice was filled with joy and with pride. *"At last, the route to Dukagsh! Well done,"* he replied. *"The Tel'Quessir thank you. Go deep as you can. Gather intelligence. Shaundar, your father would be proud."*

Shaundar's guts twisted themselves into reef knots. That was the lot of the *N'Velahrn*, he supposed. How ironic, that he had finally done something that might make Vice Admiral Ruavel Sunfall proud of him, and his father would never know of it. Suddenly Shaundar wanted to talk to him so badly he could taste it like an acrid tang in his mouth.

The phlogiston on the other side of the portal was primarily a brilliant incandescent orange. Shaundar could not remember a brighter glow in any of the strange rainbow currents he had traversed. The goblinoids, who seemed to prefer darkness, blinked against the glare, but Shaundar loved it, and so did Yathar.

They inducted the boys, at last, officially into the Order of the Silver Shellbacks. This was an ancient tradition that hailed from spelljamming's ocean-sailing roots. On planetside, one was inducted when one crossed the equator, along with some other significant positional marker, for the first time. In Wildspace, one was inducted into the Order of Trusty Shellbacks when one crossed the phlogiston. The boys had been inducted on their ill-fated voyage to capture, burn, or take the *Vengeance*, and they maintained that as part of their assumed identities. A Silver Shellback had crossed phlogiston at least twice and a Golden Shellback thrice. Shaundar and Yathar were entitled to this a few times over now, but because the Navy could not officially admit that they had done this, it was considered best that they not receive the ceremony. But Shaundar saw no harm in doing it as part of his assumed identity; and quite honestly, no way out of it if he did.

The Orcish version differed in a few significant ways from the Elvish one. For one thing, the hazing was considerably more brutal. The pirates prepared a trench of sewer water filled with emptied chamber pots for Shaundar and Yathar to swim through, and as marines, they were required to take on the ogres to prove their strength. It was still Ptah, a god of stars and wanderers worshipped by spelljammers of many races, whom they welcomed aboard with pomp and ceremony, but Luthic was His consort in this version of the myth, and then Gruumsh, mimed by a pirate with an eye-patch and referred to strictly by the titles "One-Eye," "He-Who-Watches" and "He Who Never Sleeps," fought and defeated Ptah for Her hand. A scro playing Dukagsh served as a mediator and

observer, and their version of the Royal Baby was the fattest, ugliest ogre on board, who was called “Baby Bahgtru” and dressed in a very unflattering bonnet. Shaundar had to fight his gag reflex when asked to deliver the required kiss; even considering the fact that he was covered in days-old sewage, that ogre still reeked with some kind of sickly-sweet smell that reminded Shaundar of some of the more virulent Raven Talon fungal infections.

They were then issued the certificate to denote their Silver Shellback status; which meant nothing to Shaundar, since it was not made out in his name. It was no different than the rest of the ceremony, really. The first one that had initially made him a shellback, and entitled him to the gammaroid tattoo that still adorned his right shoulder was a time-honoured ritual delivered by friends and shipmates, whom had earned his love and loyalty. He found no joy in this cheap imitation when he had no loyalty to his vile shipmates; especially when the ones he loved had all been slain not three days after Crossing the Flow.

This was a much longer trip through phlogiston. Forty days, forty nights. The crew felt it hard, with about six weeks between resupply points and all the slaves making extra bodies on board. Meals dwindled to pickles, jerky they had to fight the rats for, and weevil-infested hard tack. Shaundar felt his teeth begin to loosen in his mouth and his gums started bleeding. He remembered this from Raven Talon. That was when he had begun eating dandelions like every other elf there, but there were no dandelions here. He couldn't tell whether the other crew members were

equally afflicted, but rats began disappearing and, he could swear, so did some of the kobolds.

The air began to smell stale and a bad taste lodged continually in Shaundar's mouth. He had been a starfarer all his life, but he'd spent it on fleet ships of the IEN. He was aware intellectually that air could wear out if too many people were on a ship for too long without replenishing it in the atmosphere of a celestial body, but he had never experienced it before. In the Navy, they would have implemented air austerity measures; a skeleton crew would have seen to the ship duties, and everyone else would rest in their hammocks to limit activity. Smoking would be prohibited and there would be no hot meals, to avoid fouling the air further; not that this was an issue in the phlogiston. But the pirates had no such discipline. He began to feel tired all the time and would sleep past the start of his shift if someone didn't shake him violently. There was no discipline for his sloth, however, since he was among the most active of the crew. Some of them had to actually be "started," a practice that Shaundar had only heard about that involved the boatswain beating them with a knotted rope to get them up and about their work.

One practice that the Captain did implement, however, was to limit unessential heavy exertion, so fighting practice was out. Shaundar, Yathar and the other marines were put to work on other tasks. They ended up with a three shift rotation to work the rigging as opposed to two shifts, minimizing the hard work required of any one person. So it happened to be Shaundar on lookout detail when the crystal sphere was

sighted. He wasn't certain at first – the air was exceptionally thin up in the crow's nest and it was all he could do to stay awake – but then he saw it floating in the orange phlogiston mist like a welcome island in a storm.

“Sphere ho!” he bellowed to the main deck, and nearly blacked out with the effort of it. “Ten degrees off the starboard bow!” He indicated with his arm.

The Matey fetched the Captain, who gazed through his glass in the direction Shaundar indicated. “Confirmed!” he agreed. “Good job, Garrik! An extra taut of rum for ye!”

“*Nor drakaar*, Cap'n!” Shaundar replied cheerfully. A little extra rum would go down really well, when there was nothing to do but sleep anyway.

It was still two days ahead, but it was easier to bear with the giant shimmering pearl that was the sphere bobbing gradually towards them. The crew's vigour seemed renewed, and the pirates worked harder, making every effort to trim the sails neatly and be sure that they lost no time in making the sphere that the orcs dubbed Dukagshspace.

Of course, crossing the portal did not immediately solve their problems. They still needed to find a larger body than their ship, preferably one with animal and plant life, to replenish air and possibly food. Shaundar overheard the Matey and the Captain discussing it and was not certain he liked the available options.

“Bahgtru’s Teeth for air,” Arga nodded thoughtfully to the Matey as he ruminated on his chew. “Gonna hafta be. But we still need food. Seems Shargaas is the only option.”

Shaundar remembered from his training that Shargaas was the orcish god of thieves and darkness. Not a promising name for a planet.

The Matey grunted. “You think the men can handle it?”

“They’ll have to,” the Captain sighed. “Even the jerky’s running low.”

“Kobold soup?” jested the Matey. Shaundar did not find this funny.

“Scavver soup,” Captain Arga responded; so Shaundar never did find out just how serious the First Mate was.

They pulled through the portal without incident, and the lookout called “Asteroids ahoy!” almost as soon as they entered the sphere. Shaundar’s initial impression of Scroospace was a bit anticlimactic. It didn’t seem any different from any other sphere on initial view, except for the visible dark spots bobbing past the stars and the distant reddish sun. Those dark spots were the asteroids the lookout had noted, and those were likely what the Captain had called “Bahgtru’s Teeth.” He wondered just how “toothlike” they were.

“Make for the Teeth!” commanded Captain Arga, and the ship dipped her bow slightly lower; perhaps seven or ten degrees, as the crew called out their affirmatives. “We’ll have fresh air in a couple of days, men!” he added, and this pronouncement was met with cheers.

Shaundar crept off to the head as soon as it was convenient. “*Forty days through the Flow,*” he informed Madrimlian. “*Heading ten down; two days north to visible asteroids ‘Bahgtru’s Teeth’ for air; but not food. Further orders?*”

Strangely, there was no response.

Shaundar was a little unnerved. Madrimlian sometimes took a few minutes, but he had never failed to respond entirely. He waited for almost twenty minutes; until someone began pounding on the head’s door and demanding, “What in the Nine Hells are you doing in there, Garrik?”

“Wiping my ass!” he snarled as he banged open the sliding door, yanked up his pants, and punched the impatient scro shifting from one heavy boot to another in the passageway right in the face in his irritation. He was cursed at with some enthusiasm as he stomped back up the deck, but didn’t really notice.

He tried again after his shift, but this yielded no more result than the first attempt. Now he was worried. It seemed likely they would not be able to contact home by the standard method. Some spheres had strange

restrictions on their access to other planes. It stood to reason that a sphere controlled by orcs would simply not allow any planar contact to elves at all.

One more try at the first Dog Watch was also unsuccessful; which meant that either Shaundar's theory was correct, or Madrimlian was dead. Neither was appealing and both changed everything.

He pulled Yathar aside as they clumped off from the so-called dinner they were served, which by this point, was mostly hard tack crawling with weevils, and a handful of pickles, with a few flakes of jerky for decoration.

"I can't contact the Captain," he explained.

Yathar blinked at him. "What? Why not?"

He shrugged. "I'll keep trying every few days," he assured his blood brother, "but I think we have to assume that planar access in this sphere is restricted. So the mission priorities have changed."

Yathar nodded solemnly.

"It's imperative that the Navy acquire this information," Shaundar told him. "So we're going to have to chart the way to Dukagsh and somehow make our way back at earliest opportunity. I'll have you memorize every piece of information I acquire at this point. Just in case."

“Understood, sir,” Yathar agreed, falling easily into the military pattern of command and obedience. Shaundar still felt a little unreal about that. If someone had told him when they were children that he would ever end up as Yathar’s commanding officer, he would have utterly disbelieved it.

“So then: forty days through the Flow; eight degrees down from the portal, and north for two days to Bahgtru’s Teeth. Got it?”

Yathar repeated it back to him with perfect clarity. Shaundar was glad that his friend was a bard. Memorization was part of the training. Unwilling to spend any more time discussing these matters where they might be overheard, he clapped Yathar on the shoulder and moved off to join the men up-deck who were mending sails.

Closing in on the asteroid belt over the next few days, Shaundar could see that it deserved its name. On close inspection the rocks were bone-white and perilously jagged, toppling haphazardly through space. He questioned the wisdom of coming so close, even with air being as stale as it was. But he stopped fretting about it when they swooped near to a surprisingly large boulder hurtling through the Void and the *Starshark’s* air envelope began to rejuvenate.

Shaundar inhaled as deeply as he could as the waft of fresh air blew gently over the deck, fluttering the sails. Cheers and applause erupted over the main deck, and soon after that, from below as well. The

Captain had the jammer do a full orbit of the boulder three or four times, and with each circuit, the air tasted and smelled better.

“Right then, lads!” the Captain called at last. “Light ‘em up while we’re still sharing the air!” Shaundar did not need to be told twice. He was puffing on his pipe in seconds, and the last of his chaw was spat unceremoniously into a chamber pot in disgust. For a moment the air was as smoky as it had been stale; then it began to drift off into the atmosphere of the asteroid, where it formed ghostly tendrils that glided lazily along its surface in the eerie reddish light.

Shrapnel suddenly peppered the air. “Hit the deck!” Yathar yelled reflexively, and the pirates dove for the wood. There was a sound all around them like someone had dumped over an enormous basket of giant beads as fragments collided with the upper decks. Something stung Shaundar’s shoulder and the surprised yelps of pain told him that he was not alone. When it passed and he dared to uncover his face, he saw two small fires starting from spilled pipe ashes, and the sky was filled with an exploding boulder spewing debris into the space all around it. The almost perfectly split halves of an Ogre Mammoth floated lifelessly in the Void.

“Fire on deck!” Shaundar cried, reacting to the most significant danger first, and he leaped for the buckets the orcs kept dangling from the mainmast for this purpose and doused the infant flames with the scuttlebutt. Yathar was right behind him, and so was Dargak, so the fire was effectively stillborn. A sullen tendril of smoke swirled up from the scorched ropes to join the pipe smoke in the air.

“Bring ‘er about!” the Captain commanded. “Let’s get out of here!”

“We’re not going to search for survivors, sir?” Shaundar burst out before he could stop himself.

Arga glared at him. “Not our problem, Garrik. Besides, what would you suggest I feed them?”

Shaundar swallowed his reply. The Navy would not have worried about such things. They would not abandon survivors to the Void, regardless of the conditions. But he held his tongue. “I see your point, Cap’n,” he answered as straight-faced as he could. He lent his hand to the line to obey Arga’s instructions.

Once clear of the belt, the Captain called an all-stop and took out his sextant. It was hard to tell precisely, but Shaundar assumed that his three positioning points were that eerie red star at the center of the sphere, that huge asteroid, and some other star that they knew well. He rubbed absently at an itchy spot on his shoulder, and it was only when the blood came away on his fingers that he remembered that he had been stung with the shrapnel. He asked Yathar to take a look at it. “Nothing serious,” he grunted; so Shaundar let it be.

Shaundar stood near the Captain and cleared his throat. “Somethin’ on your mind, Garrik?” Arga asked him without looking at him.

“I’m just curious what your third navigation point is, Cap’n.”

“You have an interest in navigation, boy?”

“I was just starting to study it when I had to leave the clan,” he lied. “I was thinking about becoming a Warpriest.”

The Captain cast him an odd glance. “Those guys are very strange.”

“That’s why I didn’t,” Shaundar chuckled.

Arga seemed to consider his response for a moment. “You see that bright green star yonder, lad?”

Shaundar squinted into the wilds of space. “There?” he asked, pointing to a greenish, steady star in the distance.

“That’s the one,” he nodded. “That’s Dukagsh.”

A shiver ran down his spine. “And that’s your third point, sir?”

Arga inclined his head. “You want a look, lad?” He offered Shaundar the sextant.

He wasn’t going to refuse the opportunity. “*Nor lakaar*, sir!” He took the sextant in hand and fixed the lenses on that greenish star, the reddish sun and the asteroid. He read the marks on the brass instruments

and calculated. "We're about ten days out of Dukagsh then, Cap'n?" asked Shaundar eagerly.

The Captain grunted. "If I'd known you were that good at geometry, boy, I'd have made you Navigator. But now I'm trying to make Shargaas, so we'll have to veer a little off course. Do you know how to find Shargaas?"

"Not a clue, *karr*."

"It's tricky," the black-bearded orc admitted. "Shargaas is a water world, ye see. Not easy to spot."

"So rather than looking for it, you look for dark flickers against the stars?" Shaundar speculated.

"Exactly right," agreed the Captain. "Of course you gotta know where to look." He sighed. "I should teach ye all this anyway. It's tradition; they say it was handed down from Dukagsh himself. No chart is ever to be made of Dukagshspace, just in case the elves find their way here somehow, so all navigation is done purely by memory."

A light exploded in Shaundar's brain. That was why the Navy had never been able to recover even a single chart, no matter how many scrolls were captured! It was actually quite ingenious. "I am an eager student, sir," he confessed honestly.

Arga nodded. "Okay then! About this time of year you'll find it hovering somewhere near the constellation we call 'the Spear.' Do you see it?"

Shaundar thought he did. It was a distinctive triangle shape with an almost perfectly straight line of stars beneath it. "That one, sir?" he queried, pointing.

"Good eye, Garrik! *Gul*, that's the one. Now, see if you can find Shargaas drifting across it."

He squinted at the stars, deliberately blurring them, so that he would notice any shift of shadows against the light. It worked. It took a few minutes, but eventually he saw a travelling dark spot. It was about the size of a pin-head from here. "Got it, Cap'n!" he announced. "Six degrees starboard, about . . . thirty degrees up!"

Arga's mouth twitched upwards at its tusky corner. "That's some eyesight, lad," he grinned. "Okay, mark its position and plot us a course."

"*Gul, karr,*" he agreed, and he rose up the sextant again and shifted the lenses, then did his calculations. "Yaw six degrees starboard, pitch thirty . . . thirty-two up, then nor'-nor'east for . . . about four days, it looks like," he decided at last.

The Captain nodded approvingly. "You heard the lad!" he bellowed. "Make sail!"

“*Gul, karr!*” confirmed the crew, and they began the process of unfurling the starboard sails and furling the larboard ones. Arga clapped Shaundar on the shoulder. “Get aloft there, lad, and lend a hand!” Shaundar grunted an affirmative and scaled the rigging to lend his aid in rolling up the larboard topsail. He found himself obscurely pleased that he had impressed the seasoned pirate; then he wondered why.

If you didn’t know how to find Shargaas, you never would, Shaundar concluded. It was so dark that it was damn near invisible, even at close range. Only by where the stars weren’t could you see where Shargaas was. It was no mystery why they had named it after a god of rogues and of darkness!

When they should have been about half a day out, the Captain cobbled together a jury-rigged spotlight with a bulls-eye ship lantern and a concave lens that might once have been some kind of frying pan. Within hours he knew why. Something shimmered when the light reflected off of it that was otherwise almost invisible, and the Captain began directing them to make slight changes of course to avoid the stealthy obstacles. It took him about an hour to figure out that Shargaas had a ring, like Glyth of Realmospace, and the stones that comprised it were obsidian; or some other such black, almost transparent substance. He would have assumed ice, except that Scroospace was a very warm sphere, warm enough that he and most of the crew chose to go shirtless and the rigours of shipboard work soon had them all in a slick sweat.

“All right, that’s deep enough!” Captain Arga called out at last. “Time to resupply! All stop and brace for helmsman change!”

The ship stopped as ordered, and Shaundar wondered warily what was up. He wrapped his arm in one of the lines and stood as the ship shuddered while they put another victim into the lifejammer. The original victim was still alive, however, and Dargak brought him out in a semi-stupor. His hopes for the victim’s continued survival were dashed, however, when the boatswain began to fasten coils of rope around the goblin’s waist. He tied the other end to the capstan and hurled the shrieking goblin over the aft railing. “Resume heading!” came the order, and they set out again with the goblin trailing from the line behind them.

Yathar found his way to Shaundar over the course of the next few minutes. “What gives, do you think?”

Shaundar shrugged. “I’m sure I don’t want to know.”

He didn’t. Two bells later he spotted something following the ship. It, too, almost vanished against the dark starry sky. “Cap’n!” he called. When Arga looked around, he pointed. “I make something following us, sir! Not as big as a Dragonfly, but larger than those little elf bug-ships. One-forty starboard and forty up.”

Arga squinted in that direction through his glass and smiled. “Good spotting again, lad! That’s what we’re after! All right then!” he

bellowed. “Let’s get some hands to the capstan! Marines, ready the harpoons!”

Shaundar seized one from its hook beneath the aft railing and raised it over his shoulder, point forward, like a spear. Before his Permafrost training, he would have had no idea how to do this. Yathar stood at his shoulder in the same stance.

The Captain continued to peer at their stalker through the blackness of Wildspace. He waited with seemingly infinite patience as they sailed smoothly and carefully past the obsidian asteroids. Shaundar realized as the thing approached that it was a giant fish. He hadn’t been able to make it out originally because it was black with white spots on its body; perfect camouflage against the backdrop of darkness and stars.

“Cap’n?” he inquired with some trepidation, “is that a scavver?”

The black-bearded pirate slapped Shaundar happily on the shoulder. “Night scavver!” he confirmed cheerfully, “and a big’un too! One of those should hold us to Dukagsh well enough . . . and look, it’s goin’ for the bait!”

The scavver reared back and swallowed the goblin on the line whole.

“Pull!” roared the Captain and the crew began to crank the capstan, reeling in the enormous fish. “Harpoons ready!” he growled as the thing came near to the aft rail. Shaundar did not have to be told this.

The creature was big enough to make the ship shudder as it fought the line it had swallowed. Its eyes were covered by some kind of membrane, giving it a creepy, zombie-like appearance, and its mouth was full of razor-sharp teeth. He was certainly going to stab it with *something*!

When it came perilously close to crashing through the railing, Arga yelled, “*Now!*” Shaundar thrust his harpoon deep into its fleshy underside beneath the head. Yathar did the same and the other marines were equally true to their aim. One of them, a big orc with half a face called Gurlak, managed to stab it right through one of those creepy eye sockets. Now the thing went insane, thrashing about and trying to bite at whatever it could reach. Yathar was knocked down by that wildly tossing tail and Shaundar narrowly avoided the same experience.

“Hold ‘im, hold ‘im!” urged the Captain impatiently, running in with his axe. Shaundar bellowed, “Heave to, men!” and he gripped the rope of his harpoon with both hands and hauled on it for all he was worth. Seeing him do so, the men rallied and followed suit. Yathar charged back in and grasped his harpoon. They pulled it over the rail and, with their combined strength and the shafts of the harpoons, pressed it to the deck so that the Captain and the boatswain could hack its head free. Even then it struggled and flopped for several minutes, bruising some of the crew and dislodging part of the railing from the deck, before its tail gave one last, feeble flop.

“Cut the bait loose!” the Captain ordered, and they sliced open its belly, not without some difficulty cutting through the big fish’s flesh.

The remains of the goblin tumbled free. Most of his face was burned to the point where bone was exposed, Shaundar guessed by the acids in the monster's stomach. Thankfully, he was quite dead.

"Dinner's served, lads!" Arga announced; and the crew cheered. "I'll need some carpenters up here to fix the deck and the rail." Their axes had left large scores in the wood and the planking would have to be replaced. "Now that's a real 'starshark,' hey Garrik?" he jested jovially.

Shaundar mourned the horrible way in which the little goblin had died. But he ate the scavver all the same.

A truly daunting fleet of warships went about orderly and organized business, thickening like a swarm as the *Starshark* sailed into Dukagsh over the next ten days. How many years had they been building this fleet, Shaundar wondered? How many generations of orcs had come and gone, making ships and biding their time? For the first time, he had genuine concern for the future of his people. Dukagsh's book said, "The war is won by the warrior who wants it most." Did the scro want their revenge more than the elves wanted their survival?

When they made their approach to Dukagsh, Shaundar and Yathar were both at the edge of the railing. Captain Arga seemed to expect this, smiling indulgently at them while they found excuses in their work to have the best view possible. "Why don't you lads go aloft?" he

offered. “There’s work that needs doing there too and you’ll have a better view.”

“*Gul, karr,*” they chorused, and they scaled the ropes without hesitation.

The sun in the center of Scroospace appeared to be a disk-shaped flatworld. One side was dark and reddish, which was the side they had been facing through most of their journey through the sphere. The other was bright and golden, like most of the other spheres they were familiar with. “The Eye of He-Who-Watches,” the Captain had explained a few days before, making a sign with his thumb and forefinger that resembled an eye-shape, which was either intended to show reverence or ward off evil. “He winks twice a year when you’re on Dukagsh. The red Eye brings rain and storms, and the golden Eye helps the crops grow.” Dukagsh, it seemed, was just beginning to creep around to the golden side in its orbit.

Dukagsh itself surprised them. Having seen the wreckage of Spiral and Minial’s Arch, they were expecting a ravaged, smoking hole. Instead they found a glittering blue-and-green jewel, radiant in the golden light of the Eye, accompanied by a large silver moon that circled it closely enough that it must be huge in the planet’s night sky. And there was something else that hovered above one of the tiny caps of ice that served as the world’s magnetic poles. It seemed too square and too regular to be another moon, but the boys knew better than to make such

assumptions. One thing you learned as a spacefarer was that anything really was possible.

“Since you’ve never been to the homeworld, I assume you’ve never seen the Tomb of Dukagsh,” one of their crewmates, also high in the rigging, observed.

“No,” said Shaundar and Yathar in unison. That was the Tomb of Dukagsh? “Do you think the Cap’n would bring us in for a closer look?”

“Of course,” their crewmate confirmed. “It’s tradition for every ship comin’ and goin’ to salute Dukagsh, and the Cap’n always passes close enough for us to see his eyes.”

As they neared the square object, Shaundar realized that once again, black legitimately was its colour and it was not merely silhouetted against light. Closer still, he could see that it was, in fact, a giant mausoleum carved out of obsidian, with no small measure of grace and talent. It was not an elven aesthetic, but the effigies of orcish warriors in battle armour were impressive nonetheless. Each of them carried a different weapon, and each held a shield or buckler that was inlaid with a clan rune in some red stone; perhaps garnet or ruby. Shaundar imagined that in the full light of the red side of the sun, they must blaze like fire. In the center was an archway, blocked by an immense orc (or perhaps he should say scro) with no clan rune and a wickedly barbed spear. He was interested to note that the eyes were comprised of crystal ball sized chunks of lapis lazuli and they were limned with greenish faerie fire to

represent the characteristic scro phosphorescence. Shaundar also recognized the symbols marking the orcs on either side of him. On his right was an orc bearing a buckler with the Bloodfist rune, the four lines with two beneath it in the shape of a fist; on his left was a shield with the rough labrys shape of the Bloodaxes. Their eyes were comprised of different gems – emerald and ruby respectively – but they also shimmered with green faerie fire.

The crew solemnly saluted this mausoleum in the chest-thumping manner of the scro, and each also cried, “Hail, Dukagsh!” Yathar and Shaundar followed suit.

Skimming over its surface, Dukagsh revealed a single enormous continent covered by an emerald green canopy of thick jungle, which surrounded a ring of high mountains that rivalled the Spine of the World on Toril and the Iron Hills of Caer’Thun. It was thick with clouds that swirled lazily in the atmosphere. “All hands brace for planetfall!” called the Captain, and the boys clambered to the deck with the rest of their compatriots. The *Starshark* shuddered when she reached the first of the clouds and the temperature began to climb with the friction. Shaundar breathed deeply of the fresh, humid air.

“Forty-three degrees north, seventy-nine degrees west!” the Matey called when the tremors of re-entry had ceased; and the *Starshark* steered to the required bearing as Dargak called out the necessary course changes.

Their co-ordinates took them over some of those mountains to tablelands at the edge of an enormous inland desert, with vast fields of corn, beans and flax huddled close to the ridge. In those fields there stood a great palace fortress. Its lines were stark and it was constructed of solid black marble, but it was inlaid with lapis and amber accents, and it was guarded by more of those incredible effigies and a private fleet of spelljamming ships, many of which were those deadly iron Mantis ships. Its roof was sloped in a way that reminded Shaundar vaguely of Wa construction. A flag displaying the Bloodaxe rune flew from the castle mast.

They landed in the harbour of an artificial lake, the boat-like keel of the Hammership touching down lightly and easily before beginning its gentle roll with the waves that were washing up on shore. They moored up to the wooden dock, which was very much like the docks back home in Theraspar's harbour. Glancing up into the sky with a hand over his eyes to shield them from the unaccustomed glare, he was awestruck by the strange sight of the coin-shaped sun, which was a golden cat's-eye slit in the blue expanse.

"There's a couple of crates in the hold, lads," Dargak informed them. "Go grab one as the Quartermaster directs."

"*Gul*, bo'sun," they chorused, and did so. The crates were not as heavy as expected, based on their size, and something rattled around inside of them that sounded like a quiver of arrows spilling onto a deck. Yathar, Shaundar, and the rest of the marines carried them easily.

There was a city surrounding the palace, which was delineated by a protective wall, also of black stone. Between the beach and the wall was a well-maintained road that trundled through corn and bean fields, which were worked by kobolds, goblins, and what appeared to be the more familiar common orcs.

At the city gate, the Captain showed the guardsmen – two very serious-looking scro in tabards with the Bloodaxe symbol – some sort of paperwork, which they inspected diligently. It must have checked out because they were waved through.

The city was at least as big and as impressive as Waterdeep, and the roads were straighter and better maintained. Constructed of some kind of grey brickwork, it cut a straight line through an industrial district; a bustling market district filled with various goblinoid species and not a few humans; a middle-class residential area of adobe housing; and a higher- class district of multi-shaded wooden housing, again with a faintly Wa-like design, leading gradually into expansive estates filled with palms, fruit trees and gardens.

The road leading to the palace was the first sign of the orcs' savage heritage. It was covered in an archway constructed of horns that were easily thrice the size of Shaundar. He found himself seriously considering what sort of beast produced such a horn; and how populous they would have to be to create enough horns to be so freely used in architecture.

The palace was secured behind another wall, this one apparently built of the same black stone as the castle itself. They were escorted into a guard building on the outskirts by another Bloodaxe guard, clad in black studded-leather armour with Bloodaxe patches on his besagues. Shaundar was disappointed that they would not get to see the castle; such intel would be invaluable to the Navy! He didn't think it would be a simple matter to break in and have a look around, either. These walls, also spiked with some great horns or teeth of some predatory beast, were bespeckled with guard towers that were well-populated, and the guards were well-armed, well-armoured, and alert.

They were met by a large grey-skinned scro, this one clad in red leather studded armour with horns and teeth. The clan runes were tooled into his besagues in black instead, and his tusks were highly decorated with gold inlaid runes and a variety of swirling tribal patterns. His *toregkh* was long enough to dangle down over the front of his breastplate, and he wore a wristband of thick lapis beads.

The Captain and the rest of the crew bowed, and the boys followed suit.

"Captain Arga," the strange scro greeted him in a friendly tone. "How did it go?"

"My lord," said the Captain with deep respect, "the dwarves were most amicable to your offer." He nodded to Shaundar. "The lord's merchandise, if you please, Garrik."

“Gul, karr,” he replied, and he set his crate down in front of the big armoured scro. The scro pried it open with his axe, using the underside of the edge to lift up the wooden slat, a feat of dexterity that impressed Shaundar. Inside were crossbow quarrels. They were black in colour, from wooden shaft to metal tip, and they bore dwarven craftsman marks. A cough and a wipe over his mouth and nose concealed his *detect magic* spell. Sure enough, they radiated magic. As a matter of fact, they radiated strong necromancy.

The scro soldier investigated them in detail, and nodded, satisfied. “Excellent,” he rumbled. “Do you mind if I have one of our Warpriests confirm its enchantment?”

“Of course not, my lord,” the Captain agreed. The soldier took one of the quarrels and left with it.

“Fucking clan scro,” Arga sneered. “Doesn’t trust our shaman, I guess.”

“Maybe it’s the dwarves he doesn’t trust, Cap’n,” Yathar pointed out.

This seemed to mollify him. He shrugged.

“What are these anyway, Cap’n?” Shaundar wanted to know.

He grimaced. “Quarrels of orc slaying,” he confessed. At Shaundar’s surprised look, he shrugged again. “What do I care if clan scro want to kill each other?” he demanded. “Good riddance is what I say.”

Yathar and Shaundar exchanged a look. Yes, this definitely boded well for the elven war effort, and after the sight of the immense Scrospace fleet, Shaundar needed some encouragement.

A few minutes later, the noble soldier returned with a large coffer. “Good job, Captain,” he nodded. “Exactly what you promised.” He lifted the strongbox with some effort and shook it to audibly shift its contents, which Shaundar assumed were coins. “Shall I give this to your Quartermaster?”

The Quartermaster came forward and took it with a little more difficulty than the soldier. “You don’t mind if I have him count it, do you, my lord?” smirked Arga.

“Not at all,” the Bloodaxe growled between gritted teeth. Captain Arga had the Quartermaster count every coin. The red-armoured scro waited with barely concealed impatience, his arms folded across his chest. It turned out to be a princely sum; two thousand platinum coins, about ten thousand gold.

Arga nodded once, solemnly. “Every piece present,” he said casually. Was he intentionally mocking the soldier? Shaundar rather thought he was.

The Bloodaxe touched his tongue to a tusk, and said, “Do you want to earn twice that?”

Arga, who had been gathering the crew to leave, stopped and met his eyes. “I’m listening.”

The scro lord cast the Captain a sinister smile. “The Bloodfist heir just got married. We would like very much to disrupt their happy nuptials. You can have a full crate of the quarrels for this purpose.”

The Captain considered it, stroking his black beard thoughtfully. “Twenty thousand more, you say?”

He declined his head just once. Arga nodded. “All right, we’re in.”

The Bloodaxe smiled. “Right then. The primary target is the heir, Corin Bloodfist.” Shaundar blinked in surprise, but managed not to jerk or otherwise draw further attention to himself. “If you manage to take out his father too, even better.” He cast them a predatory grin. “The secondary targets are his new wife, Ynga, and her twin sister Y’Anid, wife of the Clan Champion. We want them alive.” He grinned wider. “Note that I say ‘alive,’ not ‘unharm’d.” Menacing laughter erupted from the *Starshark’s* crew.

“Well, what do they look like?” demanded the Matey.

The Bloodaxe scro opened a map case and unrolled a couple of canvas images. The first was the very familiar face of Dorin Bloodfist. “I recognize Almighty Leader Bloodfist,” Arga snapped impatiently.

“Good then,” grunted the scro lord. “His son looks just like him, only younger and green-skinned.” He unfurled a second canvas portrait, showing a scro woman with red-and-silver hair, bright blue eyes, and olivine skin. “That’s Elka Bloodfist, Ynga and Y’Anid’s mother,” he explained. “They look a lot like her, only younger.”

Shaundar thought the woman in the picture was actually rather pretty. He shook his head. Too much time without feminine company, he guessed.

“Get a good look, lads,” the Captain encouraged, and they passed the canvas between them until all had studied it well. When they returned to the soldier’s hands, he rolled them up and put them away. “Good hunting,” he said simply, and he packed up two of the crates, one on top of the other, and left.

“Well Garrik, you might as well pick up that crate again,” Dargak suggested. Shaundar lifted it up obediently. The pirates returned to their ship without exchanging another word with the Bloodaxes.

When they were told to line up for their pay, they were also each given one of the crossbow quarrels. He watched the distribution of treasures that the Navy might have killed an angel for with solemn eyes.

Tomorrow, he would make his quarrel count. He intended to shoot Dorin Bloodfist right through the heart.

Part Two: Becoming the Enemy

Chapter Eight

Time began to blur together. Sometimes Shaundar knew exactly where he was and what he was doing; other times he was confused. He was a boy and he was back at the academy, holding books aloft for nearly an hour at the command of Lord Durothil. He was a little older and he was receiving ten lashes at his court martial, when he crashed a flitter by buzzing the deck of his father's Armada class vessel the day that Garan Oakheart taught him to spelljam. He was being interrogated aboard the Mantis ship *Vengeance* by that Hellguard Captain. He was pumping the bellows in the Factory at Raven Talon. He was strapped to a lifejammer aboard the *Sword of Courage* by his own will.

Yes, that really was the current time and place, wasn't it? He opened his eyes as Rathgar gently tipped a waterskin into his open mouth. He was now too weak to lift it himself with his one free hand. Amazed by how thirsty he was, Shaundar drank greedily. "How long?" he rasped when Rathgar took it away.

"Thirteen days, my lord," Rathgar told him.

Shaundar closed his eyes. In one more day they would reach the Grinder, an enormous asteroid field that completely enclosed the inner planets of the sphere and a good place to lose pursuers. When that had come to pass, he could probably stand down and let someone else fly for a while. He could only hope he would make it; he was too feeble now to

hold a cup steady and he was beginning to have trouble bracing himself on the helm to use the bedpan. Targar had prescribed “poppy blood,” which was the Orcish variation of laudanum, every six hours to help bear the pain. Someone else had to hold the spoon.

The ship’s worg, who had taken a shine to Shaundar, stood up and licked his face. “Get out of there, Bahgtru,” Rathgar urged the giant lupine creature. He left with his leonine tail low and a soft whine in his throat.

Shaundar considered his first acquaintance with a lifejammer and shook his head. He’d known it had to be terrible by watching it, but he doubted he would ever be able to bring himself to do this again now that he had experienced it.

Thorgir put a hand on his shoulder. “Sir, I’ve come to beg you to stand down the helm.”

Shaundar just shook his head.

“Sir,” the Artillery Commander persisted, “you’ve done your duty. No one can fault your bravery or your honour. But the rest of us would like to share this burden.” He turned Shaundar’s face so that he had no choice but to look at him. “Cap’n’s beginning to show signs of coming around, my lord. He’ll never forgive us if you die and he lives.”

Shaundar's eyes, which had begun to glaze over in a haze of agony and weariness unlike anything he'd ever known, snapped open. "Corin's coming around?" he croaked.

Thorgir grinned. "Targar thinks that a few more healing potions and another day or two and he ought to be okay."

"Thank the Cave Mother," he breathed. What an amazing rush of relief! A little strength flooded back into his limbs as he was bolstered by a shot of hope.

Thorgir's mouth tensed again, however. "But there's bad news too. We won't make Dukagshspace on our food reserves."

Shaundar nodded. That was not a surprise. The Borka Retribution Fleet was too short on resources to resupply them properly. "And Gamaro Base is contaminated," he nodded. He sucked at his tusks as he considered the dilemma, but he didn't have to think long. There really was only one choice, wasn't there? He met Thorgir's eyes with a determined, blazing gaze. "When we stop next for the fleet to change their helmsmen," he said, "tell the fleet to select a dozen men each for a raiding party." Whether they would raid the elves, the dwarves, the humans or the gnomes would depend on distribution of forces.

He thought suddenly of the Bloodfist Summer Estate and its beautiful courtyard arbour, and longed to be sitting under the

honeysuckle with a sudden, fierce passion that left an acrid taste in his mouth. For just one moment, he wanted to weep.

The Bloodfist summer home was really quite lovely, Ynga decided as she peered excitedly over the edge of the sail barge's railing. It was nothing like the fortress in the mountains that served as the Bloodfist clan's residence in Dukagsh's rainy season, carved into the rock diligently over the course of generations; solid, stone cave walls and warrens that were imminently defensible, but gloomy. Those halls, where Ynga had dwelt among the clan's unmarried girls her whole life, were ill-suited to her unseemly adventurous nature, and she and her twin sister Y'Anid had spent many hours, even days, clambering over the rocky steppes on whatever pretense they could invent; from overseeing the pepper and quinoa farms to inspecting the lofty rope bridges that connected one outcropping to another. Their excursions were never approved of, naturally, but their mother was the reigning Den Mother, and she defended her daughters' right to see to the women's duties in their own unique way, so none would dare gainsay her. And to be fair, since Dorin Bloodfist, their uncle, had become Almighty Leader, there had been a lot less pressure for the girls to keep close to home.

Their summer estate was a sprawling, welcoming affair of warm jungle hardwoods in various shades of brown, red and purple. The roofs were conical and constructed of adobe in order to bleed off some of the humidity, and since it was close to the ocean, the buildings were

supported by pillars to keep them off the ground in case of flooding. Best of all, there were lots of windows! Because Ynga's new husband was the son of the Almighty Leader, she would live in the women's chambers in the manor house itself; a beautiful square building that surrounded a courtyard atrium overflowing with bright-coloured flowers.

Ynga knew how truly fortunate her match was. Gathka, her father's Second Wife, lost no opportunity to inform her that being so uppity and willful was not an asset. But Corin did not seem to mind. Ynga remembered him from their childhood, before his Rite of Passage had taken him into his father's house, and they had been good friends. She used to eavesdrop on the boys' lessons and Corin knew it, but had never exposed her. He had grown into a handsome young scro; muscular, large, and tusky, his olive skin gleaming with the rigours of spacefaring life and not without a couple of honourable scars; yet his unusual blue eyes still reflected depth, humour, and a joy that Ynga associated with the blue skies of the early dry season. He was awkward and respectful at their first meeting, though he had warmed up and was cracking jokes by its conclusion.

Corin precisely observed the traditional year of courtship before requesting Ynga's hand; and if his interest had Gathka stammering, the betrothal had her fuming and frothing. By this time, Ynga was beyond caring for Gathka's opinion; she knew full well that her father's Second Wife would not dare to act against her now. She began to grow and harden her claws to prepare for her new status as a married woman and soon-to-be initiated Priestess of the Cave Mother. She remembered that

the celebratory feast had been mortifying. Everyone was there, including the Almighty Leader himself, Y'Anid and her new husband Targ, who was Corin's father's successor as Clan Champion, and all of their wives, her mother and father, and the other Admirals, Generals and Warlords of the clan; but Corin showed well in the Nuptial Games and in the traditional Boast. At their wedding, Corin delivered a sound beating to the pompous Champion and nearly defeated him. And when he took her to bed, he was diffident and gentle; almost shy. Ynga liked her new husband a great deal, and knew she would grow to love him over time.

The sail barge landed, and Ynga disembarked without prompting, clad in her noble's amber and one of her nicest dresses. She was delighted and honoured to see that Corin had come himself to greet her, as had his formidable father. She was struck by the close resemblance between them, save the Almighty Leader's ruddy terra cotta orange complexion, and the landscape of burn scars etched along the side of his face. She declined her head respectfully. But Corin merely grinned and wrapped her in a welcoming embrace. Her uncle the Almighty Leader laughed aloud. "Welcome, niece and daughter, welcome!" he beamed. "My son has been eagerly awaiting your arrival."

"Thank you, my lord," she replied respectfully.

Dorin Bloodfist let out a hearty chuckle. "Now don't you 'my lord' me," he rumbled. "You're my niece, and now you're my daughter too, so 'Durkarr' or 'Kor'durkarr' would be just fine."

“Durkarr, then,” she smiled warmly back, “and I’m honoured.”

The big scro seemed pleased by her choice of “father” as a form of address. “Well, I can’t show you your room, of course, but your mother is here and I’m sure she’d love to do some catching up with you. But Corin and I have reserved the right to show you around the rest of the manor house, anyway.” He started walking and Corin, gently taking her hand, fell in step. Ynga had not known that her mother was here and she was overjoyed by the prospect of seeing her. “And my sister; is she here too?” Ynga inquired. She missed her sister, who was like another part of herself, desperately. Y’Anid had just written to tell Ynga that she was pregnant and Ynga was excited for her; but her letter had been strange. *Sparse* was the only word that came to mind, as though she had left out some important details. Ynga wanted to know what had been omitted.

“She’s been sick lately,” Dorin said frankly. “The babies, I think. I haven’t seen her yet today.”

“The trip was uneventful?” Corin inquired softly in his basso rumble that was so like his father’s.

“Sadly,” Ynga said with genuine regret; and at this, the men both laughed in appreciation.

“You see why I love her, Dad?” Corin smiled.

The clan leader clapped his son on the back. “Your mother was similar . . .” He trailed off; whether because the memories written in his

eyes were bitter or sweet or both, Ynga couldn't say. She knew that Corin's mother had died birthing him, and contrary to all tradition and social convention, he had never remarried. Corin confided in Ynga during their courtship that his father had loved his mother so much that no other scro woman could possibly take her place. The powers of the clan clucked disapprovingly at Dorin's short-sightedness in public, but behind closed doors, everyone told their story with admiration.

She watched, spellbound, as one of the Scorpion ships rose into the air from the landing site, while the crew of the sail barge finished mooring up behind her. Spelljamming was something that fascinated and intrigued her, but it was considered bad luck for women to be on warships, and with the War of Revenge so thoroughly joined only warships would leave Dukagsh without great imperative. The Scorpion sailed over the rice paddies, the coastline, and the great bamboo walls surrounding the village compound, up into the bright blue sky to vanish without a trace. "Is there anything going on that I should be aware of, my lords, or is this just a routine exercise?" she asked, indicating the departing ship.

They exchanged a glance. "I don't know what you mean," Corin confessed. Ynga smiled faintly. Of course not. Women were not involved in warfare.

"Forgive me for being so blunt," she said, "but with no Lady of the Clan, does the defense of the estate not become my concern as the lady of the Clan Heir?"

Corin seemed surprised, but Dorin barked out a startled laugh. “Yes, I do believe it does,” he admitted. “Your father has been standing in for the role for so long that I had forgotten that it was not his to begin with.” He shook his head, and the tip of a ruined ear was revealed for a moment from beneath his coal-black hair. “But that’s good! I have missed his presence at War Council. To answer your question, Ynga – no, not really. A strange ship was sighted in the area and we’re going to investigate and board if necessary. Pretty routine.”

They arrived at the great double doors of the manor house, which were no different from the ones in the winter fortress except that these were ebony and not iron, and these ones were wide open. The receiving hall was resplendent with its large window bays – still equipped with stout shutters and iron to bar them with, of course – and the stone carvings and cast bronzes depicting Dukagsh and some of the great heroes of Clan Bloodfist in their greatest moments of victory. The end of the hall enshrined the statue that was considered the crowning glory of their collection; Dukagsh and Korr Bloodfist, clan progenitor, with their fists clasped together and blood dripping down their arms, swearing the sacred Oath of the *Na’kor*. It was said to have been carved in the years following the Exodus by Korr himself.

“Do you like it?” Corin inquired, noting the smile on her lips.

“Very much,” she agreed. She liked the fierce look in the eyes of the scro warriors, captured even in the unyielding stone. She knew in that gaze that they lived and died for each other.

Dorin cleared his throat. “Feel free to decorate,” he invited. “It has been far too long since this place has felt a woman’s touch and Y’Anid doesn’t seem inclined to take that task on. Maybe get some plants in here or something . . .”

“I’ll do that,” she consented happily. Not too much, nothing to detract from the view of the statuary, but she thought maybe a couple of strategically placed fig trees and some vines to frame the alcoves might make it a little less sterile.

They made their way through a large office area, and then, to Ynga’s surprise, an area that was traditionally restricted to the males of the tribe; the War Room, the Warrior’s Quarters, and the Den. “Might as well know where they are,” Dorin grumbled at her questioning look. “You might have to fetch your drunken husband out of there sometime!”

Corin was aghast. “*Durkarr*, don’t tell her that! She’ll think I’m a sot!”

The Almighty Leader roared laughter and thumped his son on the back. “We’re all sots when we’re celebrating a clan victory, boy! Let’s not have any illusions about it.”

“I don’t have any illusions about that, sir,” Ynga assured him. “I’ve rescued my inebriated father on more than one occasion. And I know where the Den is in the winter fortress, too.”

Corin chuckled. “One step ahead of me, I guess, Ynga.”

They did not allow her into the Armoury or the Temple of Dukagsh. That did not surprise Ynga; such was not the domain of women, nor would it ever be, just as Luthic's Sanctum was not for any man. But she was permitted in the Staterooms and the Portrait Hall, where images of all the previous Almighty Leaders and Clan Champions were carefully preserved against the sun and humidity. They made it from there to the Family Lounge, and that is where her mother awaited her. Ynga beamed and rushed to embrace her. The crow's feet at her mother's eyes crinkled a little as she stood up to receive and return the hug with a broad smile.

"What do you think of your new home?" Elka Bloodfist inquired of her daughter.

"It's beautiful," she answered with sincerity.

The older woman's gentle eyes smiled a little more. "You have been here before, of course, but you were much, much younger." She looked to the men and announced, "I'll be taking Ynga to her rooms to get her settled in now. You can see her later at dinner."

"Of course, Den Mother," Dorin acquiesced. "I have some things I should probably be doing anyway. When Targ gets back, Corin, tell him that I want to see him."

"*Gul, karr,*" he agreed with a salute, easily transitioning from son to soldier addressing his commanding officer. It was a switch that Ynga still didn't really comprehend; no matter how much she had seen it. But

then Corin looked to Ynga's mother and asked softly, "May I accompany you as far as the galley?"

The smile widened on her gentle mouth. "Of course Corin." She declined her head towards the Clan Leader, who did the same; and then they headed off in opposite directions.

"How was your trip?" Elka asked her daughter pleasantly.

"Uneventful, she said," Corin replied with a smirk. Ynga clasped her hand to her mouth to stifle an embarrassed giggle.

"Always a good thing," the older woman nodded.

"As you say," said Ynga primly, her expression carefully blank.

But Ynga did not fool her mother. Elka's red-and-silver braids whirled about her head as she turned and met the blue eyes that matched her own. "Ah, the hot blood of youth," she sighed. "I think you will be less pleased to invite conflict once you have seen more of it."

Ynga's smile faltered. "I'm sure you're right, *durka*," she admitted. She knew that her mother had been through much.

She liked the look of the dining hall; a place of friendly, warm-coloured woods that could double as either a family dinner hall or something more stately, with an excellent buffet table supported by the galley. "The kitchen is out there," Mother indicated with a long and

shapely claw through a door that would lead into the courtyard. “But the tannery is outside the building.”

“Thank the Goddess,” Ynga replied with sincerity. Tanneries, not to put too fine a point on it, stank.

The nursery was equipped for fifty or more small children, but there were only about half a dozen now. *That will change soon*, Ynga thought to herself, considering Y’Anid. She was pleased to see that the children ran to greet Corin with excitement, and he knew all of their names and introduced them each in turn. Many scro men were of the opinion that their responsibilities in childrearing began and ended in the bedchamber, until their sons were ready for their Rites of Passage. Evidently Corin was not one such. What a blessing!

“Well,” Ynga’s mother pointed out, “the next room is the Solar, so . . .”

“*Gul*, of course, I’ll be going,” said Corin after a moment’s hesitation. He took Ynga’s hand and kissed her palm gently. “I’ll see you tonight,” he said hopefully. Then he bowed to Elka. “Good to see you, Aunt,” he rumbled with respect; and he took his leave.

“How are you finding married life?” Mother asked with piercing eyes.

“So far, pretty good. Corin is a dear.”

The elder scro woman smiled. “I am glad to hear it.” They entered the Solar, which by tradition was the indoor sitting room for the noblewomen of the clan. Ynga loved it instantly; the metal security shutters that fit over the enormous windows were wide open to the beautiful day and the light reflected off of the bright paint and filled the space completely. A few women were bent over their needlework. Ynga recognized some of her older cousins. They exchanged friendly greetings, but a few looked at her with piercing, jealous eyes. She recognized Nadia, a cousin on her father’s side, giving her a particularly scathing look. She knew that Nadia had desired Corin from the time they were small, and she felt badly for her cousin.

“Do you want the Lady’s Chambers?” Ynga’s mother asked once they had exited the Solar and found themselves in a long passageway with many doors. “They’re not being used. Dorin told me to offer them to you.”

Ynga was touched. *How very like Uncle*, she thought to herself. But she had seen the eyes of the women in the Solar. “I’m honoured, but I don’t think that would be right. I’m not the Clan Lady. If and when Corin wins the right to call himself Almighty Leader – and I hope it’s not for a very long time – then I will be. Not before.”

She smirked around her tusks. “Wise decision, my daughter,” the priestess acknowledged cynically.

“My mother raised no fools,” she shrugged. Women’s politics sometimes ended in poisonings. It wouldn’t hurt to not get above herself. People already accused her of that frequently.

Ynga couldn’t imagine why she would need anything more than her assigned chambers anyway. Four rooms entirely her own! There was a sitting room (with bay doors and big windows facing the courtyard,) a bedchamber, a private bath, and a wardrobe. The bed was a luxurious canopied affair and the wardrobe was immense. She even had her own couches and a daybed. The entirety of her belongings, which had been brought ahead by the goblins, barely covered one of them.

“I’ll leave you to get cleaned up before we make dinner,” her mother said with a happy smile.

“Where’s Y’Anid, Mom?” Ynga pressed now that they had some privacy.

Her *durka’s* face fell. “Y’Anid didn’t marry as well as you did,” she explained. “Targ keeps her on a pretty short leash.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” sighed Ynga in resignation. She felt badly for her sister and was doubly glad that she had come. Maybe she could be of some help.

“You might want to try that bathtub,” her mother suggested, closing the door.

Ynga didn't need to be told twice. She rang for one of the servants to heat water for the bath, and while she was waiting, she set about unpacking her meagre belongings. A good soak in the hot water and some jasmine oil was just what was needed to make her feel at home and relaxed. She did up her mahogany red hair – her source of vanity – in a high piled coil of braids to keep it out of her face, lacquered her claws with more hardener, and dressed nicely for the galley.

She fell into the routine of helping to prepare the evening meal with the other ladies of the house. It gave her a chance to get to know them a little better. Tatha, her father's Third Wife, was here and they had always gotten on reasonably well. And there was an older woman named Ganna among the concubines who spoke with an acerbic sense of humour that made Ynga laugh.

They brought the meal into the dining hall, where the males were already seated, jabbering excitedly about the details of the War. She narrowed her eyes at Targ the Clan Champion, who was a great grey-skinned scro that hulked over nearly one entire table side. He had married into the clan so he had none of the Bloodfist look to him. While Ynga agreed that new blood was important, she was not certain that his blood was the best choice. He seemed to be everything the women had come to fear about scro males in general; not at all like the other Bloodfist men. She smiled when she saw her sister at the Champion's side, but her smile faltered when she saw her sister's pallid complexion and tight-lipped expression as she raised a hand and waved.

But her heart lifted when she saw her father at the Almighty Leader's left side. He looked a lot like his younger brother, only his coal-black hair had just a dash of silver in it now, and then of course there was his missing eye. Ynga was told he had been born without it, which marked him as having been chosen by Dukagsh and the One-Eyed God to serve as a Warpriest. He often did not bother to cover the empty socket at home and he wasn't covering it now. She was accustomed to this and it held no mystery or discomfort for her.

Corin looked up at her and his eyes brightened. "Gentlemen," he rumbled, clearing his throat, "for those of you who have not yet met her, this is my lovely wife Ynga."

The males at the table tipped their tankards in her direction, and she bowed in reply. "Ah, my daughter has arrived!" her father announced with pride. "Come give us a hug, girl!"

"Once I have done my duty to my husband, *durkarr*," she smiled back at him, and she brought Corin his plate. A married nobleman could only be served by his wife when he was home. Many thought it was a tradition born of honour and respect, but Ynga cynically believed that it was more likely a practical way to avoid poisoning – or to know who had done it, should he suddenly drop dead in his soup.

Corin beamed at her and fell to his food. Some of the men applauded softly as she then made her way over to her father and embraced him. "I'd heard she was an uppity thing," Targ smirked, "but I

see that she knows her place after all.” Y’Anid, still sitting demurely at Targ’s side, winced.

“That rumour no doubt came from her stepmother, Gathka,” Ynga and Y’Anid’s father announced nonchalantly as he dug into a large drumstick. “They haven’t gotten along since Ynga was a toddler. So you really can’t take her word for it.”

Less smug, Targ fixed his sour yellow eyes on her. “Well, what do you think, Ynga?” he asked. “Are you uppity?”

There seemed to be a challenge in that gaze; a challenge, and something more sinister. Ynga found herself responding almost before she thought about it. She drew herself up to her full height, met his gaze head on, and replied, “That depends on the perspective of who’s asking, my lord.”

Now it was Corin’s turn to smirk as the warlords guffawed. Targ’s eyes smouldered for just a moment before he returned to his plate. Ynga knew by reputation that Targ was too proud by half. He would not thank her for making him look foolish. And how would this reflect on her sister? Inwardly she groaned. Why could she not seem to ever keep her stupid mouth shut? He would be a dangerous enemy to aggravate.

The timing could not have been better, in her opinion, for the alarm bell to clang. The men jumped up from their plates, startled, and reached for their axes and maces in the racks behind them. Those who

had removed their armour for the day now slapped on what pieces they could. Y'Anid handed Targ his axe while Ynga ran to assist Corin with his straps and buckles. He was swearing under his breath.

A commoner soldier came into the dining hall and saluted. "Strange ship landing, my lords," he announced. "It's a Hammership and it's flying a jack."

"Pirates?" demanded the Clan Lord incredulously. "One ship of *pirates*?"

"Mercs, more likely," the father of the girls corrected him. "And they probably didn't know about the wedding. Three guesses as to who sent them."

Dorin's eyes narrowed. "Good point, Olaf," he concurred. "Well, let's get to it, lads, before they breach the compound."

A cacophonous roar followed this pronouncement as if on cue, and the ground trembled. Several hard fragments of something rattled against the outside wall. "Too late," the Warpriest observed.

"To arms!" roared Dorin; and he charged towards the north door, which was closest. The other lords of the clan followed.

Ynga yanked open one of the linen cupboards and tossed out tablecloths. Her mother's eyes sparked with recognition of her intent.

“Make bandages!” she commanded, and most of the women fell to it, hacking a start to a strip with the dinner knives and tearing them free.

Once there was a pile, Y’Anid scooped it up and charged after the warriors.

“Where are you going?” cried Ynga.

“I’m a priestess!” Y’Anid shot back. “I’m going to heal the wounded!” With that, she was out the door. Ynga followed her.

The Blacktusks set sail a little later than intended, since the majority of the crew were nursing hangovers. Their co-ordinates took them to a spot on the shores of a very large, rather picturesque lake; or perhaps it was an inland sea. The estate beneath them was a defensible compound, but Shaundar could see that it had a garden in its courtyard.

Shaundar cast a glance over at Yathar, to see that he was tense and ready. They exchanged a nod. They needed no words. They clutched the hilts of their axes and the hafts of their crossbows grimly. Today, Shevarash would be offered a great and bloody sacrifice.

The ship bore down hard on the aquatic harbour below. “Stand to the ready, men!” cried Captain Arga. Shaundar and Yathar stood to the rail and waited for the order to go, along with most of the crew,

redirected from their roles as sailors. But there was not a man in the Blacktusk Pirates who did not know how to fight.

“Now remember,” directed Arga, “get in there, try to find the targets, pillage, take the women, and kill as many men as you can. Then get out! Don’t stick around waiting for the cavalry to arrive! We don’t need to kill ourselves for any clan scro, do we?”

There was a resounding noise of negation.

“Cannons ready!” the pirate Captain called; and ogres wheeled the machines into position on their heavy ropes, while scro primed the powder and shot.

“Weapons load!” he commanded, and the scro packed powder into the bores while goblins, with their steady hands, prepared fuses. Ogres wrestled the weapons in place while more scro shoved the heavy iron shot into the barrels of the great iron guns.

“Fire!” roared the Captain, waving his axe with authority, and goblins touched tindertwigs to fuses. Shaundar plugged his ears as the world exploded in a mighty, flaming roar. The air billowed sulphurous smoke as part of the outer wall of the compound folded in on itself and collapsed.

As close as they dared to the shoreline, they hit the surface with a tremendous splash, and water exploded all around them. “Marines away!” bellowed the Captain, and Shaundar vaulted over the railing and

charged up the beach, a war cry ripping itself from his breast like a child being born. Yathar was right behind him and his war-song sang in chorus.

The workers in the rice paddies scattered. Shaundar ignored them and ran on. He was not after farmers. But the Bloodfists were not unprepared. A contingent of armed, uniformed soldiers poured out of the complex to meet them. He left his crossbow in its holster and lifted his axe instead, though many of his shipmates let loose into the vanguard. There was a series of wet punching sounds, and about a dozen orcs and scro uttered shrieks that chilled Shaundar's bones. They died with expressions of agony on their faces.

When the forces joined, he dropped that axe with an inarticulate roar and it fell into the head of his spear-wielding opponent, throwing a fan of blood high into the air; then it lodged firmly and would not come free. Yathar's first blow decapitated a shrieking goblin, and his second dismembered an orcish foot soldier. His face was coated instantly in macabre red war paint except for the whites of his eyes.

With no time for anything else, Shaundar slid his short swords from their hilts to bat aside an iron spearhead aimed for his throat. Pressing forward to eliminate his opponent's reach advantage, his parry sliced into the tendons of his enemy's wrist and his main thrust pierced the leather armour and found something vital. The scro seemed strangely surprised as Shaundar yanked his blade free, and black blood followed it.

Knowing his foe's death to be only a matter of a few moments of patience at that point, he pushed past him, knocking him down with an elbow to the back of the neck. Yathar, he could see from the corner of his eye, was locked in a vicious axe-duel with some huge orog. He whirled in behind the creature and drew his blades firmly across the backs of its knees. It collapsed in on itself with a scream as its hamstrings twanged free of its heels with a sound like a snapping ballista string. Together the boys charged up the beach.

They were met by a virtual wall of orcs who were armed with pikes. Seeing this, they glanced briefly at each other and burst into a sprint. Yathar vaulted over top of the line and came down behind one of them to hew him through at the hip like a tree. Shaundar, not being quite as acrobatic as his bladesinger friend, leaped into the air and chopped aside one of the pikes, then landed on top of the orc, stabbing repeatedly with his short swords. He hit the creature in the face, severing a tusk and most of his jaw; the clavicle, which disconnected most of his weapon arm; and the throat, which killed him. He rolled off of the falling orc and kipped up to his feet, allowing him two more thrusts into the kidneys of the orc next to him before a single one of them could get themselves sorted and their pikes turned to face their implacable enemy. In the meantime, Yathar had chopped two more orcs nearly in half at the midsection. The scent of red iron and exposed offal filled the air. That's when the crossbow strings of their cheering shipmates twanged sharply, and another half-dozen orcs toppled over with agonized cries, black quarrels embedded in their torsos.

The orcs scattered. Shaundar didn't blame them. As they cleared, he saw that the main thrust of the fighting had shifted further down the beach, and he recognized a scro that he knew.

"There!" Shaundar cried, slapping Yathar in the shoulder and pointing. Clad in the same armour they had divested him of so long ago on Selune at the Battle of Leira, Dorin Bloodfist was roaring commands to his soldiers and cutting a swath through most of their crew's marines with his great axe. Fighting next to him was another scro with a very similar stance; except that, as the Bloodaxe soldier had said, his skin was an olivine green, not dissimilar from the shade Shaundar had chosen for his own orcish complexion. As he watched, the younger Bloodfist disemboweled one of the marines, and the elder one promptly beheaded the old shaman.

Yathar drew his crossbow and took aim, squinting to sight the Bloodfist leader in the glare from the water. He squeezed the trigger gently. His technique was perfect; but his equipment was not. The string broke instead of releasing the quarrel, and part of it snapped back and slapped Yathar in the face, cutting open one cheekbone. He swore loudly, yanked the bolt free and threw the crossbow disgustedly to the sand. "Shoot him!" he urged Shaundar desperately. "We might never have another chance!"

Shaundar sheathed his swords and unholstered his crossbow. He slapped the orc-slaying quarrel in place and drew the crank back. He was taking aim when Yathar called out, "Ware beneath you!"

He looked down, bringing the crossbow to bear, to see an orcish woman who looked very like the one in the painting the crew had been shown. She was laying delicately clawed hands on one of the felled soldiers at their feet and uttering some sort of chant. Light radiated from her fingers and his wounds began to close. She seemed oblivious of the danger that he and Yathar represented.

On the other end of the crossbow's sight, Shaundar hesitated in an agony of indecision. They wanted her alive, didn't they? He hated orcs; hated them with a burning passion that drove every action and every decision. But she was a healer, not a warrior. His mother was a healer. Was he a murderer, or was he a soldier? And yet, would bringing any living woman into the hands of the Blacktusks really be any sort of mercy?

His uncertainty cost him dearly. The scro woman looked up and met his gaze with the most striking bright blue eyes, just as something collided with him from the side and knocked him down. His face hit the sand and it filled his eyes, blinding him. His crossbow flew from his grasp and into the unknown. Something very heavy collided with his ribs and he heard a couple of them snap. The pain was excruciating. He screamed.

A familiar war-cry roared over his head, and there was an answering snarl and a heavy thud, then some scuffling and fighting noises. Shaundar struggled to get to his feet, but before he could do so he felt some sharp pinpricks at his throat, like a thousand little knives, and something sat on him, grinding his broken ribs together. He gasped in

exquisite pain and his head swam. For a moment he saw nothing but red and grey.

“Move and I’ll kill you,” a sour feminine orcish voice said.

Shaundar considered it. Better dead than fall once again into the hands of the orcs, to be their prisoner! But if he allowed it, he would revert to his true form upon his death, and the scro would know there were elves amongst them, and much of the elven advantage in the war effort would be lost. He lay still. “*Gul, karra,*” he rasped, spitting sand from his mouth. He tasted dirt and his own blood.

As his vision cleared, he saw that Yathar was engaged with both Dorin, and, he assumed, Corin Bloodfist, fighting desperately to get to him. He also saw that even with the necromantic quarrels, the Bloodfist forces had recovered from the initial onslaught, and were driving the Blacktusks back. There were other prisoners.

Someone grabbed him and bound his hands together behind his back; none too gently, either. He was yanked roughly to his feet by his hair and his bound wrists to face his captors, who had to be either Ynga or Y’Anid Bloodfist based on the resemblance to the canvas painting, he didn’t know which. The other twin was the one who had been healing the wounded, and she was standing next to her sister, who was studying him with those same astounding bright blue eyes. Did those eyes really belong to an orcish woman? They were beautiful.

“What do you want me to do with him, my lady?” the orcish male who had bound him up inquired.

“I haven’t decided yet,” she replied warily. “Hold him for now.”

“*Gul, karra,*” he agreed, continuing to grip his hair and his wrists.

Across the battlefield, Shaundar met Yathar’s eyes as his blood brother was driven back with the rest of the pirates, his expression one of agony and horror. “Get out of here! Go!” Shaundar bellowed at him with all of his might. One of them had to make it back to the Navy to reveal the location of the scro homeworld. Without that, all was lost. He was captured. If Yathar escaped, he could come back for him.

“Retreat!” called Captain Arga, and the Blacktusks turned and fled, deserting the rest of their crew. Yathar lingered a moment, his heart torn, but whether from Shaundar’s cry or being abandoned by the crew, he realized that rescue was hopeless. “I’ll be back!” he cried out to Shaundar, stepping over the body of the Matey; and with that, he made his escape with the other pirates. For the first time in his life, Shaundar was completely alone.

Yathar kept glancing behind him as they fled; and even when the *Starshark* lifted off with what remained of her crew, he kept looking down at the beach. He could see that the prisoners were all being collected and brought before Dorin Bloodfist.

Captain Arga put a hand on his shoulder, and Yathar flinched. His eyes were dark. “I’m sorry Tharr,” he said simply. “There’s no hope for your friend. Clan scro don’t spare pirates.”

Yathar refused to comprehend what he had just been told. He shook his head and turned back to the beach. He could just barely make out the figures moving about now, and who was who was impossible to determine.

But the sight of sun flashing against several axe blades raised at once was unmistakable. And the sight of the blood pooling on the sand when the axes came down was even harder to miss as the ship disappeared into the atmosphere.

An inarticulate cry of grief and rage burst from Yathar’s throat. “Channel your rage, lad,” the Captain urged. “Slake your vengeance in their blood.”

Yathar stopped screaming as though someone had cut through his vocal chords. Yes, that was good advice. He would do exactly that.

He drew the orc-slaying crossbow quarrel from his belt where he had stuffed it, wishing fervently that he’d had a chance to use it on the Bloodfists, and thrust it firmly into Arga’s black-bearded throat. Blood sprayed out over the deck. Arga’s eyes widened with surprise and horror and he tried to speak. Blood bubbled from his mouth and he keeled over, as dead as the prisoners on the beach.

The crew stared at Yathar, stunned.

Yathar turned his burning gaze on Dargak and announced, “I’m the Captain now.”

Dargak considered it, fingering his axe almost subconsciously. But then he remembered how soundly he had been beaten when the lads had joined the crew. “*Gul, karr,*” he nodded. His hand left the haft of his weapon.

Yathar cast his furious glare over the survivors of the Blacktusks. “*Gul, karr,*” they said, one after the other.

“Can we get to Dragonspace from this sphere?” he queried. The Navigator swallowed sharply and nodded.

“Set a course then,” he commanded. As they scurried to obey him, Yathar stood at the *Starshark’s* bow, staring down at the retreating green orb of Dukagsh with fury and despair. He almost forgot to salute Dukagsh’s Tomb, so focused was he on blinking away the gathering tears. Shaundar’s death would not be in vain. He would return to Permafrost and deliver the way to the scro homeworld, like Shaundar wanted. He would also deliver the crew of the *Starshark*. If he couldn’t remember the details well enough to guide the Imperial Navy to Dukagsh, he could bet that Dargak or the Navigator would; and if Madrimlian couldn’t get the information from their minds, pain was a wonderful motivator.

“Gather up the prisoners!” commanded Dorin Bloodfist, his blue eyes blazing with fury.

Y’Anid watched as the captured pirates – there were about a dozen of them – were dragged or pushed to where the Almighty Leader was standing, including the blue-eyed, golden-haired scro who had pointed the crossbow at her sister when she was healing one of the house guardsmen, his face a rictus of pain. She shivered. For just a moment, she had wondered if he was really going to kill Ynga. She had seen how he and his friend had devastated the house pikemen. But her duty to her people was clear. It appeared that her father-in-law was their target; or her husband or brother-in-law, perhaps. She was only sorry that her husband had not been killed in the conflict.

She looked at the battlefield and had to fight not to be ill. She had seen death before, much of it violent, but never on this scale. Maybe fifty, maybe a hundred bodies lay in pieces and spreading dark patches on the sand. The man Ynga had laid hands upon would live, she thought; but so many had not.

“What are you doing out here?” Targ demanded, panting and out of breath as he slung his blooded axe across his back. His eyes were angry. She knew to fear that look, but she would not back down from what she knew to be her duty.

“My job, husband;” she retorted indignantly, “just like you. Are you wounded?”

“Nothing serious,” he replied with a dismissive shake of his head, but Y’Anid could see that he was favouring his weapon arm.

“Let me see,” she requested. Obediently, Targ allowed her to remove his epaulet and vambrace. Sure enough, he was bleeding badly. The dark-haired, orange-skinned pirate who had been with the golden-haired one tackled her husband when Corin let his shipmate have it in the ribs with his mace, and the fighting had been fierce and brutal. Y’Anid thought that they might well have been overwhelmed, had Uncle Dorin not joined in driving his foe off, and even so, the pirate was the first person she knew of to survive such an onslaught. She was strangely fascinated by him. Maybe it was those unusual eyes. They almost had a purplish cast to them, like the deep autumn sky.

She sighed and incanted a healing chant. The wound closed some but still seeped blood. Y’Anid bound it up with some of her makeshift bandages. Targ watched her intently, his breathing slowing to a more normal pace now that the battle was done and the pain subsiding.

In the meantime, the prisoners were rounded up, tied if they had not been already, and dumped unceremoniously at her uncle’s feet. Her father stood at his side, arms folded, glaring at them with his one good eye, and Corin was with them as well. He was covered in blood, and Y’Anid was sure that almost none of it was his own. Most of the pirates slumped in defeat, but again, the golden-haired one stood out in that he met their gaze with his extraordinary periwinkle eyes, still blinking sand out of the irritated corneas, and did not flinch. He was smaller than most

of his shipmates, and slight of build. Y'Anid's mother touched her uncle on his upper arm to get his attention, and then said something to him quietly in his ear.

"Did the Bloodaxes send you?" demanded her uncle in a steady, quiet voice. Y'Anid knew that his foes should fear that voice more than any amount of yelling or roaring from the hulking scro.

Most of the pirates remained sullenly silent. Unsurprisingly, it was the blue-eyed one who finally responded. "*Gul, harak'cha*," he said simply, softly.

Targ sneered. "You would give up those you serve so easily, but you speak of a *harak'cha* like you know something about it?" he demanded contemptuously.

Those remarkable blue eyes turned their steady gaze on Targ. "Accept an honourable defeat as well as an honourable victory," he quoted. Y'Anid recognized it as something that her uncle had said when he returned from his imprisonment among the elves. "Recognize an honourable foe and conduct yourself with nobility. So doing, you remain unconquered, even in defeat. I take that to mean that one should be honest and direct. So I choose to be. *Gul*, the Bloodaxes sent us. Do with me as you will."

He spoke no further as Targ looked over at Dorin and made an unmistakable gesture across his own throat with his finger, his lip curled

in a snarl. Y’Anid’s father grunted and said nothing else. Her mother watched all of this with wise blue eyes.

Her uncle nodded once to the house guards. “Kill them,” he decided.

For all of Shaundar’s bravado, the bottom dropped out of his stomach upon hearing the Almighty Leader’s pronouncement. Then a strange calm washed over him. So be it. As the guardsmen raised their axes, he struggled to his feet. If he were to die, it would not be on his knees before any orc! He met Dorin Bloodfist’s eyes and nodded. He wondered where the big scro had received those scars on his face and ear, and whether or not he would recognize Shaundar’s elven corpse. He hoped Yathar had a good head start by now, because he knew they would chase down the *Starshark* when they saw his body.

“Except this one,” Dorin added suddenly.

One of the guardsmen had to pull his swing, but he avoided cleaving into Shaundar, who was soon coated in blood from head to foot as the Blacktusks were cut to pieces all around him. The young scro women looked away, and the older one closed her eyes.

When the screaming had subsided, the silence seemed almost deafening. Shaundar didn’t know what to say. He studied Dorin Bloodfist discerningly. What was going on here?

The Almighty Leader cleared his throat. “Nasty business, executions,” he observed in his characteristic basso rumble. He seemed to be waiting for Shaundar to respond.

“I agree, sir,” Shaundar concurred after a moment’s hesitation. It hurt to breathe, but he tried not to show weakness. That was not the orcish way.

“The *Art of War* is hardly typical reading for a pirate,” the clan leader pressed.

“I was not born a pirate,” Shaundar answered truthfully.

“You have the demeanor of a clan scro,” the one-eyed one, who bore a strong resemblance to Dorin Bloodfist, remarked. Shaundar could see no way to respond properly to this, and something told him that directly lying to this scro would be ill-advised, so he said nothing. He really wasn’t certain what that was supposed to mean, anyway. Had he done something completely out of a mercenary’s character, and given himself away as something he was not? Or was it intended to be some kind of obscure compliment?

“What’s your name, lad?” the clan leader demanded.

Shaundar had an intuition that the name he had given the pirates would be a poor choice. Too easy to trace, perhaps; or maybe he felt that the one-eyed scro would know that he was lying, since “Garrik” was too new and he had no attachment to it. “Bolvi,” he blurted out,

falling back on the name he had chosen originally for his orcish identity amongst the other *N'Velahrn*, the Shadow-Soldiers of the Permafrost Project.

“Bolvi,” the big orc declined his head. “I’m Almighty Leader Dorin Bloodfist.” He thumped his breast. Shaundar, unable to do the same with his bound hands, simply nodded in return.

“Bolvi,” he pressed, “the Den Mother tells me that you could have killed my niece, but you didn’t. Why?”

Ah, that’s it, Shaundar realized. That had been out of character for a pirate, apparently. The Clan Leader wanted the answer to this mystery; and then, probably, he would die. He considered his answer carefully because he wasn’t entirely certain himself. “Part of it was that the Bloodaxes wanted her alive,” he said slowly, “but that wasn’t the only reason and I’m not sure I would have taken her anyway. There are some fates that no one deserves.” Corin Bloodfist, standing to one side of the one-eyed scro to observe him, grimaced at this and bent his head in an almost imperceptible, grim nod, but some of the tension in his shoulders relaxed.

“Go on,” the Bloodfist leader encouraged.

Considering it further, Shaundar added, “My mother was a priestess, *karr*, and I guess I just can’t bring myself to cut down a healer in

the act of healing the wounded. I may be a killer, sir, but I am not a murderer.”

“You’re clanless pirate scum,” the Clan Champion snarled derisively. “You’re less than nothing.”

Shaundar shrugged. “The post of honour is a private station,” he quoted in retort.

Dorin Bloodfist coughed and covered his mouth. Was that a hint of a smile that Shaundar could see lurking around that giant orange hand?

“I think I’m going to give you a chance to prove yourself, Bolvi,” he invited. “Targ, give the boy his swords and one of the house axes.”

The Clan Champion blinked in surprise. “We’d be fools to arm him, my lord,” he protested.

The one-eyed scro laughed aloud. “We’d be fools *not* to!” he chuckled. “Did you see what he and his shipmate did to our pikemen?”

The Almighty Leader stepped closer and looked down at him. “You called me *harak’cha*, lad,” he observed. “I don’t question your honour, but I will ask; do you really understand what that means?”

“I think so, sir,” he responded.

Dorin considered his response, nodded once, and repeated, "His swords, Targ."

Targ snapped a sharp salute and stomped off to find Shaundar's swords.

"I seem to be short a Guard Captain," the Clan Leader pointed out wryly. "You'll serve in his place for a year, since my lack is your doing. If you can stomach the company of clan scro," he smiled, and Shaundar had the feeling that he knew precisely what mercenaries and pirates thought of clan scro, "and if you prove your ability and your loyalty, you can keep the position. Fair enough?"

Shaundar was baffled. "You would trust me enough to make me your Guard Captain, after this?" It seemed a little hard to believe.

The hulking scro replied, "You spared my daughter-in-law's life, Bolvi. For that, I owe you the chance. If you truly understand Dukagsh's teachings, you will be worthy of it." He clapped Shaundar on the shoulder with one of those meaty hands.

"But I would have taken yours!" he burst out in protest; then wondered why he had done so. Why was he arguing against the sparing of his life?

But the Bloodfist chieftain just smiled. "Of course you would have. Untie him." And just like that, Shaundar's hands were free. He shrugged his shoulders to loosen them, and immediately regretted it as

the muscles and tendons pulled on his pulverized ribs. He could not help but wince.

The elder scro woman stepped forward. "Broken ribs leave no scars worth displaying," she reasoned. "Let me heal you, young warrior."

Shaundar nodded his acceptance, and she pressed her hand with its lengthy claws against his smashed ribcage and uttered a guttural chant. He felt things start to knit themselves neatly back into place and sighed in relief. "*Nor lakaar, karra,*" he smiled gratefully. Her returning smile seemed both surprised and pleased.

Targ returned with his short swords, though both of them were slick with blood, and one of the soldier's axes. He gave them over to Shaundar with the same kind of expression one reserves for touching particularly loathsome insects. This did not bother Shaundar one whit; he had been the recipient of such expressions at numerous points in his life and under several different circumstances. He took the weapons with a grunt of "*nor drakaar,*" and he set about the difficult process of cleaning them with what he had on hand. Shaundar's father had taught him that you never returned a soiled blade to its sheath, and Yathar's father, one of his instructors at the Academy back home, had drilled it into him with military discipline and once, a quite thorough beating with a leather strap on the rear end in front of the whole class. He was meticulous about his weapons care.

Again, Dorin observed him closely at this and Shaundar's actions seemed to win his approval. "We have oils inside for that," he was told. "Come into the house."

"Not until you cleanse yourselves," insisted the elder scro woman who had healed him; and Shaundar winced, expecting someone to backhand her in the face and swell the skin around those amazing eyes that had been inherited by the younger woman he had spared.

The expected blow never came. "As you wish, Den Mother," acquiesced the Clan Leader. They were taken back down the beach, past several of the rice paddies they had run through, which Shaundar could now see were fed by an immense river, and into the water. It was not nearly as cold as he had been anticipating.

The women began to pour water over their heads with bowls while they chanted something guttural that Shaundar couldn't quite make out. He stood near Corin Bloodfist and the Clan Champion as the younger scro women poured water over all three of them; first one, then the other, then the third. He realized that he stood only about six inches taller than she did when they were eye-to-eye. The red on their bodies washed into the sea, leaving an inky stain in the blue water. There was a lot of it.

The green-skinned orc cleared his throat. "I want to thank you," he said to Shaundar roughly. "Thank you for sparing my wife." The healer woman with the bowl smiled.

Shaundar cast an awkward smile back at him. “So this is Ynga, and not Y’Anid then?” he asked curiously.

“How would you know that?” Corin Bloodfist demanded warily. His eyes were as fierce as his father’s.

Not seeing any reason to lie, he told him, “The Bloodaxes showed us a portrait of the Den Mother and told us that her daughter Ynga had just married you, actually. They wanted her alive and they wanted you dead. But they explained that she also had a twin sister so we were to grab them both.”

Corin swore vigorously. “I’ll kill every last one of the murderous bastards!” he promised.

Ynga sniffed. “I can’t take the war out of you if you keep making threats like that during the Cleansing.” Corin looked chagrined and ducked his head. Ynga emptied the bowl over it gently and his black hair stuck to his face.

Dorin shook his head. “We shouldn’t have executed your shipmates, Bolvi,” he said with regret. “We might have been able to demand a Grand Council if there had been anybody to substantiate your statement. If you were willing to testify, that is.”

The one-eyed scro snorted. “It would make no difference while Narok is Overlord, *na’kor*,” he disagreed. “He is a Bloodaxe, after all.” Shaundar did not miss the reference. This was Dorin’s blood brother.

“Besides,” Targ added with derision, “who would believe the word of a pirate over a noble?” Shaundar could not disagree. He had a point.

The Den Mother dumped water over Targ’s head quickly enough for him to spit and sputter, and it seemed to Shaundar that this might have been intentional. But Dorin Bloodfist sighed. “I would like to think that the clans would not allow themselves to be so bullied or manipulated,” he confessed, “but perhaps you’re right.” He bent down so that the Den Mother could reach the crown of his skull with the contents of her bowl.

The one-eyed orc shook his head, his salt-and-pepper braids whipping back and forth and splashing water about. “Everyone’s terrified of Narok Bloodaxe. You know what they say about him.”

The gathering fell silent. Feeling there might be some valuable information for the Navy in the answer, Shaundar dared to ask, “Forgive me, my lords, but I don’t. What *do* they say about him?”

They all stared at him as if he had grown a second head; which is pretty much what Shaundar expected. “They say he’s the son of the War Maker, lad,” the one-eyed scro told him.

“There’s no need to tell the lad stories, Olaf,” Dorin sighed.

Olaf shrugged indifferently. “I wasn’t saying I believed it, Dorin. I was just saying that this is what people say.”

The War Maker was a title of Ilneval, orcish god of war, Shaundar recalled from his training. That was interesting, for a couple of reasons. The first was that it was widely believed that the worship of most other orcish gods was limited at best among the scro, and that Dukagsh had supplanted them all. Evidently this was not the case. The second was that it would explain why the obviously divided scro seemed so loyal to their Overlord. “So you don’t believe it then, Lord Olaf?” Shaundar inquired.

Olaf barked laughter. “First off, lad, I’m a Warpriest. You call me ‘Father Olaf’ when we’re being formal.” He made a toothy grimace through some large tusks that came up just past the edge of his ring-pierced nose. “‘Elder’ is also proper, though I don’t think I warrant that yet, and ‘Wise One’ if you’re being really formal, though again . . .”

“I think you’re wise, *durkarr*,” Ynga smiled. Shaundar wasn’t entirely certain, but there seemed to be a different inflection to the word for “father” than Olaf had employed. Was she addressing him by title, or was this the orc who had sired her?

Olaf wrinkled up his nose but smiled at her indulgently, which made Shaundar lean to the latter option. “Be that as it may,” he continued, “it’s important that you know these things. Haven’t you ever been around Warpriests?”

Shaundar shuffled his feet. “Pirates and mercenaries try to avoid Warpriests, *karr*. And the *Starshark* is powered by lifejammer.”

The Warpriest frowned and slapped his *na'kor* in the shoulder. "You see, Dorin? Good riddance, I say."

Dorin shook his head now. "We believe that lifejammers should only be used as a last resort, lad, when all the Warpriests or shamans are dead."

This surprised Shaundar. It sounded more apt to the being he had thought Dorin Bloodfist to be upon their first meeting; before Raven Talon. He tested the waters carefully. "The Captain kept a supply of kobold and goblin slaves to feed to the thing," he elaborated, "and once, a captured ship of humans."

Dorin and his *na'kor* bared their tusks in unmistakable challenge, and Corin swore under his breath. The clan leader grumbled and rubbed his clean-shaven chin. "I suppose that's a pretty common practice," he acquiesced, "but we Bloodfists don't approve. Don't ever do that under our command, Captain Bolvi."

He smiled, both a little surprised to hear himself addressed as "Captain," and relieved to hear the Almighty Leader's opinion of lifejammers. "I am glad to hear it, sir. That is an order I won't have any trouble obeying."

Now Dorin thumped Olaf on the shoulder. "You see?" he pointed out with a beaming smile, his tusks gleaming in the sun.

Olaf nodded. “I wasn’t arguing with you, *na’kor*. The lad’s a good fit for us.”

“I do have one question though,” Shaundar added, testing again. “What happens if we do lose all the Warpriests and shamans or the main helm goes down?”

“We draw lots,” Targ informed him, as if the answer were perfectly obvious.

“You are free of the taint of Ilneval’s duty,” the Den Mother intoned with the formality of ceremony. “You may return to your wives and your children, great warriors.”

The males touched the fists of their hands – the ones that would not have held weapons Shaundar noted – to their foreheads in a ritual gesture of . . . what, exactly? Reverence? Respect? Acquiescence? Shaundar hurriedly followed suit. He chose his left hand because he was primarily right-handed. One by one they thanked her by formal title. Then, to Shaundar’s surprise, Corin clapped him on the shoulder and invited, “Why don’t you let me show you around the estate, Captain Bolvi? You’ll need to know the layout and the guard schedule.”

“Sounds good,” Shaundar grunted; and Y’Anid smiled at him with those bright blue eyes twinkling as they headed back up the beach, but looked away again quickly.

Shaundar shook his head in disbelief. He found it impossible to reconcile the compassion he had seen here with the horrors of Raven Talon. Were the scro really so different towards their own people? Or, more chilling, considering all the orcish blood on his hands, had he misjudged them?

He realized as they headed through the great black doors of the compound that the Warpriest had never answered his question about whether he believed the tales of the Overlord's divine origins.

Chapter Nine

The remnants of the Scro Fleet pulled out of spelljamming speeds just outside of the Grinder, as near to the asteroid called Ceres as Shaundar could have hoped. “Assume attack formation,” he commanded. The flags went up and the flotilla configured itself into the Flying V or “Stargull” pattern. “Direct the fleet to follow us in,” he ordered. He slowed to half-tactical, panting like a worg as the helm resisted him. But to careen full-tilt into the Grinder was tantamount to suicide. “Tell the fleet to correct course as necessary,” he gasped out. To punctuate his order, a rock that was about the size and shape of an arrowhead pierced the mizzen topsail. He ignored it.

It was a full bell later that he sensed Ceres ahead of him; a large kidney-shaped rock rolling through space. The lookout called it at almost exactly the same time.

“Pitch down forty-five and dive for the asteroid surface,” he directed his fleet. The bow of the *Sword of Courage* tipped down and they streaked for the surface like hunting hawks. When he smelled fresh air, Shaundar barked at Ghost to hold the stellar compass steady and he watched the needle swing to orient itself North like a traditional compass, now that they were planet-bound. When it did, he directed, “Correct course north by nor’west.” Obediently the sail crew tacked larboard and

they buzzed the mossy surface of the planetoid, heading for the depression at the center.

Shaundar knew that the Sindiath compound wasn't that far in. But he had never been there himself – he'd only heard about it from Madrimlian – and he couldn't remember exactly where. He knew it was nestled in a valley where it was almost invisible until you flew right over it, and he thought he remembered the approximate co-ordinates . . .

“Elf base sighted, sir!” called down the lookout. “Just where you said it would be!”

Shaundar looked down, his eyes watering from pain because he'd stopped taking poppy blood a few hours ago so his head would be clear, and he saw that instead of the single Navy Man-o-War stationed at the base, there were now three.

“Ground those ships,” he commanded his flotilla.

The flotilla charged into the fray at full sail, targeting all fire on the grounded Men-o-War. As the temperature began to rise due to atmospheric friction, cannon shot, catapult stones and ballista bolts pounded into the landed ships. “Marines away!” Shaundar bellowed, and from each of the fifteen surviving vessels of the Borka Retribution Fleet, a lifeboat was released. Just before they pulled up, Shaundar caught just a glimpse of Rathgar starting up a rousing war chant among his men, beating the haft of his axe rhythmically against the side of the small

depowered craft. “Rising at max tactical!” he cried, and the heat rose with them as they once again pushed against Ceres’ air envelope. Forces mounted as they fought its gravity.

Just as Shaundar suspected, when they returned to space the lookout cried, “Elven flotilla on an intercept course! Bearing eight points off the starboard bow, forty-five up!”

Shaundar extended his senses and saw them; little specks in the Void, but getting closer. “Good eye!” he acknowledged. “Form up into Compass Cross now!”

The flotilla manoeuvred itself into a basic cross shape and waited for their foes to get within firing range.

As Shaundar slowed and then held position, the lifejammer objected strenuously to his stillness, and sent bolts of agonizing electric pain through his synapses. For the first time he screamed. Images of Y’Anid and Ynga flashed before his eyes, and he genuinely wondered if he would live to see them again.

There was much in the Bloodfist household to surprise Shaundar. The first was the artwork. Orcs seemed dull and brutish to elves, and even the scro were regarded as intelligent only in the arena of warfare. Shaundar rather thought, after a few days among the clan scro, as opposed to the rough soldiers and mercenaries he had mostly

associated with as *N'Velahrn*, that they were being underestimated. The statuary in the foyer was downright impressive, and then there was the Great Hall. It was lined with portraits of the previous Almighty Leaders and Clan Champions. Obviously halls like this one had been the source of the portraits in the Permafrost base, giving the Black Arrows ideas about what scro actually looked like. Dorin, he noted, was portrayed twice. The first image of him in the guise of Clan Champion was pretty much how Shaundar remembered him from Selune. The second was of him in his present role of Almighty Leader, and Shaundar saw that those scars that ruined the side of his face were visible in that image. The injury that caused them must have occurred, then, before he became the Clan Chief; which, according to the brass plate beneath the frame, was about three years ago.

There was a section of the complex designated as the Warrior's Quarters, most of which was a barracks, but the Guard Captain had a small room all to himself, right next door. It was a surreal experience to remove the previous inhabitant's belongings, and stranger still was the process of giving them to his young wife, who took them with gratitude and sadness, and did not seem to bear him a grudge for killing her husband. Shaundar knew that any elf maid would have tried to tear out his throat with her teeth were no other weapon available, and her acceptance unnerved him.

Indeed, how the entire household accepted his presence was bizarre in his perspective. The guards deferred to him and seemed to trust in his decisions. They displayed the typical mishmash of species that

seemed to define the goblinoid forces, all classified according to a firm hierarchy. The common scro ranked above everyone else except for the actual clan nobles; so designated, he learned, by their use of “Bloodfist” as a surname, as opposed to his second’s moniker, which was “Gurtok of Clan Bloodfist” in formal settings. Beneath them were the common orcs, then the bugbears and the ogres, and the goblins and the kobolds held the bottom rung, who were assigned to such tasks as scrubbing pots and flagstones and doing the laundry. There were no gnolls in the household, he noted. He had dealt with more than a few of them on other missions because they were often employed as mercenaries, but he loathed the creatures because they were so bestial and loutish. When he remarked on their absence, he was informed by Gurtok that this was the very reason that there were none employed by the Bloodfist Clan.

What boggled Shaundar’s mind was that this hierarchy, though firm, was not enforced by violence, and no one seemed to mind it. The servants all appeared to be fairly happy with their lot in life. Even the kobolds and the goblins went amicably about their work. Shaundar saw a little goblin female putting towels away in a closet and singing cheerily to herself; something about flowers in the moonlight, it sounded like, from Shaundar’s limited command of the goblin tongue. He had never seen such a thing before and it struck him that the creatures were downright cute when they were happy.

With private quarters, Shaundar had no trouble finding time and space to renew his modified spell daily, and he was even able to manage some reverie rather than sleep; although this was always fitful. That left

him several hours at night in which he was free to do as he pleased and there was very little company. He had a thousand questions he didn't dare ask for fear of revealing himself, but he overheard Dorin mention something about a library. He took to wandering the corridors of the complex to familiarize himself, but he didn't find the library until the third night because it was on the opposite side of the entrance than all of the men's quarters. He had yet to dare sneaking into the women's section to see what was there because he was still new, and likely still being watched by someone. He thought that Targ might be observing him with an eye to treachery, and Shaundar didn't blame him, all things considered.

To Shaundar's eyes, the library looked almost exactly like its equivalent in the Sunfall manor on Evermeet, which again displayed more intellectualism and culture than scro were typically credited with. It was similarly endowed with comfortable overstuffed chairs, though it also housed a table with some high-backed seats and a couple of work-desks stocked with quills and inkwells. Shaundar had not spent much time at his family estate on Evermeet, but when he was there, a lot of it had been spent in the library or the gardens, curled up with Narissa while she studied, running his fingers gently through her flaxen hair and pretending to do likewise. The memory made him wince and he almost left the room. He missed her with such a visceral ache that he could only hold himself up by means of leaning on the doorframe. He had probably never felt more alone in his life, not even on Spiral because at least Yathar and Sylria were with him; though of course for their sake he wished they had

not been. He yearned desperately for a way to contact the Navy and let them know what had happened.

But that was why he was here – to learn the things he did not dare to ask, one of which was why that contact was prevented in this sphere. So resolved, he made his way in.

There was sufficient light from the bright glowing orb of Luthic hovering through the window that he did not require a candle to see; which was good, since orcs would not have, either. He wandered through the room surveying the available tomes. The first thing he noticed was an entire section of titles written in Espruar. Closer examination revealed that these were, indeed, elven books! They had some of the history textbooks Shaundar had studied in school, storybooks of some of their myths, natural history analyses of Wildspace; even, he noted with amazement, the Imperial Elven Navy Field Manual and the *Hinue ath tel’Kerym*. No titles appeared on the bindings of the books next to them. Flipping through one, Shaundar was disturbed to discover an elven captain’s log book. Closer examination revealed that they owned nearly two dozen of these. Shaundar’s father and Madrimlian collected orcish ship logs in order to study their tactics and logistics. It would seem that Dorin Bloodfist utilized the same practice.

The Orcish books were divided into categories: history, clan history, philosophy, sociology, law, natural history, and navigation, to name but a few. He started with the history books, feeling this would

reveal much about the scro mindset, which he could then take back to his superiors.

What he discovered in the first couple of nights of this was extremely helpful. The Navy knew that the scro acknowledged twenty-four tribes, but their understanding was incorrect on a few key points. Intelligence believed that all scro belonged to these clans, but that wasn't exactly accurate: all scro gave allegiance to one of the tribes, but there was a noble family for each of them that supposedly descended from one of Dukagsh's twenty-four commanders who had originally led the scro in the flight from the Elven Navy. Except that wasn't accurate either. There were eight of the original Twenty-Four Tribes left; the others had all died out and been replaced or had been taken over by a rival clan. Shaundar was interested to note that the Bloodfists were one of the original clans, and so were the Bloodaxes, and they had a rivalry that went back for generations. The historian cited a personal disagreement between Urgoth Bloodaxe and Karnak Bloodfist about whether or not Dukagsh had intended for his code, which specified treating your underlings with respect, was intended to apply to those who were not scro, and they had come to blows over this issue. That was a little less than three hundred years ago.

Shaundar had seen this philosophy in action with more than just the female goblin. It was standard procedure for Shaundar to stand guard duty at dinner just in case trouble broke out while the noble family was eating, and he would eat his evening meal with his lieutenants afterwards, struggling to acclimatize to a whole new level of spice and

peppers. One evening a couple of weeks into his service as he was observing this duty, a kobold came into the banquet hall. Shaundar cleared his throat. “My lords,” he announced, “I believe one of your servants wishes to speak with you.”

Dorin looked up from his meal and grunted an acknowledgement.

“*Zabu’karr*,” murmured the kobold politely, “our eggs are hatching and I was wondering . . .”

“Oh!” the big scro exclaimed, “you’ll need the day off tomorrow, of course!”

The kobold smiled broadly. “I was hoping, my lord.”

Dorin waved dismissively. “Yes, of course, go, go! I’ll talk to Greel and ask him to fill in for you. Get going, your mate needs you! Congratulations, Virik!”

Corin also called out his congratulations, as did Olaf and most of the ladies of the house, though Targ ignored him. Virik beamed, bowed repeatedly, and departed the way he had come.

Lord Bloodfist turned to Gurtok and said, “Roll a keg of *raug* out of the cellar and bring it down to the kobolds so they can celebrate properly.”

“As you wish, my lord,” Gurtok replied with a salute, and left to do as directed.

“Bolvi!” he called to Shaundar. “Come have a drink with us to celebrate Virik’s clutch!”

“But I’m on duty, my lord,” Shaundar protested.

“Aw, one ale won’t hurt you,” Corin argued. He poured him a frothing purplish liquid from an ewer and handed him the bubbling tankard.

“To Virik and Twila and their new clutch!” Dorin toasted, and everyone drank. Shaundar swallowed quickly and tried to blink through his watering eyes. He wiped his nose irritably as it spilled salt water all over his face and hoped that nobody noticed.

“Good stuff!” Dorin declared, and Shaundar was gratified that he sounded like he was being choked while he spat that statement through his tusks. Then he cleared his throat and added, “That’ll put some hair on your chest, eh Bolvi?”

Shaundar, who still found orcish body hair to be, at best, a necessary evil, said nothing, but he did manage a nod.

How the Twenty-four Tribes worked was not the only aspect of scro clans that the Navy did not fully understand. The lineage of a tribe was traced through its females. In order to become a part of the clan, a

male had to wed one of its women, or be born to one, and if a son of the clan married a female from another tribe, he became part of her tribe. He gathered this from the way in which things were written rather than a direct statement, which meant that this was considered to be self-evident. So were the scro as patriarchal as the elves believed?

A few days into Shaundar's studies, Dorin called him into the Great Hall.

"How are you fitting in, Bolvi?" the Clan Lord asked as he meandered down the corridor with his hands behind his back, gazing up at the portraits.

"Better than I expected, my lord," confessed Shaundar.

"I understand you're having some trouble sleeping," Dorin pressed, but gently. "Do you like to read?"

Ah, yes. That confirmed his suspicions. "I've always slept lightly, my lord," he admitted. "And *gul karr*, I *do* like to read. I feel that my education is sorely lacking and I'm looking to improve it."

Dorin turned and met his eyes. Whatever he saw there made him smile. "I think more scro should spend more time improving their education, Bolvi, and far be it from me to stand in your way should you wish to do that. I'll schedule you two hours following our evening meal for that purpose. Use it well." He clapped him on the shoulder and left him to the portraits.

Stunned once again, Shaundar called, “*Nor lakaar, Zabú’karr!*” down the hall after a few moments. Dorin answered with a deep, appreciative basso chuckle.

He eagerly availed himself of the opportunity following supper. If he were able to do research openly, so much the better, and this would free him up at night to do other things if need be.

That evening he discovered that Dukagsh had penned not the two volumes the Navy was familiar with, but nine. *A Scro Manifesto* and the *Art of War* were the first and last respectively. Eager to fill in the gap he slumped in one of the overstuffed chairs by the window. This was open to let in some evening air but screened to protect against the many large, stinging insects which required the burning of incense pots in every room to keep them at bay. He was so engrossed in his reading that he just about jumped out of his skin when a feminine throat cleared itself. Its owner turned out to be Y’Anid Bloodfist. He knew it was her and not her sister because Y’Anid’s bosom was larger (he couldn’t help but notice); perhaps because she was with child; or so he had overheard.

Y’Anid smiled at him. In the sunset and the candlelight she looked like a shapely statue carved of jade, except for the long mahogany braids down her back, those astounding sapphire eyes, and the little ivory tusks that poked stubbornly from her bottom lip. “I heard a rumour that there was a scro warrior who willingly went to the library,” she began, “who was not my sister’s husband, my father or father-in- law.” Her smile

widened. “I did not believe it, so I came to see it for myself. And here you are.”

He had no idea what to say to that. What was she after? “I’ve always enjoyed reading, *karra*,” he responded; which was true. “And I never have enough time for it. The lord’s gift of time is quite welcome.”

“May I sit?” she asked, indicating another chair next to the one that Shaundar occupied.

“Of course, *karra*,” he rumbled respectfully, and she sat. She moved with a fluid grace that suggested hidden power, like a cat. She studied him then, not suspiciously, but with an intensity that could be almost as dangerous because it was the same sort of focus he was beginning to associate with her father, the one-eyed Warpriest Olaf. She was trying to read him as though he were the book in his lap.

Shaundar thought he might try the direct approach. “May I ask what you’re looking for, my lady?”

This deflected her gaze quite nicely as she seemed to realize she was staring and looked away. “Nothing really, Captain Bolvi. But you’re a bit of a mystery and I’m trying to understand it. How does such a well-mannered, scholarly and cultured scro end up traipsing the wilds of space with a bunch of pirates?”

How indeed? The laugh that burst unbidden from his throat was pregnant with surprising bitterness. “War,” he answered. What could be more honest than that?

Her eyes darkened. “Ah, I see,” she nodded. What exactly she saw Shaundar could not tell. She rose and made as if to leave.

Though this was what Shaundar had wanted, he found himself reluctant to let her go in this way. “I did not mean to be rude, *karra*,” he apologized. “I was simply speaking plainly.”

Those eyes met his discerningly; then she sat back down. “Forgive me, *Karr’tar*,” she declined her head, contrite. “I thought you were telling me that it was none of my business, since war is not a woman’s concern.”

“War is everyone’s concern,” he blurted before he considered the consequences of admitting that view.

A smile materialized on the lady’s face like a sudden burst of golden sunlight. Shaundar was stricken by the amazing beauty of it. “I am delighted that you feel that way, Captain. I believe that war affects everyone and we should all aid our people where and how we can.”

“I would not disagree.”

The lady fell silent then, and deftly changed the subject. “My uncle and my father are very fond of Dukagsh’s works,” she disclosed,

indicating the book in his hands, “as is Corin; but they prefer the later works to the earlier ones.”

“I’ve only had opportunity to read two of them myself,” he revealed, seeing a chance to learn more about scro culture in its literary interpretations. “I much prefer the last to the first. There’s great wisdom in the *Tethka Tarrak*.”

“The *Art of War*?” Y’Anid echoed. “Yes, my father and my uncle the Clan Lord live by its code and debate its teachings at length. Do you like to do the same?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t had much opportunity. *A Scro Manifesto* is much more popular in the circles I’ve travelled with.”

“That’s a very angry book,” Y’Anid opined. “My uncle says that he believes it was a necessary step for our people but that far too many of us limit ourselves to its statements.” She sighed. “My husband prefers it as well.”

“I would not presume to judge, *karra*,” he responded in a neutral tone. Dangerous ground, here. It was essential his true loyalties remain undiscovered. Evaluating her intent expression he understood that this did not satisfy her, so he elaborated with great care. “I am not a clan scro. I can’t really fathom what it is that caused this war. It seems to me that the insult was so long ago that it should hardly matter.”

She smiled a little more, perhaps with a hint of sadness in it. “I agree. But you don’t understand scro warrior clan honour.”

He shrugged again. “I didn’t claim to.”

She sat back and observed him carefully. “No, you didn’t, did you? And again, that’s a mystery. You say little and see much, I think. I find that foot soldiers often do just the opposite.” Her mouth twitched a little with the jest.

Shaundar returned her smile, amused by her clever turn of phrase. “But in this, I disagree with you, *karra*,” he riposted. “It really depends on what you’re trying to notice.”

The Bloodfist lady blushed, and a furrow creased her brow. “Are you flirting with me, Captain Bolvi?”

He blinked. Dear gods, was he? “That would be highly improper, my lady,” he answered; for more reasons than she knew!

The scro noblewoman said nothing for a long moment. Then her eyes took on a haunted expression and her mouth pressed into a line broken only by those almost delicate tusks. “Yes, it would,” she agreed. “I withdraw the question.” She stood up, and by reflex Shaundar did the same, the way that one acknowledged an *etriel* when she departed one’s company. “It has been a pleasure speaking with you, Captain.” Though her manner was abrupt, her words were warm and genuine. Had he

offended her? Had he overstepped his bounds somehow? He couldn't tell.

"The honour is mine," he replied with sincerity. His instinct was to bow, but instead he touched his left fist to his forehead in that gesture of reverence or respect given to the priestesses after the battle, during the ceremonial cleansing.

She declined her head and swept from the room, her skirt billowing around and behind her like a ship's wake. Shaundar watched her go, enthralled by her feline gait.

He shook his head to clear it. Yes, it had clearly been far too long since he had enjoyed female company. He needed to get out of here and back to Permafrost so that he could hook up with Targa, perhaps. He just wished that Y'Anid Bloodfist did not remind him so much of Narissa and Sylria.

Y'Anid left the library smiling. She liked the new Guard Captain a great deal, pirate or no pirate. He seemed almost shy; unusual in a blooded warrior. And he was obviously exceptionally intelligent! She wondered if he had been teased as a child for this particular combination, which would not have been understood by many of her people. Of course, his small stature wouldn't have helped him either. Her face fell. Targ would be offended by him, she was certain. Perhaps that was why he gave off the impression that he was working to maintain his distance.

“Are you all right, Matey?” demanded Thorgir from topsides.

“Just hold position!” Shaundar growled, breathing into the pain. Sweat rolled off of his nose as he seethed around his tusks. “Tell me as soon as you know how many!”

The answer came a minute later. “There’s only six, sir!” the lookout announced.

Shaundar sighed in relief. They could handle six Men-o-War with their numbers, even in their weakened state. Now all that remained was to see if the gnomes, the humans or the dwarves would come to the elves’ defense.

“We outnumber them and their ground support is disabled,” Shaundar observed. “Yeoman, demand their surrender.”

“Matey!” cried the lookout, “three o’clock; there’s a quad of corvettes coming in!”

Shaundar looked out in that direction and saw four Squidships. He groaned. With all the damage they had taken and were unable to repair on route, this was going to be a closer battle than he might have hoped. “Waraxe formation!” he gasped as tried to focus through the pain. “Wheel twenty starboard; roll forty-five!” The small fleet split into an H-shape with bowed sides and turned to face off against both

incoming flotillas at once. The *Sword of Courage* held the axis, while the other lead ships took the corners of the axe-blades.

The elves arrived first. The *Starkiller* engaged the lead Man-o-War with one of the other Manti flying up to serve as a wingman. They got lucky. Their first volley killed the Man-o-War's primary accelerator and the elven ship's return fire didn't do more than scratch them up a bit.

"Open fire on the second Man-o-War!" Shaundar called out; and Thorgir bawled, "Target second Man-o-War; *fire!*" The artillery crew let loose and Shaundar's stomach turned over as their ship's sense of the recoil battered his already overtaxed pain sensors. Thankfully their enemy returned fire on someone else in the fleet.

Two Men-o-War careened above and below the *Sword of Courage* in a strafing run. "Hit the deck!" cried Shaundar; and the crew dove for cover as their battered ship was hit with accelerator and ballista fire on both gravity axis. Someone screamed and he hoped it wasn't Rathgar. "Return fire!" Shaundar bellowed in command to his ship after the Men-o-War had passed over them.

Thorgir cried out the command along with some encouragement; "Look alive there, lad! Do you want to live forever?" And the artillery released their various projectiles into the enemy craft. Two cannons and a ballista scored direct hits. The Manti flanking their ship at the center of the labrys also fired and by whatever circumstances, found the one that the *Sword* had not fired upon. Pieces of starfly leaf

broke off and scattered into the Void. Shaundar was pleased to see that his ships in the “blades” formed up as the elven vessels started to emerge from the gauntlet they’d chosen, and both cocky pilots took more damage to their elegant boats before they cleared it.

“The second flotilla is upon us, sir!” Thorgir roared, and Shaundar opened his mouth to tell them to fire, but he held his breath as he saw the Squidships pass right by them all, ignoring the battle entirely. It surprised a laugh out of him. The humans simply didn’t give a damn about their war one way or the other, it seemed. Well, that changed things a bit, didn’t it?

Was it possible they would make it after all? “Yeoman, demand their surrender again, now that they know that they’re alone out here!”

“*Gul, karr!*” the Yeoman affirmed; and a few moments later, after the appropriate flags had gone up in the Imperial Elven Navy’s own semaphore, one by one the elven ships struck their colours.

A few days after he was established as the Captain of the Guard in the Bloodfist household, Gurtok approached Shaundar. “Captain,” he began, “some of us are getting together and throwing the bones over some ales tonight. I don’t know if you’d be interested, but you’d be welcome, sir.”

Shaundar was pleasantly surprised, and seeing an opportunity to really put his fingers of the pulse of a scro household, he replied, again quite honestly, “My father told me never to gamble with my men.” Gurtok’s face fell, but he went on. “Either way it puts you in an awkward position. If you win, it makes your men beholden to you, and if you lose, you’re beholden to them. I’ll drink with you while you gamble, though.” Gurtok’s smile returned and he saluted smartly with the extended fist.

Shaundar entered into the barracks to find a now-familiar sight that he recognized from Permafrost. The house guard at liberty sprawled over their bunks, conglomerated around a card table where a good game of what might have been High Paladin was underway, or clustered in a circle on the floor where the bones were being tossed. One was drumming quietly on an hourglass-shaped hand drum that was large enough to meet the level of his lap when he sat on his lower bunk, and another was playing along on a strange bone flute that superficially resembled a recorder, but its mouthpiece was a fat double reed rather than a blow-hole. It made either warm and friendly, or bittersweet, music that reminded Shaundar of summer nights. He rather liked it.

Upon his appearance, the flute-player stopped and called out, “*Karr’tar* on deck!” Everyone stood up at attention and saluted sharply. Shaundar envied their military discipline.

“As you were, men,” Shaundar nodded approvingly and they returned to their various leisure activities.

“Cap’n’s here to drink with us tonight,” Gurtok announced, and there was a chorus of cheers. Not long after that a keg of not-bad pepper ale made an appearance. It was reddish as opposed to purple and much less spicy. Shaundar actually found it rather pleasant.

“Throw the bones with us, sir?” one of the gamblers asked him.

“The *Karr’tarr* doesn’t gamble with his men,” Gurtok explained. “Says it puts them in an awkward position.”

“What’s this instrument that you’re playing?” he inquired of the musician, not wanting them to think that he wasn’t interested in their activities.

“You’ve never seen a *nardek* before, sir?” the musician queried with a slight frown. The word “*dek*,” he recalled from language classes, meant “bone.”

Shaundar shrugged uncomfortably. “I’m a common scro,” he tried by way of excuse. “I’ve spent most of my time with pirates and mercenaries and I’ve never been to the homeworld before a couple of weeks ago.”

He assumed this would produce questioning glances and secret disrespect. Certainly it would have among his own people, who expected nobles to be the only proper officers without great heroism or competence, and sometimes commoners were not accepted in command

positions even then. Instead, a raucous cry of approval rose up from the gathering, and Gurtok crowed, “See? I told you lads he was one of us!”

“I’d be happy to show you, sir,” the flute-player offered. He introduced himself as Rathgar, and began to demonstrate the instrument and explain the fingering, which was not much different from a penny whistle and followed a fairly recognizable standard musical scale. Shaundar tried it but simply couldn’t make the reeds vibrate properly. The instrument kept making odd squeaking sounds that were obnoxiously loud. In response to one particularly unpleasant noise that sounded like a strangled cat he couldn’t help but laugh aloud at his own incompetence, and the men laughed with him and started coming up to speak with him in small groups after that, somehow endeared by his self-depreciation.

Conversation for the house guards seemed typical of every other soldier Shaundar had ever known; mostly, who was an ass, who could beat whom in a fight, what they were going to do when they got their pay, and the lovers they would bed or were bedding. He learned that Corin was well-liked and Targ much feared. He also learned that almost everyone had a favourable impression of their clan leader; though they feared his wrath, they feared his disapproval more. It occurred to Shaundar that his father would approve of this; indeed, he believed his father tried to cultivate the same attitude through his own command.

He was struck again by the discrepancy between this household and Raven Talon. The rival Bloodaxe tribe had been in command there; was it simply a difference in attitude between the two clans? Or was it

that elves were so despised by the scro that any treatment of them was acceptable? He resolved that when he felt he could dare such a question, he would ask Dorin about it.

Y'Anid did not resist when Targ climbed on top of her that night and sated his lust. Her mind went wandering as it did every time the Clan Champion exercised his husband's rights since he took her maidenhead on the night of their wedding without so much as a fare-thee-well. She tried not to wince as his enormous paws groped artlessly at her swollen, aching breasts, but she was not entirely successful. Targ noticed, and his mouth widened in a smirk as he began to pinch and scratch at her nipples with his claws. Y'Anid swallowed back her rage and composed her face in mask of neutrality until at last her nipples went numb. He curled his lip in disappointment and pinned her shoulders to the mattress instead so that he could thrust into her as hard and as deep as he wanted without her interference. The first thrust felt like a kick in the guts, but Y'Anid had learned how to shut this pain out months ago, and she lay rigid like a dead thing until at last he shuddered and spilled his seed into her with a grunt.

For a split second as he collapsed on top of her, yanking on her braids with the weight of his immense arms, Y'Anid contemplated forming her hand into a claw and driving her lacquered priestess nails into the Clan Champion's exposed throat. Perhaps she would grab his windpipe and *pull*. As she felt his manhood begin to wither inside her,

she also considered the tale of Katya Darkstar, who had slowly developed a resistance to blacksnake venom and then poisoned her mercenary kidnapper by stuffing a tuft of cotton soaked with the stuff into her woman-parts. Katya had also, according to the story, ripped her rapist's family jewels from his body and tossed them at his pirate band's feet before the poison killed her as well. But she died with a smile on her face, and the pirates had born her on a bier back to her clan and she was burnt with her father's ship like an honoured warrior.

Targ interrupted her vision by slapping her across the face, hard enough to drive her head back into the pillows. "Frigid bitch," he spat. Then he got up and went to the head.

Y'Anid sat up and quickly took the opportunity to wipe herself clean and heal all the wounds. Then she slipped on a loose shift. She used to sleep naked in the summer but she had learned that nakedness or marks seemed to fuel Targ's lust and he would take her again. She noticed that the shift was a little tight at the bust line and resolved to let it out a little or make another one soon.

By the time Targ returned she was composed, and had managed to fold herself under the light linen covering and curl in such a way that she hoped that Targ would think her asleep. She need not have bothered. Targ just flopped his reeking, sweaty carcass onto the bed; then he rolled over and turned down the wick on the lamp. It wasn't long before he was safely snoring. She had trained herself to wake up as soon as that snoring faltered, because it meant that he might be conscious

soon and Y'Anid should get up and get the morning meal started before he asked her why she was still in bed. Then she wouldn't have to make morning chitchat either.

She tried to go to sleep right away, but she was still angry and afraid. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. She wanted to scream until her throat was hoarse. Instead she lay in silence. Even Ynga didn't know the true depths of her loneliness and pain, because she would not have been able to hold her tongue. Y'Anid knew that someday Targ would go too far and war would be inevitable. But the Mother willing, she would have many daughters to carry on the clan before that happened. She was only sorry that her babies would have to claim Targ as their father, and she wished with all her might that it could be different.

Bitter envy poisoned Y'Anid's thoughts of her sister for the first time. Why had Corin not chosen her instead? And then she hated herself for it; because of course that meant that Ynga would be lying here now at Targ's side instead. She knew she didn't want that.

She also knew that the new Guard Captain was watching her with a discerning eye, and she wondered what the mercenary thought of all of this. She imagined that for him it must be what was expected. And yet, the way he had spoken of the Bloodaxe intentions for them suggested that it wasn't. As a matter of fact, she sensed genuine anger.

When she realized that Targ was snoring she disentangled herself from the covers and made her way into the library. She supposed that she was half-hoping that either Ynga or Captain Bolvi would be there; but neither one was. She selected the script of the opera *Katya* – and sat with it open in front of her but not really reading the pages. Y’Anid loved this story because at least Katya had a name, and at least she did something. So many of their traditional stories were written about warriors with their faceless, nameless wives and concubines, and maybe a daughter or two! Where were the priestesses and the matriarchs? Where were the heroines? What happened to the eldest daughter who was married off to the clan’s greatest rival at the end of the story on the day after? She wished she knew. Maybe then she would have some kind of guidance for her current situation.

“I hoped I would find you here,” Ynga said. Y’Anid looked up from her reading and smiled warmly when her sister came to sit beside her at the window. “How are you? How are you *really*?”

Y’Anid’s smile faltered.

Ynga nodded. “Do you want me to slip him a nightcap?”

How ironic that her sister would make that suggestion, considering her choice of reading material! “You can’t,” she sighed. “The feud. And besides, what if I’m bearing sons?”

Ynga reached over and laid her hand on her sister's belly, which was only beginning to thicken, and nodded. Sons, to be granted the rights of tribe or clan, had to be recognized by their fathers or their fathers' male relatives. If Targ were to die suddenly, that would never happen. Her sons would then be forced to eke out their existence as best they could on the periphery of society, like Bolvi and his compatriots. It wasn't a future a mother wanted for her children.

"I'm sorry things ended up this way," Ynga sighed.

"I don't need your pity," Y'Anid growled.

Ynga blinked. "No, of course you don't," she said after a moment. "As the Founder said, 'what cannot be cured must be endured.' We will endure together." She grasped her sister's hand and squeezed.

Y'Anid softened. "I'm glad to have you here at last. Were you waiting for me?"

"Not really," she confessed with a wry smile. "I hoped I would find you, but I was actually also hoping to speak with our new Guard Captain."

"I spoke with him the other night," she divulged. "I like him."

"Not what you'd expect," Ynga observed. "Mother asked me to find out more about him. Why he's in here all the time and what he's

reading.” She shrugged. “It’s not every day that a mercenary joins the House Guard.”

Y’Anid smiled. Of course her mother was shrewdly evaluating the Almighty Leader’s choices as to whom should be admitted into the household, which was her purview as the clan Den Mother. “I ran into him the other day. He was reading from *The Way of the Warrior*.”

Ynga raised an eyebrow. “Ethics? Not the usual mercenary’s reading material.”

“No,” Y’Anid agreed.

Ynga selected a volume from the shelves and sat by her sister quietly. Y’Anid was reminded of many times that they had curled up together in the library as children, often with one resting her head on the other’s lap, and they would just quietly enjoy each other’s company and the subject of their reading. Y’Anid leaned her head against her sister’s shoulder and went back to *Katya*, hoping to find inspiration.

Shaundar retired before his men did, recalling that this was how his father tended to handle things, and swung past the library, slightly inebriated, to pick up that copy of Dukagsh's second volume, *The Way of the Warrior*, for bedtime reading. He was pleased to see Ynga and Y'Anid curled up in the chairs near the window, each with a book, almost as though they were waiting for him.

“Oh!” exclaimed Y’Anid, looking up, as Shaundar’s shadow fell over them. Her sister’s gaze followed. “I didn’t hear you come in, Captain.”

“I can be rather quiet,” Shaundar agreed.

“You weren’t here after dinner,” Ynga pointed out. Shaundar smiled a little. Maybe his private conceit wasn’t too far off the mark.

“The men invited me over for a few drinks,” he explained, settling just a bit over-hard into what was rapidly becoming his favourite chair. “Thought I should get to know them a little off-duty.”

The corner of Ynga’s mouth twitched up around a small tusk. “Are you drunk, Captain?”

“Perhaps a little,” he admitted.

“Are you off to rest, then?” she asked him while her wry smile evolved into a full-blown smirk.

“Perhaps not yet,” he said, returning her grin, even if it was at his expense.

Y’Anid took a ribbon and draped it through the pages of her book, which she then put aside. “We spend a lot of time here,” she confided. “Ynga and I like reading as well. And this window has a lovely view.”

He nodded his agreement. “The garden atrium is really quite beautiful in the moonlight. What do you call those white flowers that seem to be glowing?” They looked like lilies, perhaps, and their scent reminded him of starflowers and possibly jasmine.

She blinked at him. He wondered what he had said now that was out of character. “Lady’s Tears,” she told him after a long pause.

“What did I say?” he wanted to know. Better to not make the same mistake again!

Ynga shook her head. “We are surprised by you, Captain, that’s all, and perhaps we shouldn’t be.”

“I just hardly expected a pirate to appreciate flowers,” Y’Anid explained.

“You don’t get to see them often in Wildspace,” he justified himself guardedly.

Ynga laughed. It was not at all like elven laughter, which was more ethereal somehow. Her laugh was rich and earthy, full of life. “That sounds exactly like something Corin would say.”

“Sounds like I would like him.”

Ynga fixed him with an intent gaze. “I considered that. I think you should get to know each other. Corin could use better company to associate with.”

“Who does your husband associate with now?” Shaundar inquired. This could be valuable information.

“My husband Targ,” Y’Anid said abruptly.

“But Corin doesn’t like him and neither do I,” Ynga added with flashing eyes.

Shaundar wasn’t sure he understood exactly. “So why does Corin spend time with him then?”

She sighed and Y’Anid looked at her lap. “Because it’s expected. The men of the clan are supposed to stick together. But I’m not sure that Targ sees himself as a Bloodfist yet. Certainly his ethics are not ours.”

“What tribe was he from before he married you?” Shaundar asked of Y’Anid. He was pleased with himself that he knew to ask this question.

“Bloodaxe, of course.”

Shaundar sat back, surprised. “I thought that the Bloodaxes and the Bloodfists were mortal enemies!”

“Exactly,” Ynga scowled. Seeing his blank expression, she explained, almost defensively, “Well, the clan had to do *something* when Narok Bloodaxe became Overlord!”

“So our father promised me in marriage to Targ because he was about the same age.” Her hands twisted anxiously in her lap and knotted in on themselves. “I don’t think he left his clan loyalties behind him, and he certainly didn’t leave their beliefs behind him. But we don’t dare do anything against him or we’ll reignite the feud, and my father says we don’t dare do that, we can’t afford it.”

Ynga argued, “But I don’t think it matters if they’re going to send mercenaries to attack us. I hate him and what he’s doing to my sister.” Once again Y’Anid’s eyes fled Shaundar’s.

Shaundar sympathized with their situation and he couldn’t help but feel a little guilty for his own part in all of this. But he had his own reasons to hate the Bloodaxes too, didn’t he? “He hits you, doesn’t he?”

She nodded, looking down at her hands, which writhed in her lap.

“What can I do to help?”

Y’Anid looked up in an agony of desperate hope. “Really? You really mean that?”

He nodded. “There’s no excuse for that. It’s wrong; I don’t care who you are.” He discovered that this was no mere effort to earn their confidence; he genuinely felt that way.

Those incredible eyes were suddenly luminous with tears. “I don’t know what to say, Captain. But you really shouldn’t get involved. The risk to you is too great.”

“You think that preening blowhard frightens me?”

“He should,” Ynga snapped. “He’s the Clan Champion. He’s twice your size and fighting is what he *does*.”

Shaundar pursed his lips, and the edge of his mouth twisted into a smirk around his tusk. Dear gods, he was posturing for the ladies, wasn’t he? He shook his head at himself. “Okay, I guess he does,” he admitted. Actually, when he thought about it, Targ scared him quite a bit. He was a huge male scro, and a Bloodaxe at that. Had Targ been at Raven Talon? Had Shaundar encountered him before, perhaps at the other end of a whip? “But if not me, then who?”

Y’Anid shook her head. “I can’t accept your offer, Captain. And I’d better go before he notices I’m gone.” She stood, leaving her book on the table. “But thank you anyway. Good night, Captain Bolvi.” And she fled the room. Belatedly Shaundar offered that deferential fist-to-forehead salute that was her due.

Ynga now set her book down on the table. “Do you mean what you say, Captain? Will you defend my sister?”

“Of course,” he affirmed. Yes, he meant it, and he wasn’t sure why it mattered to him. What did he care if one orc was beating another one? And yet, there was no denying the fury that was smouldering in his belly when he considered the fear and the despair in the Lady Y’Anid’s eyes. He knew that expression. He never wanted to see it in *anyone’s* eyes, not ever again.

Her eyes sparkled. “Oh, *nor lakaar*, Captain! I was going to ask but I didn’t dare; not yet! I don’t know what you can do exactly, but . . . if she needs a safe place to hide, can you find her one?”

“*Gul, karra*,” he promised. “I can do that.”

Ynga stood up then, her face radiant, and in an apparent impulse she kissed him soundly on one cheek, just at the edge of his orcish sideburn. “I am in your debt, Captain. Thank you,” she repeated, and she swept from the room.

Shaundar’s face tingled where she kissed him, and that shiver ran through the rest of his body. Not a good sign. Yathar’s suggestion that he find a professional was starting to look more attractive all the time. He also stood up from the chair and left for his room and his cot, thinking that rest and reverie would do him worlds of good. He realized once he had stripped to his skivvies and lay down, already too hot to

sleep under a blanket, that he had forgotten the book he meant to read. Shaundar lay awake in the dark, wondering when Yathar was coming for him.

Shaundar felt almost awkward at breakfast. His reverie had been short, for one thing, and for another, the members of the clan were paying much more attention to him this morning. Ynga was all smiles and Corin was watching him, almost as if evaluating him somehow. Y'Anid kept sneaking glances his way, but looking away when he turned to meet her eyes. Even Dorin's attention seemed more focused. He wondered if his offer to assist Y'Anid had been a mistake. Would he have made the same judgment were he sober, he wondered? Well, it could not be undone, and he still felt the same way about it in the light of the morning sun, so there was nothing to do now but do it.

After the meal – a plantain and rice porridge called *klar* – Dorin cleared his throat. "Captain Bolvi!" he began.

Now he would find out what was up. "*Gul, karr,*" he responded reflexively.

The clan leader studied him with those intense blue eyes again. "Something you said a couple of weeks back finally registered with me. You said that you only came to Dukagsh for the first time just before the attack on our beach. Do I remember this correctly?"

"Yes you do, sir," he confirmed. What had he missed?

Dorin and Olaf exchanged a glance. "So where did you do your *Zabbak'Tarr* then, lad?" the Warpriest wanted to know.

Zabbak'Tarr? What in the Nine Hells was that? He thought quickly. "*Zabbak*" was related to "*zabu*," which meant "holy, sacred, or taboo." He seemed to recall that it translated to "rite" or "ceremony," but he wasn't a hundred percent certain of that. "*Tarr*," he knew, was "warrior." Were they speaking about some kind of rite of passage? "I haven't, my lords," he admitted. The clan lords looked at each other, astounded. Even Gurtok seemed taken aback. "I thought you knew."

After a moment of silence, Dorin shook his head. "Well, we'll have to do something about that," he rumbled. "The men won't follow you without it."

"I'll take him," Corin volunteered. "I'll be his *valdok*. Ynga says I should get to know Bolvi better anyway."

"And how would she know that, do you think?" Targ pointed out slyly.

"Because she ran into him in the library," Dorin told the Clan Champion, "which you'd know if you ever bothered to read!"

There was an audible snicker from both Olaf and Gurtok. This did not impress the surly grey scro in the least, who strode from the room in a huff.

"Well then, it's decided," declared the Almighty Leader. "Olaf, can I ask you to prepare the men?"

The Warpriest grunted his affirmative. His wife, Y'Anid's mother, stood up from the table with a knowing smile. "And I'll prepare the women," she announced. "Come along ladies." The women marched purposefully from the room in a train. Y'Anid did cast him a long, searching look, perhaps to confirm that he would protect her. Shaundar met her eyes and declined his head just once. She risked a ghost of a smile before vanishing into the manor.

Corin Bloodfist came around the table and clapped Shaundar on the shoulder. "And you, Bolvi, come with me."

Shaundar obediently followed Corin, wondering what it was that he was getting into.

Corin led Shaundar past his quarters, where he gathered up several jars in a leather sack, and down to the beach, where they had not been since the Blacktusk assault. "Strip to your skivvies, Bolvi," he was commanded. Uncomfortably Shaundar obeyed. "Cleanse yourself in the salt water." Shaundar started scrubbing dutifully. When Corin was finished this he stepped out of the ocean water and back onto the beach,

near where they had left their clothing. He began to wipe himself dry vigorously with his hands. Shaundar did likewise.

“Here, take this.” The scro noble passed him one of the larger jars, which he caught. “Cover yourself in it; that should be of some help against the damn bugs! And don’t forget your bits, Bolvi; trust me, if you do, you’ll regret it!”

Shaundar opened the jar to find green ochre. He recalled that this was a custom of the green elves. Once, a coppery skinned elven beauty had painted him with ochre for Midsummer, he believed with intention to seduce him, but then sent him off with Narissa. They had spent the night snuggled up on the roof of the Sunfall Manor watching the stars, but with the formidable threat of Narissa’s father looming over them, no more. It seemed that ochre had a different purpose here. Corin was rubbing the green-pigmented mud and oil mixture over his olivine skin. Shaundar followed suit.

Corin stopped and observed him critically for a moment. “You’ve seen some action, haven’t you?” he observed, indicating Shaundar’s varied landscape of scars. Now he passed him a smaller jar. “Paint those up. Honourable scars deserve respect on a *Zabbak’Tarr*.”

This container held red ochre. Right; he had forgotten the orcish attitude towards scars. Corin was painting his own – a big claw rake across his chest, a similar one in his opposite flank, and a few axe and sword nicks across his hands and wrists – also in the red ochre. Shaundar

started to draw over his own numerous wounds. It was cool and soothing to the touch, especially to the one on his upper thigh that ached in the damp.

Corin shook his head in admiration. “When you’re done,” he said while Shaundar dabbed at the flak marks on his arms, “paint the hollows around your eyes with the black, and mark yourself with triangular stripes. We’ll blend better.” This time he placed the pot of ochre at Shaundar’s feet. He then began to follow his own instructions by way of demonstration. Ah, right; camouflage! The Black Arrows had spent a month on a small jungle planet under the tutelage of Kael, and the grizzled and scarred green elven ranger had taught them how to survive in the woods. Fair enough. He remembered in their instructions that the type of stripes used to break up the green or brown depended upon the shape of the shadows in the area. Jungles were filled with long triangular leaves.

When he was finished, Corin nodded his approval. “Good! Now we wait.” He indicated down the beach with a thick claw-tipped finger. “We won’t have to wait long.” His father and the other men of the tribe were marching down the beach dressed in their armour, chanting low and gruff in their throats as Olaf sounded a large, booming drum. Gurtok was among them, shoulder to shoulder with the tribal nobles. For Shaundar, listening to the effect of all those low voices, deeper than any elven register, was alien and eerie. A shiver ran down his spine.

As the delegation approached the chanting increased in intensity and some low drones mingled with the hoarse male voices. Shaundar felt this resonate on a primal level. He found himself wondering if some kind of spell was being cast.

They came to where Shaundar and Corin were standing on the beach, covered in drying ochre. The drumming and chanting abruptly ceased. “You’re in for it now, lad!” roared Dorin suddenly, chased by a booming laugh, and he was seized by his arms and his legs and dragged through the sand.

For a moment Shaundar was terrified and reflexively he struggled as images and scents of horror from Raven Talon overwhelmed him. Once again he was being seized from his bunk, the scent of his tormentor’s sweat and his friends’ blood in his nose. Then the drumming and the chanting began again and he remembered suddenly where he was. He forced himself to stand down. This was a ceremony of some kind, not torture, and the voices of those who had brought him to it were not only friendly, they had no idea of his true face. They were initiating a young orc into a tradition, not venting their spleens upon an elven prisoner of war. He instructed his muscles one at a time to soften and his fists to unclench.

The only ones who seemed to realize that anything had changed in Shaundar’s demeanor were Gurtok and Corin. “It’s all part of the ritual, sir,” Gurtok muttered in his ear, and Corin had a reassuring hand on his shoulder. He almost bit it. What right did any orc have to comfort him

from the horrors their people had inflicted? Corin recoiled from the scathing look in his eyes and again with some effort, he relented. *Corin was not responsible*, he reminded himself firmly. *Corin was not at Raven Talon, and that readiness will not help you here. You will give yourself away for sure.* He looked away.

The tribal males brought him out the gates of the compound and hiked him over a couple of miles or so. They were headed into the grey-green jungle. Before long the canopy swallowed Gruumsh's expanding yellow Eye.

After a few minutes Shaundar could see a fire up ahead in the thickening gloom. There was a strange feminine chanting now, and someone was playing some kind of droning horn. It appeared to be made out of a painted log, and one of the women was blowing on one end of it to make the noise while she ran a stick up and down the side of the thing. The tribal males dumped him unceremoniously at Elka Bloodfist's feet.

He followed his gaze up her feet and legs. She was wearing not much of anything and he noticed now all the muscles of her sturdy frame, poised with catlike grace beneath her aventurine skin. Her breasts, still firm, were concealed in a rather attractive leather bodice, but most of her cleavage was shielded behind primitive stone and bone jewellery. "Welcome, Bolvi," she smirked, and she shook a bone rattle over his head, clutched in her impressively long, red-lacquered claws. "Welcome to the ancient mysteries of our people!" She began to toss crumpled brown lumps of something onto the fire that issued an odd, acidic grey-

green smoke. Instantly his vision sharpened and his hearing developed a degree of acuity unrivalled even by that of his natural form. He noticed movement in the foliage, a shade of green from the sunlight that painted the edge of the jungle leaves in a way he had not previously regarded, and the metallic sounds of several birds and insects, all of which were strange to him. Beneath the overwhelmingly green scent of the jungle he was reasonably certain he could smell the sweat on his own body and hers – though hers was not at all unpleasant – and he could swear that he heard both of their hearts beating. His heart rate was more rapid than hers and he made it calm down.

The priestess smiled more broadly around her ivory tusks. “We are the priestesses of the Cave Mother,” she announced. “We are the keepers of Her Mysteries. Who speaks for this boy?”

Corin stepped forward. “I do,” he rumbled.

“Kneel before the wisdom of the Cave Mother,” Elka Bloodfist commanded her son-in-law, “as all men must.”

Again, these words were inconsistent with what the Navy believed about scro women. Corin fell to his knees beside Shaundar, and the priestess dipped her fingers into another pot like the ones they had left on the beach, and painted a red ochre symbol onto Corin’s clean-shaven cheekbone. It was the rune for the goddess Luthic, Shaundar recalled from training. It was like the numeric character for “seven” in the

Common tongue, but with a dash over it that resembled a symbol in Espruar.

“Sit up, Bolvi,” he was directed by a feminine voice he had come to know fairly well as of late; and the sound of it, enhanced by whatever they’d thrown into the flames, ran chills of longing over his scalp and down his spine. Doing as commanded, he found himself staring directly into the magical blue eyes of Y’Anid Bloodfist, luminous in the gloaming. He could smell her scent, a delicious mixture of musk and spice, not at all elven. Y’Anid reddened the tips of her own fingers and drew what felt like the same symbol on his cheekbone. He felt every touch like an electric shiver, and when she drew near, it was all he could do to resist staring at the partially clad curvy jade bosom that was practically at his eye level. He closed his eyes and silently breathed her intoxicating aroma. When she was done he shook his head to clear it. What in the Abyss was the matter with him? She was an *orc*!

He had never been more relieved to be startled out of a train of thought than he was when Olaf Bloodfist roared, “Hear the words of Dukagsh!” In his state of heightened awareness it was loud enough to resonate through his head like a temple bell. He snapped his gaze to the greying scro with a start.

The Warpriest closed his single eye and began to recite with what seemed ease of long practice, yet with a poetic rhythm and meter that captured Shaundar’s attention, “When we came to this world, we could run no further. We had lost our elven pursuers in the stars, and

now we needed a place of rest. But He-Who-Watches laughed. ‘Do you think I wish, My Son, for My people to grow lazy and complacent?’ He roared in our Progenitor’s visions. ‘All this world will be Your enemy and You will send Your sons to prove themselves and their right to carry on Your line.’ And the insects bit us and caused diseases, and the great storms battered and shattered us, and the predators hunted us, and the plants gave up their secrets to our women only at the cost of lives. But slowly we learned the ways of this new world. Every mystery was hard-won over generations. Every inch we carved from the wilderness proved the strength of our will and our arm! We learned to grow crops in swamps fit only for black dragons and rocks fit only for reds. We learned to cure the ailments that the insects inflicted. Our women learned the wisdom of the plants, and we even learned to eat the harsh fruits of this world, and to like them! We hunted even the greatest predators and laid them low. We learned to live with the storm-cycles. We became the masters of this world we named for our Founder and our Saviour.

“But, we have not forgotten the words of He-Who-Cannot-Be-Named! So as our ancient ancestors did, we send our sons into the wilderness to prove themselves and their right to be warriors. We send them to face the dangers of Dukagsh with only their bare hands, as the Founders faced them. And only those who return from a successful hunt may be recognized among us as warriors, and only warriors may carry on their line.” The scro priest leaned over Shaundar ominously. His one blue eye blazed like a star. “The wilderness is fearsome and heartless, Bolvi,” he warned. “It will have no mercy. But I shall. Do you wish me to cleave

your head from your shoulders here and now, rather than face death or defeat at the hands of the pitiless forest?" He lifted up his axe and it hovered above Shaundar's neck.

Was he serious, or was this part of the ritual? With his heightened senses and his training, Shaundar took note of the tension in the gathering's mouths and shoulders. It was part of the ritual, yes, but it was also a genuine threat. Or perhaps it was an offer. He could smell the sudden concern radiating from the pores of most of the Bloodfist family and Gurtok as he appeared to hesitate.

"No," he growled. His voice sounded different somehow; deeper than even his orcish baritone; rougher. "No, Warpriest, I will fight."

Relief now radiated from the gathered scro as Olaf lowered the axe without blooding its blade. "And so it is with each warrior," he recited. "We choose to fight, rather than surrender. We choose to live rather than die. Such is the Warrior's Way." He hurled the axe with a roar. It embedded itself in the great trunk of an ancient tree, which began to bleed red sap almost immediately.

"Go then, Bolvi!" cried Elka in an ecstatic scream that stood every hair on end and set his heart to racing. "Go forth into the wilderness! Bring something to aid the tribe or do not return!" The gathering erupted into a cacophony of drumming, roaring and shrieking. There was no question of disobedience. The cries and the drumbeat ricocheted through his body and before he knew it, he was charging into

the wilderness, a war cry on his lips, with Corin running and howling at his side.

Chapter Ten

Shaundar was gratified and relieved when the Captain of the Elven Navy flotilla's lead ship presented herself and her sword to him at the helm. He wasn't at all certain if the Navy would continue to respect the protocols of honourable surrender. Certainly, he thought venomously, her compatriots at the Battle of Borka had not.

He suffered yet another moment of unreality when they brought her below deck to the lifejammer helm. Her eyes were fierce and angry as she bowed with her sword out before her. When she got a good look at him, her eyes widened for a moment. Shaundar knew then how he must look.

"I present to you my sword in exchange for the lives of my people," she began after a moment's hesitation, extending the blade before her like an offering. "When the War began, we had a tradition of ransoming each other back. If anyone is to be executed, I ask that you end my life in lieu of theirs." Her eyes were full of fear and courage.

"Why in the Nine Hells should we?" demanded Rathgar in Espruar so that the elf captain could understand him, still bleeding from a nasty slice in his shoulder and a burn to the side of his face. "It's not like any of you pointy-eared bastards had that much respect for us! Burning and slaughtering those of us who surrendered! My lord," he begged Shaundar, "let me do the honours. It would be my great joy and

pleasure.” He hefted his bloodied axe in one trembling hand, barely containing his rage. Shaundar knew he was fighting the unquiet ghost of his little brother.

The elf maid lowered her head. “If it will please you to make sacrifice to your gods, I will go willingly to the altar in exchange for the lives of my people,” she offered quietly.

“You don’t have a choice either way, *gurt*,” the furious boatswain spat. “My lord, please.”

The sputtering of that deplorable word from the mouth of his friend stabbed Shaundar in the guts as surely as any sword. “Would you have me spill woman’s blood on a *warship*, Rathgar?” he demanded sharply in Orcish. “Would you so freely invite the displeasure of the Den Mother?”

Rathgar started as if slapped. “Sir! No, sir,” he murmured in horror, releasing the full impact of what he had almost done. His axe hand lowered. His face was almost as pale as Shaundar’s.

“Accept an honourable surrender if it is offered,” Shaundar quoted from the *Tethka Tarrak*. “‘For if your foes believe they must always fight to the death, they will.’ Whether the elves choose to act with honour or not,” he elaborated – and there was a bitter pain in his soul at the acknowledgement that these words were necessary – “we shall. Am I clear, Bo’sun?”

Rathgar lowered his weapon arm fully. His eyes were gravid with remorse. “I’m sorry, *Tath’Darrak*,” he whispered. “I forgot myself.”

Shaundar returned a slow nod. “Understandable,” he recognized at last, “but you need to work on keeping your wits about you. I know you are angry and you’re right to be. But we must not stoop to their level.” He realized that he was shaking with the force of his own anger and knew that, although Rathgar would assume it was directed at him, it was the dishonourable actions of his species that infuriated him and grappled his belly with the nausea of shame and betrayal.

“*Gul, karr*,” nodded his friend, ashamed.

“Captain,” said Shaundar in Espruar, “your life is not necessary. But we’ll be taking your food, your ammunition and your ships.” The latter would be necessary to prove they were not cowards who had simply fled the battle when they returned to Dukagsh, or the damnable Bloodaxes would have them stripped of their title for sure. “But we’ll leave you depowered flitters and most of your ship’s funds. Do you understand?”

The Captain blinked and then nodded. The flitters and currency would enable them to send a messenger to any of the other settlements on Ceres and beg or buy their salvation and passage. “You are merciful and generous, Captain,” she replied with a hint of surprise in her voice. “Thank you.”

“I am neither,” Shaundar denied. “But I will hold to my honour.”

“For what it’s worth, if my people did not treat you in kind, I am sorry.”

Shaundar bit his tongue. He thought of the pots of Greek fire fired from accelerators to burn the scro ships, whether or not they flew white flags, and the sick feeling in his belly from this dishonour and treachery was so powerful that it mingled with the illness caused by the helm’s drain and he turned his head and vomited.

Rathgar seized the elven captain by her arms and bellowed, “Targar, get down here *now!*”

Targar scrambled down the passage and seeing what was going on, stuck the chamber-pot underneath Shaundar’s face. Shaundar could not stop the cramping in his belly and bowels. He retched and retched until he was bringing out blood in great red splats.

“What’s the matter with him?” he heard the elf maid ask from somewhere far away.

“That’s a lifejammer,” was Rathgar’s response.

“Sehanine have mercy,” breathed the Captain in awe and horror.

When the frenzy wore off, Shaundar realized that they were completely lost.

“Don’t worry,” Corin reassured him. “It’s part of the rite. When we’re ready to return, we’ll remember the way.” They were hiking through thick undergrowth that cut at their bodies with blades of grass as sharp as the name implied. They bled from a thousand little cuts and the insects were drawn from the mud and the foliage in clouds. Most of them bit. A few of them stung. Those ones they avoided.

“Well, what sort of wildlife are we hunting?” Shaundar asked. He wasn’t completely ignorant in the wilds; survival had been part of the Black Arrows training regimen. You just never knew when you might be marooned somewhere. Of course, his jungle survival course had involved something to carry water with, a pot to boil it in, and considerably more weaponry; and even the three-day final exam had allowed clothing and a good field knife.

Corin shrugged. “Whatever volunteers first, I suppose.” He scowled. “Let’s just hope it’s not a *surrush*!”

“What’s a *surrush*?” Shaundar asked him.

“They hunt dragons,” Corin explained.

“Ah,” said Shaundar. This was not encouraging. “Well,” he cleared his throat, “if we’re not particular about the kind of game we’re

looking for, I guess we find a game trail and track the first thing we come across?”

“I doubt we’ll need to find a game trail, Bolvi,” Corin chuckled. “Believe me, something will find us first. First thing we need is a weapon.”

“You’re not supposed to strangle something with your bare hands?” Shaundar inquired with a wry smirk. He phrased it in the form of a joke, but he was half serious. That would not surprise him, all things considered.

Again Corin laughed. “You could try, I suppose, and I guess some have! But I want a weapon. You know how to make a fire-hardened spear?”

“In theory.” Of course, the question remained as to whether or not he could make a fire without casting a spell or focusing a glass lens.

“Let’s find a riverbed,” Corin suggested, “and then we should be able to find a sharp rock.”

“Good idea,” Shaundar agreed. There had to be something that could be knapped into a cutting tool. This was another trick taught to the soldiers by green elves, just in case they were ever disarmed in the wilderness. He started studying the lay of the land and followed it down-slope. Corin grunted something that sounded like approval and followed. After a time he realized he could smell the water, even in the moist green rain forest. He chased the scent.

The gloom closed around them, and Shaundar sensed they were heading deeper into the jungle. Strange animals called out to one another. Odd as they seemed to Shaundar, he had been on a few different worlds by now and he knew not to assume that anything that sounded strange was hostile. Monkeys, for instance, often made disturbing calls, but they were a natural part of the landscape even on his homeworld. He knew there were monkeys here; he'd seen one rummaging through the garbage when he was on a break smoking his pipe a week or two ago. He was certain that one of the cries he heard echoing through the green was a simian of some kind. Most of the others sounded like birds.

"You all right, Bolvi?" Corin asked him.

"Just listening to the jungle," Shaundar assured him. But if what he told Corin were true, why were the hairs standing up on the back of his neck?

"This isn't the first time you've been in the wilderness," Corin observed.

Shaundar shook his head but did not answer. He was distracted. Maybe it was the nature of the jungle, but he had the sensation that they were being watched. He tried to pinpoint it as they continued through the bush. Thick moss covered every inch of the forest floor and it squished between his toes with the most unique tickling sensation.

That's when he realized that he was still in that state of heightened awareness facilitated by whatever had been thrown in the fire.

"What was the stuff that the Den Mother burned?" he inquired of Corin. "I think it's still affecting me."

"It should be. I don't really understand it but the priestesses call it 'Witch's Eye.' I was told it awakens the senses of our primal orcish ancestors." He clasped Shaundar on the shoulder to get his attention. Once again his scent implied concern. "The rite isn't an idle one, Bolvi. The threat out here is real, and we scro are much more civilized than we once were; maybe too civilized to survive in the jungles of Dukagsh. So we burn Witch's Eye to bring back the instincts we need. It wears off after a few days, or the priestesses have a counteragent of some kind for when we return."

Shaundar sniffed the air and his nostrils flared. What a delicious hodgepodge of scents he detected! Flowers, trees, green plants, peppery fruits; and now he knew there was water just ahead. "I'm not sure I want a counteragent," he smiled. "I *like* having keen senses like this."

Corin met his eyes. "My father said that some of the Progenitors tried to take it all the time when they first found it. Soldiers just out of a war; who wouldn't have wanted it?" Shaundar nodded his complete understanding. "After a time they started going crazy," he continued with huge pupils and the acrid scent of . . . what? Fear? Horror? Both, he recognized; a scent he knew well from Raven Talon. "They became

paranoid. Began to see danger everywhere, even from their best friends. They started having nightmares about the war and they even started believing that they were back in it. When their wives demanded it, they all stopped using it except for emergencies. Except, they say, Urgoth Bloodaxe, and you see what happened there. They say that Urgoth and our ancestor Karnak were good friends, once.” His mouth was a thin line.

Shaundar too couldn't help but be a little frightened by all of this. He hoped to find a suitable kill quickly and head back as soon as possible. What would happen if he started having one of those incidents in which he was relieving Raven Talon while he was out here? He had already experienced a couple of them without need for the drug they had inhaled. He would be sure to give himself away. He was not concerned for himself, because only Corin would be a witness, but that was when he realized that unless it was demanded by Naval Command or necessity, he had no desire to kill Corin Bloodfist. The scro had shown him only kindness, and had shown everyone around him an equal kindness. Just like his father. This was not the same brand of orc who tortured the slaves of Spiral.

“Why did you come out here with me?” he demanded of the Bloodfist suddenly.

Corin shrugged. “Ynga really likes you. I figured that I owed you for offering to protect my wife's sister from that accursed Bloodaxe bastard and keeping me from strangling him and earning our clan exile or worse. And I guess somebody had to.”

Shaundar nodded to himself as he considered all of this. “Well, *nor lakaar*, Corin.” He was quietly touched.

Corin offered him a friendly smile in return that again, reminded Shaundar so much of his father. “You’re welcome,” he said.

A few moments later they found the river. Even it was shielded from the sun by the thick green canopy. As a matter of fact, it was so dark that strange phosphorescent mushrooms sprouted from the roots of the mammoth trees. They were similar to varieties that Shaundar had only ever seen underground before.

He searched the riverbed for something solid to serve as a makeshift hammer and something with edges that could be easily broken into sharper ones. Perhaps they could form a crude knife or spearhead. Shaundar was both gratified and dismayed to find that most of the stone in the river was obsidian. It was sharp and brittle; perfect for the making of their blades. But it was completely unsuited to the hammering work that would shape and form them. It would shatter and probably cut them dangerously, and the odds of infection were considerable in the primitive, humid conditions.

Then Shaundar found a diamond-shaped broken black stone with sharp edges. Inspiration struck him. “Corin!” he exclaimed. “Do you know where we can find some hard wood and some sturdy vines or something?” He lifted up the diamond.

Corin considered it. “Wood, sure. I’ll see if I can find a good green branch. But vines will break. Best stuff you got would be your skivvies.”

Shaundar hesitated only briefly before stripping completely naked and beginning to cut the cloth into strips with the sharpest edge of the stone. It cut them raggedly, and the way he needed to hold it left his fingers bleeding, but it worked. “Right,” said Corin with a firm nod, and he searched out a green branch that he wrestled free of its parent tree with a growl and raw orcish stubbornness, and gave it over to Shaundar.

He split the thicker side of the branch with the obsidian and bound the blade by sliding it through the slit, twisting the fabric strips into rope and winding them firmly around the stone and the wood in an X, then binding it in place above and below. Shaundar hefted it and gave it a test swing. Well, it wouldn’t hold up to more than maybe one solid blow against something that meant business, but they could probably cut themselves some wood and a couple of spears with it.

Corin nodded approvingly. “That should work! Good idea. I’ll get stuff to make a fire.” He started scrubbing around in the undergrowth for tinder while Shaundar found a few long straight branches and hacked them carefully to a rough point. He found his axe haft was unsatisfactorily loose and he had to stop repeatedly to re-fasten it. There had to be a better way to attach the obsidian. Maybe if he found some good sticky tree sap and made more room for the center of it by carving out the wood on the inside of its pith . . . Venturing a little further up he found, of

all things, an oak tree of some variety which was leaking sap from where some giant claw had carved it open. The size of the wound was . . . concerning. Shaundar coated the inside of his makeshift axe handle and all the cord with the stuff. It wasn't dry enough to hold it firmly yet, but it helped with stability anyway. While he was there he palmed a couple of oak leaves and stuck them haphazardly into his hair. There was a spell that required an oak leaf that just might be handy against some of those big predators, if he could pull it off without Corin noticing.

Corin inspected some twigs for moisture, then sniffed at a large tree fungus and discarded it, his nose wrinkled. "My father was my *valdok*," he explained to Shaundar cheerfully. "There's no good way to make a fire in the jungle."

"We need a good solid river stone to knap out some knives," Shaundar lamented in response. "Maybe you'll have better luck finding one than I did. Why don't you let me see what I can do with a fire? I've got some good basalt stone here that ought to make useful sparks."

Corin shook his head. "I won't argue," he replied, "because that's a thankless task. I suppose we can always build a fire drill if we have knives though, so I'll go do that. You never know, you could get lucky." As he wandered a little ways down the river he called over his shoulder, "Make sure you have lots of dry timber! It's not getting the spark going that's the problem; it's keeping it going!"

Shaundar turned his attention to the little pile of kindling they had gathered. He waited for Corin to be a little ways down the river. The first thing he did was to quickly and silently renew his transformation spell, just in case he failed to find another opportunity. The second thing he did was to bang a couple of rocks together to make the right noises, and then he whispered a quick incantation and a small flame shot from his fingertip and into the kindling.

That was less than half the job done, of course. Corin was absolutely right about the nature of primitive fires. He cupped his hand around the little tower of mosses, dead leaves and twigs, and blew on it very, very gently in short puffs. His miniature bellows was effective. After a time he managed a good little flame. Quickly he gathered together some of the larger sticks they had found and piled them around the fire in a careful cone-shaped stack. When it got going it produced a warm fire with little smoke. *That would make any green elf proud*, he mused with personal satisfaction. Then he called out, “Corin! How are you doing out there? I got the fire going!”

“Did you really?” Corin responded. Shaundar looked and he could see him downriver, making his way back. “I think I found a decent hammer-stone, too!” He held up a round shape that might have been a rock which fit in the palm of his hand. Picking his way along the stones of the riverbed, he started asking, “Do you think . . . ?” But that’s when Shaundar smelled something that he wasn’t expecting to smell. It was the scent of orcish male, and it was an orc, or more than one, whom Shaundar did not know.

“Corin, down!” he cried, and he hit the dirt himself. The sound of a bowstring twanged sharply through the air. An arrow pierced Corin in the side as he dove for the ground too late. He made a grunt of pain and fell on his face in the riverbed. In the moment following, when Shaundar’s already hyper-aware brain leaped into battlefield consciousness, everything slowed to a crawl and every sense came to full and vivid life and he could see that it was not an arrow in the Bloodfist’s side at all. Too regular, not enough fletching. It was a crossbow quarrel.

Inspiration seized Shaundar like the claw of a great beast piercing his brain. He yanked out an eyelash, ignoring the sharp pain that came with it, and mashed it into the sap on the axe blade as he mouthed another magical chant. The adaptation worked. His hands and everything they were holding vanished from view. He rolled into the underbrush and lay still and silent.

"He's down!" one of the strange orcs called. There were scuffling noises and several large booted feet passed by Shaundar's face. He noticed one of the would-be spears on his side of the fire and eased it gently under the ferns with him.

"Where's the other one?" demanded a rough and sour voice that was far too close for Shaundar's comfort. "Here's his fire." Shaundar could see this one's boots, hear his breathing, and smell his breath and his sweat. He was excited and his last meal had been something meaty and bovine with more than his share of peppers.

“Doesn’t matter,” a scro with a deep bass voice responded. He sounded as though he were further down the river, near where Corin had fallen. “He’s not the one we’re after.”

“He’s a witness!” someone else exclaimed.

The basso voice guffawed loudly. “You think anyone would care what some merc turned guard captain has to say? He’d be lucky if they didn’t blame him in the first place! To the Hells with him!” He made a grunt of effort and Corin roared in pain.

Shaundar risked rolling over in the distraction and saw two large scro with Bloodaxe runes on their armour lifting Corin by the arms. The place that the crossbow had pierced was running blood freely down his flank. He started coughing and each cough produced a moan of agony. Shaundar could smell the iron tang of the blood in the air.

The basso voice, which belonged to the scro on the right, chuckled with sadistic glee. “At last, the famous Corin Bloodfist!” he crowed. “I’m going to enjoy making you scream.” He grabbed hold of that crossbow quarrel and twisted it. Corin made a brass noise somewhere between a shriek, a roar and a gurgle that Shaundar had not heard from any throat since Spiral.

Shaundar turned away, panting and pouring sweat. Flashes of Raven Talon lingered at the edges of his consciousness. What should he do? He could walk away. It was probably even a good chance for him to

escape unnoticed, maybe buy his passage off of Dukagsh with his silence and get back to the Blacktusks. That was certainly the safest path.

But, that cry! And the promises made by these Bloodaxe scro. He knew what the Bloodaxes were capable of. He had experienced their abuses firsthand and they were seared into body and soul in a way that he could never, ever forget. What would they do to a Bloodfist, their hated rival over generations?

He's an orc, Shaundar's mind insisted.

He's my friend, Shaundar's heart responded.

Shaundar's fist closed around the haft of his axe and his spear.

He kicked some of their gathered wood into the fire. The sudden noise and flash of the disturbed flames startled the scro who had surrounded it and they flinched away. Shaundar leaped to his feet and charged the two scro who had Corin by the shoulders. He figured he had one good shot with the axe. He let it fly. It connected with the back of the left one's neck in the exposed spinal protrusion between helm and breastplate and flew apart as predicted, but the scro went down without a word.

The scro on the right, the one who had been torturing Corin, dropped him to the ground and whirled around to see what was going on. With Shaundar's invisibility spell now useless the scro had just enough time to register Shaundar's charging scro form and his eyes widened with

alarm before Shaundar impaled him through the torso with the makeshift spear. It shattered as well, cutting Shaundar's palm, but not before pinning the scro firmly to the tree as his lifeblood flowed out through the wound in a black stream.

Shaundar glanced around quickly to see if his attack had been noticed. There were two scro in Bloodaxe armour watching him with gaping mouths. Quickly he grabbed a crossbow and a real axe, hacked the quiver free, tossed Corin over one shoulder despite his greater size, and fled.

Now the scro who had seen him were yelling in alarm. Shaundar concentrated on putting as much distance between them and their pursuers as possible. He shifted Corin's weight so that it was more balanced and ran on. Every step was agony and he couldn't help but think of the irony of how Captain Wintervale's harassment had uniquely prepared him for this. Something whistled behind him near his right ear and he jerked to the side, just in time to avoid a crossbow bolt that might have split his skull.

When he heard the voices begin to grow more distant behind them as the Bloodaxes rallied the pursuit, he jumped down a slope and into a thicket, scratching himself open in several places, and hoping that Corin was too dazed to figure out exactly what was going on, he murmured another chant twice and laid a hand upon Corin's chest and his own. Both of them vanished from view with a mirage's ripple.

Shaundar lay with his arm over Corin's chest trying not to pant and gasp, and praying that Corin would not cry out or moan.

Three separate bands of Bloodaxe scro ran by in close proximity. There were a disheartening number of them. With his advanced senses and mental acuity he counted six in one group and the other two seemed to have more.

"You're dead, you clanless scum!" bellowed the one with the sour voice. "I'm going to rip your head off with my bare hands!"

Unlikely, Shaundar mused to himself as he successfully resisted the urge to giggle.

He went over Corin's semi-conscious body quickly to check the extent of the damage. He couldn't see him with the improved invisibility spell he had cast, but his senses were still keen enough that he could discern a lot by feel, and what he found did not encourage him. The quarrel had embedded itself between a couple of ribs and it was thrust in deep. The blood was leaking around it only listlessly now and Corin's breath was coming in laboured wheezes. Shaundar placed his fingers near the wound, and sure enough as the bellows of Corin's breath pumped in and out, air blew gently past Shaundar's fingertips. The bolt had lacerated or punctured Corin's lung.

Shaundar had no means of treating such a wound here. He could only hope that Olaf or one of the priestesses were capable of divine

magic of sufficient power to heal that serious of an injury. All he could do for it now was to bind the wound more tightly to prevent bleeding into the chest cavity and limit the possibility of infection. It seemed counterintuitive but it was best that he leave the offending bolt in place. It would help to seal the breach. He cut most of the damaged strap off of the quiver he'd stolen with his new axe and used it to fasten the bolt so it would shift as little as possible, after breaking it off as close to the skin as he dared. Then he stripped Corin of the only piece of clothing that either one of them had and bound the bleeding wound.

This raised the stakes considerably. A person could only survive this for so long without a proper healer's attention. Shaundar did not have time to wait for the Bloodaxes to leave. He would have to eliminate them.

But first, they would have to split up and make themselves into more viable targets. He didn't think that it would take more than perhaps half an hour to an hour for this to evolve naturally. A person could only sustain adrenaline for so long and he was alone out here, while they were many. They would relax their guard eventually, and then he would strike.

The invisibility incantation would only last for a short time, so he spent his last few minutes of it covering up Corin as best he could with the thicket and improving his own camouflage by sticking leaves and moss to the green ochre. Suddenly he was very glad of the traditional garb of the ceremony. He made a point of hiding most of his reddened scars with the leaves.

That's when he remembered the oak leaves, and he checked his hair to see if they were still with him. Miraculously, they were. He grinned and thanked the stars for that spark of intuition. This was not the reason he had gathered the materials for that spell, but it would help in this situation too, perhaps more than he'd anticipated. He wished he had gathered more sap, however; it would help to seal the hole in the Bloodfist's chest. He made the best use he could of the stuff still on his fingers and it helped somewhat; at the very least, he couldn't feel escaping air any longer.

Eventually the sour-voiced scro, who had obviously assumed command, called, "Spread out! We can cover more area," in the distance. It sounded like they were headed back this way. Shaundar smirked.

Carefully he propped Corin up with his back against a tree before the Bloodaxes could get too close. Sitting upright would prevent fluid from collecting in his lungs and might save him from drowning. Corin's eyes rolled up in his sockets and then came into a semblance of focus. "Bolvi," he whispered and started coughing, "what . . .?"

Shaundar slapped a hand over his mouth. "Shh," he hissed back. "The Bloodaxes are looking for us." Corin nodded his understanding and choked off the cough so it came out more like a strangled huff.

"Sir!" one of the Bloodaxes yelled, "I think I heard something."

“You’ve been shot,” Shaundar went on to explain, his mouth right next to Corin’s ear, barely breathing the words. “You have a crossbow bolt in your lung. You’ll want to cough, but you can’t. Understand?”

Again Corin nodded. His face deathly pale, he beckoned Shaundar closer. Shaundar put his ear towards Corin’s face. “Aunt Elka,” he breathed. “She can help.” He fought off another fit of hacking.

Shaundar nodded. “I have to kill the Bloodaxes or drive them off before I can leave,” he breathed back. “I’m going to go and do that now. I’ll be back. Try not to make any noise.” Corin nodded once more and promptly passed back out. Well, that was probably for the best. Shaundar quickly braided his now shoulder-length hair into two braids and fastened them with knots; then he emptied the strapless quiver and shoved a couple of quarrels into each braid. He made sure the crossbow was still loaded, rammed the empty quiver over the stock of it and hefted the axe, and began to creep through the undergrowth to find his way through the enemy line.

“Over there, *Gor’tar*,” said the same scro, pointing, and though it might not seem to be to Shaundar and Corin’s benefit at first, the Bloodaxes moved forward towards the general area of the thicket with less care and attention, since they felt they knew roughly where their quarry was hiding.

Shaundar dragon-walked between the second and third from the right of their increasingly staggered line and froze in place as they passed over him. He smelled leather, sweat and irritation. His grin widened.

He scuttled through the ferns and found a surprisingly large rock outcropping that formed a natural barricade on all sides, with just a little crawlspace to get into it. If only he'd seen this before! The rocks came up to about the level of his waist, forming a perfect foxhole. Closer inspection revealed that visibility was excellent with the riverbed on one side and an unexpected clearing on the other. If he could find some way to bring Corin over here, he would.

In the meantime, the din of the water sounded like a cacophony to him, and he knew it would mask his natural noises if he were careful, just like the river on Adonia. He crawled into the rocks and waited, peering through the bolthole, for his opportunity. Yes, there was more than enough space for the two of them if he could make it here with a heavy semi-conscious body in tow.

The Bloodaxes were now doubling back, combing through the undergrowth with their axes. One of them came dangerously close to the thicket, but the brambles did not easily part for the axe he was using to push foliage aside so by some miracle, he didn't see Corin. "Maybe they left," he suggested. "I could swear it was somewhere over here that I heard it."

“They didn’t leave,” snarled their sour-voiced lieutenant. “No one risks a bold attack like that if they intended to abandon their comrade, and the Bloodfist was too wounded to run. That merc has to be dragging the heir and he can’t have gotten far. We’re not leaving, mercenary!” he roared now into the silence. Birds squawked in fear and burst into flight. Shaundar was amazed by their plethora of bright rainbow plumage. “We’re here ‘til we find you, so save yourself and turn over that Bloodfist bastard!”

Ice filled Shaundar’s veins as he saw a clear line to the lieutenant’s windpipe through a natural triangular murder-hole in the rocks. He breathed out softly as he squeezed the trigger. Then he vaulted over the stone and fled into the underbrush and up the river. He was long gone as the other scro ran to the aid of their commander and called out to him. When Shaundar doubled back he could see that they were staggered haphazardly around the edge of the riverbank while one of them attempted to revive the doomed lieutenant. Shaundar knew their efforts would fail. His shot had been true. He was trained for it.

While they were distracted, he ducked behind another tree and took the opportunity to reload. This was a time-consuming and noisy task which involved stepping into a stirrup in the center of the bow to brace while drawstrings were fastened onto the bowstring and then drawn back with a crank.

“I think I hear something over there,” another Bloodaxe remarked, indicating his general direction. Shaundar froze in place and waited.

A twig snapped somewhere not too far off and it was followed by a grunt. To Shaundar it sounded like a boar of some kind. “There!” exclaimed the scro who had been searching near the thicket, perhaps eager to redeem himself. He charged the noise and the rest of the soldiers followed.

Shaundar poked his head around the trunk and took aim with his crossbow at the hindmost straggler. His string twanged and once again the bolt was true, piercing his neck through his spine and carrying right through into his windpipe. He fell and no one noticed.

Shaundar considered reloading and firing at the second hindmost but decided against it. Instead he abandoned the weapons in his hands, scrambled over to the body and quickly stripped it of its breastplate, its weapons, and its boots while the fallen scro stared at him with accusatory eyes. Was he still alive? To be sure, Shaundar jabbed the soldier’s own knife into his throat and drew it firmly through the damaged windpipe just above the quarrel, severing his esophagus and both carotid arteries. *Just like little assassin’s school*, he mused. Then he wiped the blade on his victim’s trousers so that it wouldn’t drip on anything and give him away. Considering taking his helm but rejecting the idea because it would dull his senses, he put the boots on and doubled back along the path that the scro had already taken.

A squeal and a snarl confirmed Shaundar's suspicions about the nature of the intruder. There were the sounds of a struggle and a few wet, meaty thumps accompanied by more squeals, one of which was cut short. A grizzled old scro with a scar across his face burst from the undergrowth and let out a stream of enraged swearing. "Fucking sow!" he roared at last.

"Trust women to get in the way, even among pigs," jested one of the others.

"At least we'll have dinner," another suggested hopefully.

Silence fell, thick with tension. Shaundar wondered if the elder was going to kill the comedians. He started working his way back around to the thicket in the undergrowth.

"Make camp," the grey-haired scro growled.

"Sir," one of the comics began, "our commanders are dead. Maybe we should . . ."

"Do you want to go back and tell the lord that we went snivelling home because of a single mercenary?" the veteran demanded.

There was a moment of thick silence. "I see your point, sir," the other joker agreed.

"I'm assuming command," the old scro announced. Shaundar wormed his way back into the brambles, disappointed.

He was alarmed by Corin's appearance, slumped against the tree trunk and more grey than green. Shaundar checked to see if the scro was still breathing and was surprised to find that he was relieved when the answer was yes.

The Bloodaxes made their way back towards the riverbed, most of them carrying pieces of a very large bristled pig. He was uncertain how they had determined that the beast was a sow and not a boar because its head was adorned with enormous tusks that looked incredibly sharp. Sure enough, a few of the soldiers nursed large gore marks, and one limped along on a gashed thigh. He smelled the blood even at this distance and a sickly scent as well, and he knew that this wound was on its way to a good infection. "We're going to have to bind that," the old orc observed critically. "You're losing a lot of blood. Raknar, Kort; carry him." Two unwounded scro carried their injured companion in a professional, soldierly manner.

Shaundar examined his acquisitions. He had the breastplate, another crossbow, a full quiver, two knives, a second axe, and a proper spear. The Bloodaxes started making an encampment and Shaundar used the noise to fasten on the breastplate, which required some meticulous adjusting in order for it to fit properly. The weapons were even equipped with sheaths and belts and so he buckled them on; all except for the spear of course, and the crossbow. This he loaded while the Bloodaxes

were pitching tents, burying the sound of the drawstring in the noises of the canvas. He placed it in Corin's lap.

Corin came around at this disturbance and his eyes fixed on Shaundar.

Shaundar leaned close and whispered, "The safety's on. You'll only have one shot because I doubt you can reload, so if need be, make it count."

Corin nodded just once, and gripped the stock firmly.

Shaundar took advantage of the continued activity to venture out again. If they were going to dig in, so should he. The basic needs of survival remained unchanged from their original objective. "We'll need food and water," he explained softly. "I'm going out again. I'll be back."

He began to make his way back around to the river. He could fill that empty quiver with water and bring it back to Corin if he just blocked up the small opening at the point of the cone with perhaps a leaf and some more of that oak's sap. It wasn't until he had nearly reached it and was beginning his dragon walk through the foliage that someone asked, "Where's Barga?"

They began to call his name and spread out. Shaundar froze in place because they were actively looking in his direction. He made use of the gloom to conceal the shape of his form in a long shadow, tilting his head down to shield the faint phosphorescence of his orcish eyes.

“Go find him,” the elder told the two comedians at last.

“*Gul, karr,*” they acknowledged and began to make their way along the riverbed, crossbows in hand. The others went back and continued to bivouac. Shaundar grinned. The next two victims had been chosen.

Quickly he scurried ahead of them along the path they were tracing. Gambling that they weren’t expert trackers, he took the boots on and off and laid some footprints. Eventually he found a massive tree with a root system that was partially overhanging the water, and partially crawling over the land. It was large enough that any one of the roots would serve as cover and the secondary saplings that sprouted from those roots were good concealment. He laid his ambush there. The biggest spider he had ever seen, brightly coloured like a poisonous frog, lurked in a funnel-web about the size of a dust devil in the crook of a nearby root. It didn’t seem to be interested in him.

“Look at this!” one of the comedians pointed out. “Two sets of tracks; you see them?”

Shaundar smiled. His ruse was working.

The second one grunted acknowledgement. “You think Barga was trying to claim all the glory for himself?”

“Could be a trap,” the other pointed out. Shaundar smirked ruefully. *Too clever by half, my friend,* he thought.

“Okay, cautiously then,” the first one nodded, and they began to pick their way in his direction.

With elven patience Shaundar held his position.

When they finally came within range of the tree they chose the side by the river. Shaundar did not hesitate. He leaped on them from above and with no more than a grunt, aimed the point of the spear down with both hands and drove it through one Bloodaxe’s clavicle. He rolled off of the scro’s falling body and came up on the beach with his stolen axe in his hand. The other comic cried out and attempted to parry with his spear, but he was too late. Shaundar swung the axe into his face and his jaw collapsed in on itself. The spear jerked from the comic’s hand. Shaundar swung the axe again, this time with both hands, and caved in the scro’s face completely from the other side. He crumpled to the ground, blood pouring from the remains of his skull, and Shaundar knew if he wasn’t dead yet, he soon would be.

That’s six, he tallied silently. And one wounded.

Sure enough, the cry had alerted the Bloodaxes, and they were now calling out for the other two. Shaundar again grabbed breastplates and all weapons. He also divested the soldiers of their waterskins and ran back into the deep jungle.

Somebody swore. They had found Barga’s body. They examined it and found that yes, he was indeed dead. “Where did the goblinspawn

go?” demanded one in frustration. “I see his tracks leading up here, but none leading off!”

“Maybe that’s why Barga’s boots are gone,” the one who had heard Corin cough but missed him suggested.

Shaundar frowned. He was hoping they would miss that. Unfortunate. But he supposed he’d been amazingly lucky so far. It would be far too much to hope that they were that unobservant.

“This is not the work of a simple pirate,” the elder pointed out. “See that cut? He knew what he was cutting for. This is a Scout or a Shadow Soldier.” Shaundar started in surprise. That’s what the term *N’Velahrn* meant in Espruar. Had his methods revealed that he was an elf somehow?

“Who are you working for?” the elder bellowed into the jungle, frightening more birds and this time, startling some irritated monkeys into scolding him. Well, if he had to ask that question, then it was unlikely that he knew Shaundar’s true nature. He allowed his heart to quit racing.

“Sir,” the one who had called him “goblinspawn” asked, “shouldn’t we find Toth and Baug?”

The scarred old scro shook his head. “If they haven’t returned by now, they’re already dead.” He fixed the soldiers under his command with a fierce look. His eyes were green in his grey skin and his tusks were immense. “No one goes anywhere alone!” he commanded. “He still can’t

go far if he wants to save his friend. He can't sneak through the jungle with a body on his back without us hearing or seeing him. We'll set up a search; four of us in each group, and we'll fan out in three directions. The north and south groups will cover the riverbed. The rest of us will set up a rotating watch. Go out for half an hour then return and we'll switch off. Understood?"

They began dividing up and Shaundar sighed. This was a much better tactic. He could kill two people quickly enough that they were unlikely to be able to defend effectively against him or sound an alarm, but not four. One would alert the others, and the other survivor would likely deliver a blow that would spell death alone out here against so many. And he would also have to move Corin. It was only a matter of time before they found him if they began such a systematic search pattern.

As he returned to the thicket pondering this dilemma, he heard a bird in the trees that drew his attention because it sounded like a songbird that he knew from Nedethil. Looking up, he noticed a nest in the crook of a branch that extended out over the brambles, and it was thicker than the boughs of the great willow that overstretched the creek where he, Narissa, Yathar and his little sister Selena had spent much of their childhood. That branch connected to another that was just as wide. As a matter of fact, there was a whole network up there that would have made good support beams for wood elven housing. An idea began to crystallize.

He made it back to the brambles. Seeing that the four assigned to cover this direction, which was due east of the riverbed, had already begun the sweep, he moved quickly. “Corin,” he roused him gently. Corin started awake and almost shot Shaundar with the crossbow. Shaundar smiled. If his reflexes were still that good, they might have a chance. “Corin, I have to get you out of here,” he whispered. “The Bloodaxes are headed this way. We only have a few minutes.”

“Wh . . . what do you need me to do?” he mouthed so quietly that Shaundar had to press his ear to his face to hear it.

“Put this on,” he told the scro noble and he presented the breastplate.

“Only if you cut the runes off,” he smirked. Shaundar snorted and the giggles almost escaped him again.

Shaundar fastened the breastplate, which fortunately was a much better fit for Corin than his was. He placed the crossbow back in Corin’s hands. “See those scumbags down there?” he breathed, indicating the approaching Bloodaxe patrol.

Corin nodded.

“If they find you, kill one,” he instructed the scro. Corin smiled faintly and gripped the weapon more tightly. “Back in a minute,” he promised, and then checking to be sure that he was on the back side of the enormous tree from the approaching Bloodaxes, he scrambled up the

trunk. This was not an easy process. Down here the roots were almost taller than he was, and there were few small branches that lent themselves to the process. He climbed using mostly his arms, and at one point only his orcish claws kept him attached. But eventually he reached the spot he was after, where he had seen a thick parasitic vine plant.

Perhaps smaller vines were not strong enough to fasten an axe head onto a makeshift handle, but these were much broader. Would they hold an orc's weight, he wondered? Carefully he sawed one loose with a knife, not daring to chop at it for fear of the noise it would make, and bracing himself in the crook of the limb he looped it around his foot and yanked on it with all his strength in both directions. It held. That was the best test he would likely get.

He cut an extended length of the stuff, untangling it as quickly as he dared, and he tossed it over another large branch slightly above his head on the side of the tree he had been climbing. Seeing the patrol approaching, and seeing that they were actually combing through the underbrush with their axes, he rushed the climbing-harness he made from the vine length and almost pinched his exposed testicles in the cable. Breathing a silent whistle at the close call he lowered himself down.

Now he disentangled the climber's harness and fastened it to the shoulder straps on Corin's breastplate. This would be safer than a harness because Corin was likely too weak to rappel himself; providing, of course, that everything held. Thanking the gods that he was a spacefarer,

he formed a good bowline knot that would have held a mainsail in a solar storm. If the leather on the strapping didn't snap, it would work. He hoped. Corin was unconscious again and Shaundar prayed he wouldn't awaken before this operation was done. It was likely to hurt and would be more than a little frightening.

Hearing the patrol's voices, he quickly tied on everything he had stolen, from spears to axes to quivers to waterskins, and then he slowly started heaving to on the line, afraid that Corin would swing if he yanked on it too hard and too suddenly. Up Corin rose; like a crate on a cargo pulley to a ship's deck. A Navy work shanty began to repeat itself in his mind and yet again he resisted the urge to laugh.

"We've been over this spot before," the one with the keen ears pointed out to his fellows.

"So what?" another snapped. "Let's check it again."

"Heave away, haul away," Shaundar mouthed to himself in time with the refrain. Seeing that Corin had nearly reached the branch he fastened a simple slipknot around a sturdy tree root tendril so that it would come loose with some deliberate tugging but would stay strong until pulled properly.

Since Corin was out cold and time was against him, Shaundar risked another spell and levitated gently up to the side of the tree limb.

He stepped up and over as he released the spell and balanced on the branch.

With some effort he hauled Corin's boneless form over the side a limb at a time and set his back firmly onto the branch. The patrol was almost at the roots on the opposite side of the tree, still combing through underbrush, when he jerked the knot loose.

"Did you hear something?" the one with the keen ears asked, his voice sharp. Shaundar froze.

A monkey began to scream furiously somewhere nearby. They all snapped their gazes in that direction. Shaundar didn't miss the chance to haul up the rest of the vine.

"Bloody vermin," snarled one of the others crabbily and Shaundar breathed a sigh of relief. He resolved never to treat monkeys poorly again.

He forced himself to breathe slowly as the patrol passed underneath him and carried on. The bird whose song had drawn his attention chattered contently on its nest, utterly unconcerned by these strange simians in its perch. It was sky blue and yellow and it had a little tuft on its head.

When they were safely ahead of him, he released the bowline and then inspected the makeshift rope and Corin's shoulder straps. The line was scraped a little along most of its surface where it had rubbed

against the bark of the tree, but it should still be useable. The leather on the strapping was noticeably stretched but not cut at all as Shaundar feared it might be. Shaundar rolled his vine-cable up into a rope coil and slung it around his shoulders. He might need it again.

Corin groaned softly but Shaundar didn't think anyone was near enough to them to notice. And that was something else the Black Arrows had learned from their indomitable wood elven instructor Kael. "No one ever thinks to look up," he'd grinned through his ruined face, with his one good eye sparkling, "unless they know how to fly."

What next? He thought perhaps that now that Corin was likely secure, at least for a while, he would plan better attacks to take out groups. Kael had shown the Black Arrows a bag of interesting tricks. With all these crossbow quarrels that he was unlikely to have a chance to shoot, one of them had just come to mind.

Shaundar looped another vine through the buckles on Corin's breastplate just to be sure that he wouldn't wake up and fall off. He double-checked the wound and discovered that all the activity had caused more bleeding. He knew that the next time he moved Corin would have to be the last for a while. He needed to eliminate a few more enemies and then get to that stony outcropping. That might be possible to defend.

"You're in a tree, so don't look down," Shaundar hissed in Corin's ear. This time there was no indication one way or another if he'd been

heard. "I'll return soon." Shaundar shouldered the quivers and took up one of the spears, which he then used as a balancing pole to skip from one tree branch to another.

The search parties didn't cross the river, likely because they believed they would have heard splashing if he had tried to flee that way, but Shaundar skittered over the branches and managed the crossing fairly well; though the limbs bent and wavered just over the deepest part of the water. He briefly considered trying to carry Corin through the overhead branches. But then an old and almost-forgotten image flashed through his head; Yathar falling from a splitting willow branch and breaking his leg. Would these tree limbs hold both his and Corin Bloodfist's weight? And if they did, would he be able to balance well enough to manage the climb and carry the injured scro? He didn't think so; and because Corin's injuries were so severe, he didn't dare. Shaundar hissed through his tusks in frustration.

He found a patch of that sort of sticky, sloppy mud that sucked boots right off of feet. The insects were thick enough to obscure vision and he was happy to renew parts of the mud on his body because some of the ochre was beginning to flake off and leave exposed skin. That accomplished, he set to work on building what was essentially an enormous ball of mud formed around a thick and lengthy vine. Shaundar hiked this back into the trees and then he filled it full of crossbow bolts until it was a spiked mace on a rope. He left it to dry in the crook of a branch.

Back on the opposite side of the river, he gathered together a whole collection of twigs and long narrow rubbery leaves, cramming them into a now-empty quiver for ease of transport. He took the opportunity to drink deeply and heavily from the river and saw to a couple of other bodily functions, burying his spore thoroughly before returning to the treetops once more and making his way back over to Corin.

Shaundar could see that the patrols were making their way back now, and they were in an ill temper. Corin was semi-conscious. At Shaundar's return he nodded once, and then slumped immediately back into darkness.

Shaundar roused him. It was not easy. The Bloodfist eventually came around with a sullen glare. "You have to drink some water," he informed the orc quietly.

Corin nodded in acquiescence. Shaundar uncapped a waterskin and as gently as he dared, dripped some water into Corin's mouth. He drank, though more was likely spilled than not.

"Good enough," he nodded to Corin, who promptly passed back out. Shaundar then remade his climber's harness and then scuttled back down the tree and into the underbrush once more. While the scro were distracted with delegating who would go out next, he hooked the edge of someone's pack with one of the spears and dragged it into the bushes. He slipped it on and clambered back up into the trees.

“Okay, you who just got back; get some sleep!” the grey-haired scro commanded. “We could be here for a while. As for the rest of us –” he hefted his axe – “we’re going to head out in regular patrols. We’ll call our positions every ten minutes and head back after half an hour. Five in one patrol, four in the other two, five including Darrak at camp. Got it?”

“*Gul, karr!*” the Bloodaxes chorused. The orc with the leg wound, presumably Darrak, who was now a sickly grey that on an elf would have indicated death several days prior, nodded. Shaundar swore silently under his breath. That defeated his plan, which until now had been to wait until they were sleeping, then carry Corin out through the jungle. He knew that that the river emptied into the sea, as all rivers must. With the Bloodfist estate being right on the ocean shore, all he had to do to find his way out was follow the river. They couldn’t be more than a few hours from the compound at the most, and it maddened Shaundar to know that salvation was so close, yet still out of reach.

He looted the stolen pack. He was in luck. The previous owner had managed only to remove his sleeping gear. Everything else was still in it, including tindertwigs, rations, cooking supplies, rope, a knife, and clothing. Damnably, there was even a pipe and tobacco; an indulgence that Shaundar yearned for but did not dare for fear of revealing himself. Shaundar quietly and carefully shuffled on a pair of trousers before doing anything else. It was more than dignity that drove him. A body lost a lot of heat from the genitals and upper thighs. When night fell he would stay warmer and drier, and he would be less exposed to insects and baleful

plants. Shaundar would dress his unconscious companion too, but not until they were on the ground. The tree perch was just too perilous.

Biding his time, he wove a lattice with the twigs and leaves he had gathered in the empty quiver. At some point he might be able to dig a trap and fill it with quarrels or bamboo stakes, and the lattice would give him something to spread leaves and moss over in order to camouflage it; another green elven trick. He carefully rolled up his web, fastened it with the rope, and placed it in the top of the pack where the bedroll was supposed to go. Then he ate some of the rations. After that he tried to doze, but the heightened state caused by the Witch's Eye made sure that every time the patrols called their position, he jolted back into full consciousness again. Eventually he gave up and in order to combat his flagging focus he chewed some of the pipe tobacco. It tasted like a bitter, brandy-soaked purple pepper without the burning sensation; all things considered, not too bad.

“Can I have some of that?” whispered Corin hoarsely.

Shaundar pinched a little of it and put it in Corin's mouth. He made a face, but chewed anyway. “Are they gone?” he breathed; then covered his mouth as a coughing fit seized him.

Shaundar shook his head. “We're still in the tree,” he muttered back quietly. “You should eat. I have rations.” He gave over some of the jerky. Corin wrinkled up his nose at it. Shaundar frowned. “If you don't eat this,” he insisted, “I will feed you bugs. They're mushy.” Corin nodded

reluctantly and Shaundar gave him the jerky. He chewed it listlessly, mostly allowing it to dissolve in his mouth.

“Think I’m going to die, Bolvi?” Corin asked him with steady blue eyes.

Shaundar considered the question. “Let’s see the inside of your mouth,” he directed at last. Obediently Corin opened up and Shaundar studied the mucus membranes critically. It was impossible for Shaundar to tell if Corin might be turning blue when compared to his green skin, partially due to the pigmentation and partially due to the lack of illumination under the green canopy, but his mouth was as pink as any elf’s he’d known; and it was indeed still pink, not purplish. “You’re not bluing so far,” he decided, “so no, not yet.”

Corin nodded and closed his eyes. “You should still leave me, Bolvi,” he wheezed. “Save yourself. You owe me nothing.”

Once again Shaundar considered it. But after all that had happened, he rejected the idea almost immediately. “Not to the Bloodaxes,” he refused.

“How many . . . are left?”

Shaundar sympathized intensely with Corin’s struggle to draw breath. The injury that had necessitated his prosthetic mithril breastbone remained untreated for weeks before the surgery. He still had nightmares about not being able to breathe.

But Corin deserved an answer. “Eighteen,” he replied.

Corin was crestfallen. “Eighteen?” he whispered incredulously.

“It’s not that bad,” Shaundar assured him. “I’ve killed six already. And one’s badly wounded.”

Corin just blinked at him in stunned disbelief.

The patrols all called out again, and were answered by one of the scro standing watch in the base camp. “Half an hour!” he responded. “Head back!”

That’s right; they were at the apogee of their patrol. And dusk was setting in. It was time to move.

“I’ll be back, Corin,” he assured him. “I’m going to go even the odds a little.”

“What are you going to do?” Corin asked. Shaundar just grinned.

He took both crossbows and the quiver, and found a branch overlooking the base camp. There he set them both in a slightly smaller limb just above him and positioned them so that they would be braced a little. That accomplished, he dragged the spiked mudball up into an overhanging branch. Once again, he waited.

The scro were milling about the camp, and some of the initial tension had worn off, reducing their combat readiness. They were, however, still armed with the crossbows. The scro with the leg wound was lying either asleep or unconscious near the fire, and his orange skin was more of a ghastly yellow. One of them was searching around by the bushes. “Hey guys,” he said at last, “have you seen my haversack? I could swear I left it right around here somewhere . . .” Shaundar smiled.

When the next positioning call came, Shaundar waited for them to fall silent, and then he tossed the knife he’d stolen from the haversack to the ground as noisily as possible.

“What was that?” demanded the scro with the missing pack as he spun around. The knife was in the ground behind him. Shaundar knew that he sensed trouble, because he approached the knife warily and pulled it free with a dark expression on his face. But it didn’t save him.

As soon as he bent over the blade, Shaundar released his deadly medicine ball. The doomed orc had just enough time to look up before it connected with his skull. Momentum focused on the sharp points cracked his head like an egg and his skull burst into fragments as he fell. It made a subdued popping sound.

The others started at the noise. It took them a split second to realize what had happened and rush over to their comrade’s aid. In the meantime, Shaundar grasped both crossbows, aimed them as carefully as he dared in the brief flash of time available, and squeezed the triggers.

One shot went where it was supposed to; the other went into the second Bloodaxe's cheekbone. He reeled backwards but he was still alive.

The fourth Bloodaxe raised his crossbow and fired it, but Shaundar was already in motion. He grabbed the vine still attached to his spiked medicine ball and dove off of his perch, just like swinging over the creek beneath the willow back home. He and Yathar would release and allow their momentum to carry them over the water and into the bushes in a boy's challenge of bravery, sometimes resulting in injury but mostly resulting in scratches, ruined clothing and a parental lecture. Shaundar released and allowed momentum to carry him right into the scro's body, knocking him down and slowing Shaundar's fall. They scuffled, but the Bloodaxe was winded and Shaundar managed to get his knife free, which he drove repeatedly into the Bloodaxe's body wherever he could reach until he lay still.

Shaundar almost missed the axe aimed at his head, but he smelled the blood and saw the shadow flash out of the corner of his eye and he threw himself backwards just in time. Incredibly, the scro with the bolt sticking out of his face was trying to hack Shaundar apart. His eyes were completely mad and he was growling wordlessly. Shaundar desperately kicked his legs out from under him, and when the wounded Bloodaxe fell, Shaundar scrambled to his feet and thrust his knife several times into his back and shoulders. When he dropped the axe, Shaundar seized it and brought it up, then down. Something crunched. The Bloodaxe did not get up again.

A knife bounced off of his breastplate harmlessly. Shaundar looked up and Darrak, already sick with fever, was struggling to get to his feet and failing. He scrambled backwards and tried to brace himself up on a tree. As Shaundar approached, he growled low in his throat and reached for one of the spears.

Shaundar stood over him and Darrak looked into the face of death with grim defiance. “I should let you live,” Shaundar told him quietly, remembering the wound that had left the scar on his thigh. “That would be justice. But I will show more mercy than your people showed me. Die well, Darrak of the Bloodaxe Clan.” Shaundar grabbed a hold of the orc’s scalp and slit his throat from ear to ear. He bled out in seconds, and lay there in the dark spreading pool with an expression of what might have been puzzlement in his sightless eyes.

Shaundar was panting now from the exertion and covered in sweat and blood. Knowing that all of this, though it seemed like a long time, could not have taken more than maybe a minute, he made the most of the time before the ten minute call-in to make staying as unattractive as possible. Leaving the bodies where they fell, he pissed on the fire and most of the roasting sow, dumped water over it until it sizzled, then kicked the remaining pieces in all directions. He shredded the tents and all the bedrolls, with the exception of two that he bundled onto another looted haversack. Then he stole every tindertwig, every piece of clothing and every scrap of food that he could carry. He didn’t try to remove the axe from the one scro’s spine, and he didn’t take the spears because they were just too awkward, but he took every other weapon.

He turned over the body of the scro who had been killed by the spiked mudball, and the horrific scent and sight of exposed brain tissue overwhelmed him. Just like that, he was back on the *Queen's Dirk*, crawling through the viscera of his dead shipmates in a desperate attempt to reach the helm while he dragged his broken leg behind him, and when he reached it, he looked up to see the partially decapitated remains of his good friend and mentor Garan, still on the seat, though most of his brain was on the floor in front of him.

It was only for a fraction of a second, and then he was back in the Dukagsh jungle. His eyes wide and staring, it took him a moment to figure out which reality was the current one. Shaundar opened his mouth to breathe a sigh of relief and vomit spewed forth instead. He swore and wiped his brow by sweeping his hands over his forehead and hairline, shivering uncontrollably.

“Ten minute call-in!” called out the grizzled old scro. “Bartok, Darrak, where are you, damn it?”

Shaundar struggled to collect his senses. He needed to get out of here before they realized something was wrong. What in the Nine Hells was the matter with him, anyway? He gathered up the crossbows again and all the supplies, and shuffled off; not back towards the tree where Corin waited, but towards the stone outcropping. He stashed the extra weaponry and most of the extra gear there. Then he hurried back to Corin. It was dusk, when his elven vision would be more effective than

orcish night vision, and the patrols were on their way back but it would take them a few minutes to get there. The time to move was now.

He clambered up the tree. “Corin,” he hissed. “It’s time to go.”

Corin did not respond. He was unconscious again. Shaundar fastened another vine to Corin’s shoulder straps with a bowline, waited for the east patrol to cross back in front of the tree on the way to their base camp, and then he quickly but carefully lowered Corin back down to the ground. He made his original vine back into a climber’s harness, a much quicker operation with trousers to protect his genitals, and rappelled down the tree. Mother bird was feeding her young now. She twittered at him, as if to say goodbye.

“Bones of Dukagsh!” exclaimed one of the patrollers returning to what was left of the base camp, and Shaundar could hear him voiding the contents of his stomach noisily. Shaundar seized the chance to pick Corin up over his shoulders by one leg and arm. He groaned aloud, as Shaundar anticipated that he might, but no one heard. Running into the forest, he could hear the Bloodaxes’ exclamations of surprise and horror. *How does it feel to find your friend’s brains on the ground, you bastards?* Shaundar thought ruthlessly. The image of Garan’s awful death bobbed once again to the surface of his consciousness, but he fought it down with a snarl.

Shaundar doubled back to the stony foxhole. It was awkward to shuffle Corin’s bulky, limp body through the crawlspace, and it took extra time and care because he was trying not to pull too hard on the scro’s

lateral muscles and aggravate his wound, so it was almost completely dark by the time that Shaundar managed it. The soft illumination of the phosphorescent mosses and mushrooms were sufficient to navigate by, but there would be no elven advantage for operating in low light when the gloom was this thick.

The move was as hard on Corin as Shaundar feared. Once situated, he began to breathe in laboured panting. Shaundar was glad of the stone barrier to muffle sound. He doubled-checked but, not seeing any visible changes to the wound save some more bleeding, which was only to be expected, he went to work. As promised, with some effort he lifted Corin into a pair of trousers and then a pair of those distinctive scro steel-toed war-boots. Now that he was on the ground and had no intention of climbing any more trees in the near future he put his own stolen boots back on. One advantage, he mused, of wearing the form of an orc was that shoes were rarely too small, something that had been a constant problem in his life. He remembered suddenly how he'd been whipped for his inability to wear the standard-issue wooden shoes in Raven Talon, and unconsciously bared his teeth in a snarl of rage.

Clothing dealt with, he made use of the early hours of dark to build a small fortress. First, he loaded the six crossbows he had thus far managed to acquire and set them in a full circle around the stone barrier, some poking through murder-holes, and others propped up so their sights were pointed over the edge. He stabilized them with rocks and bits of sod which he cut from the ground with one of the knives he'd appropriated. Then he uncoiled some of the rope from the stolen pack

and attached it one piece at a time to the trigger mechanisms of the crossbows, finishing the ends with loops large enough to shove booted feet through that didn't quite touch the ground. Provided that he was careful not to stomp on them too hard, they would create decent cover fire, although there was no way they would be accurate enough to be any better use than that. Still, it would enable him to shoot almost simultaneously in all directions for at least one shot, if need be, and make a good distraction if nothing else. He could always aim and fire them if time and opportunity allowed.

With Corin's breathing sounding so arduous, Shaundar was reluctant to leave him, but he had no choice. He propped him up as well as he could and crept off once more to sneak back around the other side of the Bloodaxe camp.

Shaundar was gratified to see that the scro were busy. Most of them were gathering up the remains of their comrades. Two were taking turns working a fire drill, desperately trying to restore their campfire. A tiny wisp of sullen smoke was beginning to sputter lethargically from the kindling they had gathered, but Shaundar knew from experience that it was far from ready to be left to its own devices and they would be occupied for a while yet. The grizzled grey scro glared into the underbrush with eyes that were angry and alert. Shaundar knew to avoid his gaze, especially without the fire to provide backlight. Most of the others, however, were in exactly the right state of mind; terrified. And that would cause them to make mistakes.

Eleven were now dead. That left thirteen. Shaundar had, of course, never taken on so many scro at once, but in theory it could be done with proper preparation.

When he reached the far side of the camp, Shaundar found a small bamboo grove and chopped a couple of pieces free. He did not take special care to be silent about it, but he did make sure that no sound of the metal knife he was using was audible. “What in the Hells was that?” demanded one of the frightened Bloodaxes. That was his cue, so Shaundar moved off to another side of the camp to find more bamboo to harvest.

“Nothing, you idiot!” the response came a minute later. “You’re jumping at shadows!”

Exactly, Shaundar thought with a savage grin. When he was in the new position, he made just enough noise once again to attract some attention.

“There’s something over there!” another Bloodaxe exclaimed. “Can’t you hear it?”

Shaundar froze. He could smell the acrid scent of their fear even at this distance. There was also something faintly porcine. He must be downwind. But the scro elder did not smell of fear. He reeked of rage.

“I don’t hear anything,” someone else said uncertainly. With that, Shaundar rustled a bush deliberately and then vanished once again into the jungle.

“There!” cried the first scro who had spoken, and a few of them grabbed up their spears and charged off into the bushes. Shaundar skittered off to one side and back towards the camp.

“Stay where you are!” bellowed the grey-haired leader, but they were beyond listening. They started poking around at the spot where Shaundar had been. Shaundar waited.

There was a faint shifting noise. “There!” yelled one of the searchers again, and all four of his companions began thrusting their weapons into the undergrowth grunting and growling.

A shrill *screed!* echoed through the forest, and a very frightened piglet came charging out of the bushes and into the scro encampment. The stream of vitriol that issued from the elder’s mouth, most of it in regards to the intelligence and breeding of the squad under his command, blistered Shaundar’s ears. He shook his head at the irony and wondered about the piglet and whether or not it might have been one of the dead sow’s babies. It seemed that luck was still in his favour.

But now he had what he wanted, so Shaundar made his way back to the rock barricade. Corin was still breathing laboriously. It was beginning to make him nervous. Now that it was night, Shaundar tucked

the blankets in around him; one underneath as much as possible to prevent the ground from leeching his heat and one over top. Shaundar put his hand to Corin's forehead and his skin was cold and clammy. Shaundar's mouth thinned into a line around his tusks. Not a good sign.

He counted the knives he had acquired. They totalled eight. That left him six that he could use and two to keep. He tested them all and set aside the two sturdiest, and then he took the other six apart by unwrapping their hilts and removing the pins that fastened on the bone handles, leaving steel blades and tangs. He set them aside, and made use of one of the remaining knives to carve up the bamboo he had gathered.

First, he took the thickest reeds with the strongest walls and cut them into six tubes, with a hole just a little larger than size of the tangs of the blades at one end, the other sealed. Those he set near the un-hilted blades. The others he carved up into sharp stakes.

He went back into the undergrowth to gather more twigs and grasses and brought them back. Corin's condition was unchanged. Shaundar ate some of the roasted pork that the Bloodaxes had managed to cook before he had destroyed their fire. He tried to rouse Corin to share, but he wouldn't wake. Now Shaundar was worried.

He wove together some more latticework and set out with the stakes to lay some traps. He was interrupted, however, by a happy opportunity. Two of the Bloodaxes were headed towards the river with

iron pots in one hand and their spears in the other. They looked and smelled frightened. Shaundar knew they were right to be.

He would have to act quickly, before they passed the stony foxhole and heard Corin's harsh breathing. He didn't have a crossbow because his hands were full of the stakes he was going to set. How to do this quietly?

Shaundar crept up behind them as they glanced furtively about themselves and headed for the water. "Shh!" one of them whispered suddenly. The other one came up next to him. "Did you hear that?" he murmured. Shaundar knew they had picked up Corin's panting because he had heard it a few moments before.

There was no more time to consider it. Hoping for the best, Shaundar grabbed the closest one by the hair and twisted his knife through the bones and the tendons of his throat. He made a faint gurgling noise as he went down and that was all. As he was falling, Shaundar snatched up his spear and thrust it at his companion's windpipe. Because the other one was in the process of turning around and because Shaundar had no leverage it wasn't a killing blow, but it did bash him hard enough in the neck to choke off the cry that would have escaped. Good enough. Shaundar finished the job by ramming the knife still in his other hand up under his chin and wrenching it as hard as he could. That one he eased to the ground before pulling the knife free and releasing black blood into the ground and over his hand.

The newly-dead did not have their crossbows or their haversacks – probably to keep their hands free in the dark in case he snuck up on them – but they had two spears, two iron pots, and two more knives. The pots were the solid cauldron variety with three feet. He left the bodies where they had fallen for the time being and brought his new acquisitions back to his little fortress. As he disassembled the knife he used to kill his last targets, and the knife that had carved the bamboo, he took a quick inventory. Two blankets, both around Corin. Three breastplates; they were each wearing one. Three more pairs of trousers and six old sailcloth shirts. Two more pairs of boots other than the ones they wore. Eight disassembled knife blades, a whole pile of tindertwigs, four good lattice covers and several pieces of bamboo, most of which were cut into spikes but six of which were formed into large hollow cylinders. Three waterskins, two of which were now empty. One vine rope and one coil of real rope, which was now down a few feet. Food consisted of rations enough for two weeks in the jungle if necessary and some roast pig. One pouch of tobacco and a useless pipe. While he was thinking of it, he chewed a little more, instantly regretting the bitter aftertaste which he now knew would linger for nearly an hour. Two field haversacks; one he had looted from the bushes, the other taken when he trashed their base so that he had something to put things into. Two iron cauldrons and some smaller pots and dishes from the first stolen pack. A handful of wilting oak leaves. And weapons: two new knives, six armed crossbows, two full quivers with one that was only missing a couple of quarrels (though the bolts left in his braids had fallen out long ago,) and no less than eight axes and five spears.

Up until this point, Shaundar had more or less been reacting, just trying to keep one step ahead of the enemy, just trying to stay alive. But that was when an idea struck Shaundar so forcefully and so clearly that he sat bolt upright and covered his mouth to stifle the gasp that threatened to escape. With Corin's condition deteriorating, he really had no other choice, but they might get out of this after all.

Once he had finished taking apart the knives, save for the two he had just taken, he carved two more large and thick pieces of bamboo into tubes with a small puncture at one end and a slit in the other. He also re-carved one of the bamboo spikes into a small container about the size of a glass vial. Then he set out to complete what he had started. With a spear he dug some shallow pit traps in a trigram around his bolthole, and filled them with the bamboo spikes he had made and some of the extra quarrels. He covered them with his lattice-works and a thin layer of the leaves and mosses of the forest. Then he took one of the haversacks and the pots and went to the river. Before he did anything else, he searched along the muddy and mossy banks. Would his luck hold? His entire idea depended upon acquiring something very specific. It was likely that he would find it, but . . .

And there it was! A tiny turtle, almost invisible in the dark, was crawling along the edge of the riverbed. "I'm sorry," he whispered softly, and the turtle was carefully placed in one of the cauldrons.

Shaundar moved further down and used the other cauldron to scoop up little obsidian fragments and then dump them quietly into the

haversack. Even though he wrapped his hand in one of the sailcloth shirts he still managed to cut his fingers again on the incredibly sharp black stones. Well, that was exactly why he wanted them, wasn't it? Bringing the obsidian back to the shore, he noticed that the cauldron had fallen over and the turtle had almost escaped. He tore the sleeve from one of the shirts, tied it at one end to make a bag, slipped the turtle into it and fastened the other end to the belt loop on his trousers. Taking the now-empty pot he made his way over to the giant tree with the great claw mark in it that he had discovered what seemed like a century or two ago now, and gathered as much sap as possible. The last thing he did before leaving the riverside was to fill the now-empty pot that he had used as a scoop, drink as much of the water as he dared at once, and refill it.

All of these things he brought back to their bolthole. It was long past time to see to Corin's wound once more. Shaundar poured cauldron water carefully over the embedded quarrel and was gratified when Corin groaned and hissed, no matter the risk it posed. "Who goes there?" demanded a voice from the encamped Bloodaxe troops. Shaundar ignored them and continued to wash the injury site. Then he shredded the rest of the sleeveless sailcloth shirt and bandaged it better. On a hunch he tilted Corin so his wounded side was turned towards the ground, though he was still propped up in a mostly seated position. A few moments later blood ran from the edges around the bolt. Corin let out a sigh and breathed a little more easily.

That bought them a little more time, but Shaundar knew it wouldn't last. He threaded lengths of rope through the bamboo cylinders.

To make sure he would have enough to work with he used a good three feet on each pipe. With most of the remaining rope he bound the bamboo in tight coils, using a stick to tighten them firmly and wedge them into place. In roughly octagonal points around the foxhole's perimeter he dug with a spear until he had formed a thin trench. With the end of the ropes sticking from the sides with the larger slits, he slipped a noose-knot through the holes in the tangs of the hiltless knives. All of this was left on the ground until they were all completed.

When he returned to the bolthole he checked on Corin again. The scro was breathing better, but he seemed paler. Blood loss was obviously beginning to tell. His mouth made a line again, but there was nothing else to be done.

Shaundar set the haversack of obsidian fragments to one side of him and all the tindertwigs on the other. He sat cross-legged and placed the empty cauldron into his lap. One by one he tore the match-heads from the tindertwigs and placed them carefully into the pot.

Now came the tricky part, a particular combination of skills and properly-applied magic that Shaundar had developed in his studies of alchemical explosives. There was a fairly well-known ritual that prevented fire from damaging the spell's recipient. Shaundar cast it frequently when working with volatile flammable materials, just in case. It was when he was spending long hours in the lab, avoiding Captain Wintervale, that he had really considered the nature of the spell. What mechanism did it use to prevent flames from causing damage? It was not just the body of the

recipient that was affected, but it was also anything that individual was wearing or carrying. Did it create some kind of invisible shield that guarded against fire and heat? Or did it simply prevent combustion from occurring when an item was in contact with the recipient's body?

The differentiation wasn't relevant in most active combat scenarios, but it made all the difference in the world when handling explosives. In the lab Shaundar tested the theory, proceeding on the assumption that it was the latter premise that was correct. And his experiments seemed to bear it up.

The spell required a vial of water. Fortunately there wasn't a shortage of that. Shaundar took the bamboo piece he had carved down for this purpose and carefully filled it with some of the water from one of the skins. With that, he murmured the incantation and formed the appropriate sigils with his empty hand. The vial vanished and a momentary red glow settled around Shaundar and dissipated. There was, of course, a risk that he had alerted the Bloodaxes, but he felt that most of the light had been blocked by the foxhole and the foliage that lay between them, especially since they had the backlighting of their fire to deal with.

Now he worked quickly. The spell had a limited duration; at his level of understanding, approximately 20 minutes. He shook out the haversack over top of the cauldron containing the match-heads and mixed obsidian shards together with the stem of the previously useless pipe. Without his spell, this would have been exceptionally dangerous.

The problem with such improvised explosives was a high threat of accidental ignition.

Taking the handle of the cauldron in his hand before getting up so that he never once lost physical contact with it, he jogged to the first of his casings. Tolerating the many tiny cuts he picked up a couple of small handfuls of the mixture in the pot and dropped them into the casing, while bracing it with his knees so that it never lost contact with his body. That accomplished, he thrust the knife blade into the trench he had prepared so that it dug into the earth below, and set a little mud and moss on the knife quillons while he rested the device on his lap. Never once letting go of the bamboo casing, Shaundar dabbed sap around the cut that was intended for the knife tang, and then cautiously slid the rope through the bamboo on the side with the puncture until the tang was partially, but not all the way, inside the cylinder and it rested precariously on the mud, with the opening reinforced by tree sap. He would have handled this in an entirely different way were it not for the spell he had cast, perhaps instead carving a third hole in the center to fill the casing with the catalyst once the tang was already in place, which would later be sealed. This would have increased the risk of malfunction, but normally, drawing the tang through the match-heads in any way would probably trigger the detonation. Metal creating friction against the strike-anywhere match-heads – in this case, the tang of the blade – was the detonator. The small space would compress the gasses created by the ignition, and not having enough room to expand, they would explode. That was still the principle by which these devices would work.

Though all his nerves screamed at him to hurry, Shaundar knew that rushing in explosives was a good way to court serious injury, so he took time to seal the puncture around the rope with more sap, and set a tripwire across the edge of his perimeter. Ideally, when someone crossed the wire, it would yank the tang deeper into the catalyst, create friction and ignite, triggering the bomb.

There was no time to inspect it more thoroughly. Quickly he rounded the circle and repeated the entire process seven times. He almost didn't make it; the last tripwire had to be set after the spell had expired and any mistake might have cost Shaundar his limbs or his life. But he was successful, even though his only illumination was the glowing white mushrooms in the grass. He supposed the Witch's Eye must still be working on his senses. The wind was also shifting slightly; he could smell the drying blood on the bodies of the two hapless water-bearers. Were the Bloodaxes wondering what had happened to them yet, he wondered?

After that, he dropped the cauldron and haversack at the outcropping and grabbed up the quivers, then spent maybe an hour breaking fletching off of quarrels and thrusting them butt first into the ground at random intervals through the killing field.

With that, he returned to their bolthole. Once more he checked on Corin. His pulse was rapid and erratic. Shaundar decided that was enough. Once again he considered leaving the orc behind. At this rate he would likely die before the Bloodaxes could torture him.

But was he sure? Was he really?

It was time to call them out; force their hand, force them to fight on his terms. There were only a handful of preparations left to make and the sky was beginning to lighten. For the same reasons that dusk had been the right time to move, the twilight before dawn was the right time to act.

He double-checked to make sure his turtle was still in its improvised sack. It was. Okay. Shaundar cut the spare armour into its individual pieces and reinforced weak spots in their defenses. Then he set the spears around the first perimeter in an almost even division, positioned so that he could grab one from any angle. He set the axes on all four sides in pairs. He belted on the knives so that there was one at each hip. Then once again, inspiration struck him. And for once, he even had the proper material component required for the magic he had in mind, with no adaptation required!

He draped the clothing that was left, save one shirt just in case, on the ground, and positioned the cauldrons so that they were in the center. Then he cut a piece of cooked rind from the remaining pork, shoved the hand grasping it up to the wrist into one of the pots, formed the signs and intoned the required arcane phrase in a hoarse whisper. An oily substance materialized in the pot and spilled over into the other one, though some of it did make it onto the garb as well. Perfect!

Shaundar slathered the excess grease onto the clothing as well as he was able, and then once more he ventured out. Careful not to step too far into the field of destruction he had created, he laid the greased clothing down on the ground, also in a perimeter. When he returned, he set the spearheads in one of the cauldrons and leaned them against the rock, instead of leaving them in the circle he had previously created.

He could think of nothing else left to do. Finally, all was as ready as it could be.

Shaundar dozed fitfully until more light bled into the gloaming, though the Witch's Eye worked against his weariness. A thin mist rose up from the nearby river and drifted across the ground cover. A sudden growl made him look up. Over the other side of the perimeter, two small creatures were worrying at the corpses of the water-bearers. Shaundar had never seen their like. Were they lizards of some kind? Dragons, maybe? They walked on their hind legs swishing whip-like tails for balance, and they had tiny arms that seemed to be useful for grasping things close to their sharp maws and not much else. The orcish faces were being quite thoroughly chewed.

A strangely reptilian sound, something like *rrraaak!* came out of nearby bushes, and maybe a dozen more of the creatures appeared and began devouring the bodies. Well, by Shaundar's count there were thirteen corpses lying on the ground or piled up somewhere; he supposed that attracting scavengers was inevitable.

A cry came from the distant camp at that point, and through the trees with the backdrop of what was left of their fire, there seemed to be a flurry of activity. One of the scavenger lizards looked up from the eyeball it was eating, hissed irritably, and went back to its meal. Shaundar could see the ground near the camp come to life, and a wave of the creatures swarmed it. There was a lot of shouting. He grinned. Maybe all his preparations would be unnecessary after all, and the jungle would take care of the problem for him. He just hoped that the creatures wouldn't be drawn by the scent of Corin's blood on the wind that was now blowing gently towards the Bloodaxes.

That also gave him an idea.

Probably about twice the scavengers previously visible at the bodies of the water-bearers scurried out of the foliage. They bit and argued over choice morsels. Within minutes, the corpses were picked clean. Nothing was left save their armour and their bones. The lizard creatures moved on and disappeared into the night. Why they didn't come to him he would never know. Perhaps they smelled the sulphur in the pipe bombs and it repelled them. There was always a danger that the local wildlife would set off his improvised landmines, of course. But they didn't.

The camp seemed to be calming down, but it did not fall silent. Too bad. Shaundar studied the available light with a discerning gaze. It was bright enough now that orcish night vision would not be as effective

as an elf's ability to see in dim light. Corin's condition was deteriorating. Now was the time.

Shaundar gathered up the oak leaves and put them in a pocket. That's when he finally remembered that he had yet to renew his *greater alter self* spell. Chuckling to himself at the irony he chanted the command phrase softly. A fat lot of good all of this effort to save Corin Bloodfist and eliminate the Bloodaxes would have done him, if they had seen he was an elf!

He stood up and stretched his aching legs, relieved that at last he could come out of the cramped foxhole. He opened up the tobacco pouch, packed the pipe, and lit it. The first draw tasted like all the comforts he had left behind in this wilderness. Shaundar sighed with unadulterated pleasure. If he was to die, at least he would have this moment of contentment.

"That smells . . . so good," rasped Corin suddenly. Shaundar looked down to see his bright blue eyes open and focused. "Can I have . . . some of that?"

Shaundar blinked at him. "You have a crossbow quarrel in your lung," he said in a quiet voice that was no longer a whisper.

"I'm going to die anyway," the Bloodfist smiled. "Might as well."

“You’re not going to die,” Shaundar assured him. “I’m getting us out of here. You can smell this, though.” He bent down and wafted the pipe smoke into Corin’s face with his hand. Corin’s nostrils flared eagerly.

“The good stuff,” he whispered and settled back down into the dirt.

“Over here!” came the call of one of the Bloodaxes, drawn in by Shaundar’s intangible bait. He smirked. *Just like the funnel-web spider*, he thought to himself, feeling smug. He turned around and keeping his hands close to his chest so Corin would not see the gestures, he palmed the little turtle in its improvised gunny sack and murmured the relevant incantation. A faint shimmer flooded briefly over his body, something he was banking on Corin’s dubious consciousness to explain. Sadly, the little turtle also vanished, sacrificed to the gods of war to assure their survival. With that he stood back up and took another draw off of the pipe. Ah, delicious.

“There he is!” announced another Bloodaxe, approaching from a slightly different angle. Movement in the trees indicated that Shaundar had been correct to anticipate a 360 degree attack plan. Other orcs were moving into flanking positions.

“Ready to give up?” asked a third Bloodaxe hopefully. They were all still fully armed with their crossbows, axes and spears, either never having lost them or having reclaimed what was left by their dead compatriots.

“You wish,” Shaundar retorted, champing the pipe between his teeth. He remembered when this had been impossible around the new tusks and smiled.

“You’ve led us on a merry chase, mercenary,” the grey-haired elder said from somewhere behind him; somewhat off to his right, probably coming from the river.

Without turning around, Shaundar responded, “To the Hells with that. I’ve killed more than half your men. I’m a one scro army.”

“What in the Abyss for?” demanded the elder, obviously exasperated. “I’ve been trying to wrack my brain and I just can’t figure it out. What do you owe this clan scro? What did we do to earn your wrath?”

Shaundar couldn’t help it. At this last question, he burst into a bitter, mad laugh and he could not stop.

A growl issued from the greying orc’s throat. “All right, I’ve had enough of this scum. Shoot him.”

But that was exactly what Shaundar was waiting for. The first crossbow bolts bounced harmlessly off of his magically-protected skin as the Shadow Soldier tipped the contents of the pipe into the two iron pots at his feet. That was when he finally palmed the disintegrating oak leaves in his pocket and cast his last spell.

Strength and vitality flooded into his limbs. The grease in the pots at his feet burst into flames. “Death to Bloodaxe!” he roared, and all of his pent-up rage burst forth in a war cry that came from his belly and his soul. He grabbed one of the spears from the flaming pot and hurled it with all of his strength at the scro who wanted to know if he was ready to give up. The spell, the Witch’s Eye and the power of his raw rage combined with all the training he had received to send the fiery javelin careening farther than he’d ever imagined it could. It pierced the scro through the center of his torso and out the other side. Blood exploded from his mouth and the orc collapsed face first, the flames already consuming him.

“Kill him!” howled the elder in pure hatred, and the scro burst forth in a massive all-around charge.

Shaundar grabbed another spear and waited, trembling with the labour of his patience. But it was only seconds before they hit the first line of his defenses. The tripwires pulled and the pipe bombs exploded, popping like firecrackers in short succession. The air filled with smoke, flak and screams. Shaundar covered his eyes just in case, and powder and dust peppered around him, but his charges were set at the right distance and none of the shards actually touched him. A smell permeated the air like brimstone and burnt pork. When the smoke cleared, two of his foes were dead and several were badly injured. One of his devices had turned out to be a dud, which didn’t surprise him given the primitive construction. He stepped on the rope trigger mechanism for the

crossbow he'd aimed in that direction. Someone cried out in pain. Snarling with rage the Bloodaxes pressed the attack.

That's when they hit the second line of his defenses. Three more orcs howled their agony as they stepped right into his pit traps full of stakes. One shrieked and tried to limp out of the pit, but his foot was dangling oddly and he fell. Shaundar was certain his ankle was broken.

The marine stomped on both of the crossbows behind him to maintain cover fire, though he didn't really expect them to hit anything significant. Then he whipped his body back around and threw the spear. His aim was true, shattering an enemy's lower jaw and spilling his teeth and one tusk out onto the ground. The scro hit the ground face-first and the flames from the spearhead licked over him eagerly.

Shaundar gripped a third spear and stepped on another rope trigger, this one to his left. The charging orc on that side was pierced through the upper shoulder but kept coming. Shaundar stomped on the crossbow trigger to his right and hurled the third spear to his left at the scro with the shoulder-wound. He was completely surprised when the spearhead sank deep into his un-armoured flank, and more surprised still when he buckled to his knees and then his face, all his strength having deserted him. The metallic tang of blood hung thick in the air.

The elven soldier turned his attention back to the right and two wounded and angry orcs were still charging at him with murder in their eyes. They were getting close now. Shaundar picked up the empty

flaming pot, whirled it about his head like a shot-put, and hurled it at one of the furious orcs. It hit the scro right in the head with a metallic thud, knocking his helmet clean off, and down he went, screaming as the flames engulfed his face and most of his torso. The one he had managed to wound with his lucky crossbow shot kept coming, consumed by battle-fever.

There was no more time; the survivors were right on top of him. Shaundar hurled the rest of the spears and the other pot in random directions around himself. The cauldron rolled and spilled its fiery contents all over the ground in its curving path. Bushes lit on fire, as did the greasy clothing scattered all around the immediate perimeter of the foxhole. The screaming scro ran through the flaming gauntlet, but not without earning some burns.

He managed to throw one of the axes, which missed all the immediate threats but caved in most of the head of the unfortunate with the broken ankle, who never got back up. After that he needed both of the axes he had managed to seize to battle the many foes suddenly besieging him from the other side of the stone.

A great red-skinned scro with a badly-burned face and his helm askew swung an axe at his face. Shaundar stepped back and parried awkwardly with the one in his right hand and brought the one in his left down into his enemy's shoulder, mostly severing his arm. He howled and fell away. Another one rose to take his place. Shaundar chopped with the axe in his right hand and severed the scro's ear and part of his cheekbone

with his glancing blow. This just made the scro angrier, and he struck back with a mighty cleave. Shaundar managed to get his left-hand axe up to block in time, but only just. The handle split like cordwood and the pieces fell to the ground. The others, too far away to connect with the hand-axes, thrust at him with their spears. One skittered off of the Bloodaxe besague, and the other two missed.

The scro with the missing ear tried to climb over the rocks and bite Shaundar's face off. He could smell the stench of the soldier's breath. There was one last crossbow. Shaundar held him off with his almost-numb left arm and stood on the trigger loop. The crossbow shot him in the upper belly at point blank range. He threw up an enormous splat of blood right in Shaundar's face and fell face-first over the side, dead before he hit the ground. The stench and taste of iron were overwhelming.

Needing to find a way to get the body out of the way in the already-cramped quarters, Shaundar picked him up with his free left hand; a feat he didn't know he was capable of until he tried, and shifting the body into both hands, threw it at the three survivors on the right hand side. It did no damage, of course, but they were forced to block the corpse from falling on them rather than attack, giving Shaundar time to grab another axe. When they managed to move the corpse out of the way Shaundar was able to devote all of his attention to that direction. A cry rising from his throat like the howl of a hellhound, he spun the two axes around like whirlwinds. One of his swings severed the head from one of the spears aimed in his direction and the second batted the second

spear aside again. The third pierced him solidly in the flank; a blow that might have been fatal if Shaundar had not turned away at just that moment. As it was, it thrust in deep and wetness ran down Shaundar's side. Now he had no choice; he had to end this quickly. The old grizzled scro was on the other end of it, and he grinned knowingly.

Shaundar used his axes to claw into the stones. Sparks flew as he heaved himself onto the edge of his improvised fortress wall. This was not what the Bloodaxes had been expecting and they flinched back. The marine howled something inarticulate and dropped directly onto one of them while he chopped down with both weapons at the second. One blade hit the clavicle, severing the breastplate strap and cutting deeply into the upper chest. The other cut a groove into the bone of the scro's weapon arm just below the elbow. Reeking black blood sprayed into the air. Shaundar must have sliced into his foe's aorta. The wound was quickly fatal.

He rolled off of the one he had knocked over and slammed his boots down onto the Bloodaxe's face. There was a loud crack as something broke. The elder stabbed him again with the spear, but this time Shaundar was lucky; his armour deflected most of the blow.

The scro scrambled to his feet and whipped the axe around his head. Shaundar dove underneath and tackled him, forcing him to the ground again. When he was prone, Shaundar dropped one axe and brought the second one down with two hands. The Bloodaxe expelled all

his air as though he had been kicked in the solar plexus, and his chest crumpled inwards. He died drowning in his own blood.

The elder stomped on the back of Shaundar's knee and he collapsed. Knowing what would come next, Shaundar threw the axe behind him and both axe and spear careened off into the underbrush as the force of the parry caused it to bounce out of his hand. The elder punched him in the side of the head with enough force to give him double vision, and then wrapped his massive arms around Shaundar's throat and started tightening the vice. Shaundar's vision flashed red and then greened out almost immediately. "I'll kill you yet, mercenary!" the tough old scro snarled.

With great effort, Shaundar pried at the arm around his throat, drawing blood with his claws. The elder did not let go. So Shaundar threw his body backwards to bash his enemy against the rocks. Though the orc cried out in pain, this still did not deter him. His vision rapidly blackening, Shaundar finally tried a tactic that was born of sheer desperation. He rolled with the elder scro still holding onto his headlock. The scro didn't release the marine until his ribs were pierced by one of Shaundar's random quarrels sticking out of the ground and his boots were charbroiled by burning clothing. When he finally did let go, Shaundar didn't give him another chance to get up. He drew in a quick breath as the colour returned to the world and fell on the old orc to rip out his throat with orcish tusks. Blood flooded into his mouth as the carotid arteries were rent open and the elder fell dead with an expression of amazement on his face.

Shaundar came up with the blood of his enemy in his mouth, his eyes wild, waiting for the next attack, but it never came. The bodies lay in pieces all around him, most of them smouldering. There were no foes left to fight. Somehow, he was still alive.

Corin watched him with impressed eyes as he staggered back to the stones to drink from the waterskins and wash the blood from his face. “My gods, Bolvi,” he whispered, “A better scro warrior . . . I have never seen.” Shaundar fell to his knees and tried not to giggle.

Part Three:
Honour of the Clan

Chapter Eleven

Almighty Leader Corin Bloodfist staggered through the passageway to the Main Deck. One of the ogre mages awaited him at the hatchway to help flip him around in the gravity plane and steady him while his swimming head adjusted. He slid his feet in a slow and careful way along the empty space in the opening until his heavy war boots found the surface of the deck.

Shaundar looked up at him, shivering, and smiled around his tusks and the slow trickle of blood that bled steadily now from the corner of his mouth. Corin was still pale and weak, and he was walking somewhat shakily, but he was alive. His tusk remained broken, but the puncture to his throat had healed into a thick jagged scar.

Shaundar tried to force his arm to come up into the chest-pounding orcish salute. He managed, with great effort of will, to wrestle his palsied arm into a half-cocked bend towards the center of his torso, then a limp-wristed flop forward with his knuckles bent. The arm fell uselessly into his lap after that. “*Zabu’karr* on deck,” he smiled in a voice that was barely a whisper. “Welcome back, *na’kor*.”

Intense grief and horror and fear battled for control of Corin’s contorting face. “Get him off of there,” he moaned. “Get him off of there right now.”

“*Nor lakaar*, my lord,” Thorgir nodded vigorously, his relief palpable. “It will be my pleasure.” He immediately jerked loose the restraints. Shaundar closed his eyes and concentrated all the force of that considerable will on not losing consciousness.

The lifejammer released its red life-sucking tendrils all at once. Excruciating pain exploded through every bit of Shaundar’s neural tissue, including his brain. He screamed and everything blazed red and then winked out into darkness.

When he came to, he saw Corin’s thin-lipped green face hovering over him. His big green hand was stroking Shaundar’s matted yellow hair. Shaundar didn’t have the strength to smile.

“Damn your eyes, *na’kor*,” Corin hissed when he saw his eyes open, “don’t you *ever* do anything that stupid again! I can’t run the clan without your help. And if I come home without you, Y’Anid will never forgive me.”

“It’s good to see you too, *na’kor*,” Shaundar croaked in reply. Sorin pressed his scarred palm firmly against Shaundar’s own; and Shaundar remembered how those scars had come to be there.

Shaundar didn’t remember much of their return to the Bloodfist compound. He remembered trying to field-dress his own wound with the remains of the one sailcloth shirt intuition had instructed him to keep and

some of the leather strapping from the quivers. The bleeding was significant so Shaundar tied the leather tightly enough to restrict breathing slightly in an effort to get it to stop. Corin helped by washing it with water from the other skin and pressing the balled-up shirt in place. “A little higher and you’d be in my boat,” Corin jested in a thin whisper. Shaundar knew he was right.

They left everything except the remaining knives, one spear, Shaundar’s stolen breastplate, the waterskins, one axe in its holster, and the clothes on their backs. Speed was more important than gear, now. Shaundar already had to carry Corin out of the jungle and any extra items would just slow them down, since neither one was in a condition to hunt even if game presented itself. Shaundar was reluctant, but they also took a tusk from each of the slain soldiers; Corin insisted.

They ate all of the remaining food they could handle before leaving. Shaundar rigged up a travois with bamboo poles, some of the remains of the tents and the two stolen blankets, and he dragged Corin behind him as close to the riverbed as it was possible to travel in the terrain. Shaundar slugged along in a trance of rhythm and pain, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other and not much else.

His only clear memory of that trek through the rain forest came when he smelled something musky and foul on the wind. He looked down and saw a feline paw print in the mud of the riverbed; but that paw had to be as big as his head. They crouched in the foliage, hoping for the best,

and a few minutes later a great spotted cat the size of a lifeboat with dagger-sized fangs padded into view. It looked right at them with its luminescent green eyes. But there was blood on its jaws, which it stopped to wipe daintily with one of those monstrous paws before it carried serenely on and disappeared in the brush on the other side of the river. Shaundar did not wait around to see what it had slain.

There was a hazy memory of going off to urinate and standing there for ten minutes before he remembered that it was time to re-cast that unique polymorph spell. It was his last. Shaundar was too exhausted to summon the will necessary for that or any other spell. He offered a brief prayer to whatever gods might be listening that they reached civilization before that one wore off, or all of his efforts would be for nothing and they would probably both die. He didn't think he had strength left to make it any farther than the Bloodfist estate, and even that was beginning to look questionable as his continued activity kept the wound open and he continued to leak out his strength with every step.

Sometime later – the gods only knew how long – he suddenly stepped out of the jungle and onto a rice field.

The bright light of summer glaring in his eyes, Shaundar made his way over the fields until he came to a farm hut. A family of goblins shied away from them as they staggered a drunken path through the bog and the new rice shoots were flattened in their wake. Shaundar's boots filled with muck but he was beyond caring. Were they in the right place? Knowing his luck, he had gone completely in the wrong direction. "Is this

Bloodfist land?" he rasped to the farmers, his voice now reduced to a harsh wheeze not much louder than Corin's.

"*Gul, karr,*" squeaked the frightened goblin maid, who had pushed her three children behind her.

"Send for the Almighty Leader," Shaundar gasped. "This is Corin Bloodfist. He's badly wounded. So am I."

Her demeanor changed immediately. She reached up and clasped two of his olive green fingers in her tiny leaf green hand. "Come inside," she urged.

Just sitting down (there really wasn't much room to lie down in the hovel, and Corin was occupying it) was such a welcome relief that Shaundar almost faded out of consciousness before he remembered what he was doing. He slapped himself in the face. If he passed out, his illusion would end and his true nature would be revealed.

The now helpful goblin maid sent her eldest to find their father in the field, and she offered them some of the rice gruel she had in a cauldron over their hearth. Shaundar made a gallant effort but he really was in too much pain to eat, and now that they were in a relatively safe area, Corin had lapsed into a deep swoon.

The next thing he remembered, Dorin Bloodfist was filling the doorway of the hut with his great orange bulk. "Good to see you sir,"

Shaundar groaned when he came into focus. “I’m sorry; I think I failed the challenge.”

“Can you walk, lad?” the Clan Leader asked him with what seemed to be genuine concern.

“So far,” he smiled, and he staggered to his feet and weaved his exhausted way out of the hovel.

Dorin took one look at the blood running down his side and scowled, and then he picked Shaundar up and carried him over to a small arrow-shaped fighter craft of some kind. He was delightfully surprised to see that Y’Anid was at the helm. Shaundar smiled faintly and brought his fist to his forehead in that gesture of reverence. He would not have imagined her as a spelljammer, given the patriarchal scro culture; but he supposed that she was a priestess and had the necessary magical energy running through her body to power a helm. Her eyes were wide and gravid with concern. Olaf Bloodfist also frowned and together they lifted him into the craft.

“See to Corin, Elka,” Dorin told the elder priestess, who was stepping off of the ladder. “It’s pretty bad.” Elka set her mouth in a firm line around her delicate tusks. Shaundar saw then that Ynga was also present and she grimly started laying out a healer’s station to aid in her mother’s work.

“He has a crossbow quarrel in his left side, *karra*,” Shaundar informed her. “It has either pierced or lacerated his lung. I’m pretty sure he has air, blood or both in the chest cavity too, and it’s restricting his breathing.”

“*Nor lakaar*, young warrior,” the healer nodded in appreciation. She entered the hovel. Shaundar supposed it had been necessary to move him out of the way in order to have room to work.

“Crossbow quarrel?” echoed Dorin, confused. “What happened out there?”

“Bloodaxes attacked us, sir,” Shaundar explained.

“Those bastard sons of a . . .” snapped Olaf with a blazing blue eye; but Dorin held up his hand. “Easy, *na’kor*,” he soothed. “Bolvi, are you certain?”

Shaundar hooked his fingers under a besague and thrust it outward. “I took this breastplate from one of them, sir,” he said.

The elder Bloodfists exchanged a glance and a knowing nod. Strangely, they both appeared to be smiling. “Good job, lad,” Dorin beamed. “That will help when we take this before the Grand Council. This attack will not go unanswered, Bolvi.”

Y'Anid cleared her throat. "Father, Uncle," she pointed out, "I don't know if you've noticed but Bolvi's bleeding and he's really pale. Do you think maybe . . . ?"

Olaf seemed chagrined. "I'm sorry, Bolvi! Let me have a look at that, my boy."

The Warpriest healed his wound and he was immediately overwhelmed with immense weariness. He dozed fitfully until they brought Corin aboard. "Is he going to be all right?" Shaundar demanded in a muzzy sleep-voice. Ynga was hovering over her husband and fussing at his dressing. Corin's eyes were open now and brimming with his love for his bride.

"Much better, Bolvi," he sighed. "You did it. I don't know how, but you did." He forced himself up on one arm. "I owe my life to him, father. He stood against twenty-four Bloodaxes and not one of them lived to tell the tale! I was no help; I didn't see them and they shot me right away."

All eyes now turned to look at him. Shaundar shrugged uncomfortably. That wasn't exactly true, but what did he tell them? *I'm a trained assassin and I killed them one by one in the bush?* He didn't think so, somehow.

Dorin clasped his hand. "*Nor lakaar*, Bolvi," he said softly, "for saving my son."

“Take us out of here, girl,” Olaf directed his daughter.

“*Gul, karr,*” she nodded, and the small fighter craft lifted away from the rice paddy and back to the Bloodfist estate. Shaundar’s last sight before fading back into the deepest sleep he had ever experienced in his life was Y’Anid’s sparkling blue eyes studying him with that particular focused intensity.

Shaundar awoke in his quarters, and immediately panicked. How long had it been? Slapping his hands over his face he was relieved to find a couple of days’ worth of whiskers and orcish tusks. It had not been long enough for him to lose his spell.

Before anything else, he unearthed his folding spellbook from the corner of the wood panelling he had stashed it in, and ran over the incantations he had used on their strange jungle odyssey. He re-cast the *greater alter self* spell right away.

Further investigation revealed that he was washed and the now completely ragged Bloodaxe trousers and breastplate had been removed. He wondered who had been responsible for that. But there was a new scar under his ribcage where the elder’s spear had pierced him, even with the healing magic at work. Must have been a closer call than he thought.

There was a gentle tap on his door.

“One moment!” he called, and put some pants on. He was glad that he had; when he opened it, Ynga was standing there. He touched his forehead with his fist again.

“Good, you’re awake,” she smiled, declining her head in greeting. “Corin wanted to know as soon as you were. How are you feeling?” the lady asked now with genuine concern.

“I think I’m going to live, *karra*,” he grinned back. Nope, nothing had changed since the rite. If anything, it was worse. He found her presence invigorating. This was ridiculous.

“You might want to shave and clean up a little,” she advised him with a wry smirk. “But don’t bother getting more dressed than you are. They’re waiting for you.”

“Waiting for me?” Shaundar echoed, confused. “For what?”

“You’ll see,” she replied, and continued on down the hall with an amused expression.

He took her advice, carefully trimming around the sideburns and brushing teeth and tusks with due care, applying crystallized salt to his underarms, and carefully filing ragged claws, which unfortunately grew on toes as well as fingers. The whole process almost felt natural now. The face in the small shaving mirror still looked strange to him though, and it was still a little pale. He supposed that he had changed it often enough over the past couple of years that any face would look strange to

him, even his own. He tamed his completely unruly hair into a semblance of neatness, in the process discovering one oak leaf still stuck in a tangle, and heeding Ynga's directions, he padded out into the hallway with nothing on but his knife belt and trousers.

Corin was there to meet him, and he was no more clad than himself. He looked much healthier than he had the last time Shaundar had seen him, but he also was sallow-shaded and his eyes were ringed with dark circles. That pale face radiated happiness when he saw Shaundar though. "Come on!" he urged eagerly, clapping him on the shoulder. "You're wanted in the courtyard."

Mystified, Shaundar fell in step with the clan heir, who proceeded into the Warrior's Quarters and through a large door, which opened into a beautiful courtyard atrium. They stepped through a jungle arbour. On the other side of the gateway, what must have been the entire tribe had gathered. The men began to beat sombrely on a variety of drums; standing drums, hand drums, frame drums, snare drums, even drums on huge stands that required a man standing on each side, banging them with belying pins. The women began to clap and chant and the men joined in with their deeper baritone and basso voices. The chant was gruff, solemn; even primal. Corin sensed Shaundar's hesitation and pushed him out through the archway and into the center of the gathering.

Elka and Olaf Bloodfist were both standing before Shaundar. He saluted the priestess and nodded respectfully to the Warpriest. “The hunters have returned!” the Den Mother crowed. “Let us honour them!”

Women of the tribe, many of them priestesses, came forward and with more ochre and their fingers, drew designs on their bodies. Some of the patterns traced their battle scars; others were runic or pictographic. Y’Anid was among them. Shaundar knew that the effects of the Witch’s Eye had faded, but when she touched him, he shivered. He tried not to show it because he knew that Targ would be watching.

“Welcome home, young warrior!” Olaf chanted. “Stand here and be recognized!”

“I don’t understand,” Shaundar protested. “I failed the challenge. I didn’t hunt anything. I came home without food for the tribe.”

Elka laughed out loud. “This is not the story I heard!” she denied with a fierce grin. “Here stands the scro who hunted twenty-four of our tribe’s enemies and lived to tell the tale! Here stands the scro who saved my son-in-law and brought home our tribe’s future! How can you say you hunted nothing? How can you say you brought nothing for the tribe, Bolvi? Surely, we cannot eat what you brought . . .” the tribe laughed aloud, “but because of what you brought, the tribe will eat!” And to Shaundar’s utter amazement, the entire gathering cheered him and there

were hands all around him clapping him on the back. One woman kissed him full on the mouth before he could protest.

"I can't ever repay the debt I owe you, Bolvi," Corin told him with an intense gaze.

Shaundar, growing more uncomfortable by the second, protested. "This really isn't necessary," he argued.

Corin drew the knife from his belt and ran the edge of the blade over the palm of his hand. Blood welled to the surface right away. "You are my brother, Bolvi," he intoned with all the formality of ancient ritual. "I will stand and fight beside you. I will protect what you protect. Your family is my family and I will fight for them. And should you be slain, I will avenge you with my dying breath." He extended his arm and raised his bleeding palm so that the blood ran in rivulets down his wrist. "Will you be my *na'kor*, Bolvi?"

Shaundar hesitated. Were the orcs not his sworn enemy? How could he possibly take this oath?

He saw Corin's smile falter. He knew then that he really had no choice but to at least go through the motions; otherwise, they would wonder why he did not. They would ask questions he couldn't afford. He drew his own knife blade firmly across his hand, over the thin scar already present, and when the blood came forth, he clasped Corin's bleeding palm in his own. "You are my brother, Corin," he replied. "I will stand and

fight beside you. I will protect what you protect. Your family is my family . . ." he hesitated, not remembering what came next.

“. . . and I will fight for them," Corin's father prompted. Shaundar repeated it.

"And . . . should you be slain . . . ?"

"I will avenge you with my dying breath," Dorin Bloodfist smiled.

"I will avenge you with my dying breath," Shaundar echoed.

Another great shout of approval burst from the gathered clan in an unbelievable cacophony. If he thought they were pleased with him before, it was only a taste of what was to come. Ale was pressed into his still-bleeding hand. His shoulders were clapped, his back smacked. More than one of the women kissed him. Someone patted him on the rump. Then each of the members of the Bloodfist family came to embrace him in turn.

"Welcome to the family, my boy," Dorin rumbled.

"Stand tall, Bolvi Bloodfist," said Elka with a beaming smile. "You are a hero this day."

Y'Anid touched his shoulders only briefly and whispered "welcome." She didn't linger, but her eyes did. Yes, they did, and it was not just his imagination.

Targ clapped him heartily on the shoulders in a manner that struck Shaundar as a little over-friendly. “Welcome to the Bloodfist family, Bolvi!” he declared. “I hope your *na’kor* will take the time to school you in proper etiquette and the clan’s complicated politics.”

Recognizing the veiled insult for what it was, Shaundar replied pleasantly, “You seemed to manage it well enough. I’m sure I can catch up.”

There was a high pitched giggle and a snort from somewhere. Corin was grinning and Ynga’s eyes twinkled. Even Y’Anid’s eyes were sparkling, though she looked away so none would notice. Targ’s eyes darkened. He nodded curtly and found something important that required his immediate attention. Shaundar was sorry to see that he cast his wife a withering glare as he passed her. She froze as if poleaxed.

“Well!” Olaf announced. “It’s time to receive the clan rune, lad!” He produced what looked to be a tiny chisel and hammer. “You want a little more to drink, first?”

Now what in the Universe could that chisel be for? He considered it and sunlight sparkled off of the runes carved into their tusks. “I imagine I do,” Shaundar agreed. He downed his ale.

“Here lad,” Dorin offered, passing him a pipe with strong-smelling smoke wafting out of it; not tobacco, something else. “Have a couple of pulls off of this. It will take the edge off.”

Shaundar did so. After a couple of draws, his head was foggy but he felt no pain. He nodded.

As the drumming and chanting resumed, Shaundar allowed it and the smoke to take him into a trance while Olaf carefully and painstakingly carved the symbol of the Clan Bloodfist into one of his assumed orcish tusks. It was still excruciatingly painful; stabbing pains that he felt in his whole head and face, not just his teeth. He grunted and tears welled from his eyes, but he refused to cry out. His effort was again cheered by the Bloodfist males.

At last Olaf sat back and admired his handiwork. “There!” he declared. “Now, we just have to add the gilt,” and a small crucible was brought that was filled with molten gold. Shaundar subconsciously winced.

They painted the gold into the new grooves in his tooth with another metal tool. This didn’t hurt much right away, but as the process went on and more and more heat was added, a dull throb began in his maxillary nerve that carried on until it was vibrating in the crown of his skull. He tried to concentrate on the chanting and lose himself in its rhythm. Just when he thought he couldn't take any more, they took the crucible away and it was done.

A hand clapped him on the shoulder. He whirled around – an action he immediately regretted because of the throb it set off in his jawbone – to see Gurtok standing behind him. He was shaking his head in

admiration. “Damn, sir,” he whistled, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone take that without screaming before. You’re a tougher man than I am. I cried like a little girl.”

Shaundar snorted before he could stop himself. And to think, his resistance had been born of the belief that scro males were expected to be so strong! The irony!

Gurtok misinterpreted his amusement, of course, and chuckled in a self-deprecating way. “Yeah, I sounded ridiculous, I’m sure,” he agreed.

Shaundar put a hand on his shoulder. “I wasn’t laughing at you, my friend,” he felt inclined to explain. “I was laughing at *me*! Only I would be stupid enough to try not to scream through something like that. Damn, that hurts!” Mollified that Shaundar did not think him a coward, Gurtok laughed with him.

“Heed this when the One-Eye speaks!” called Olaf; “That Bolvi is true and honourable to the Bloodfist name. Behold Bolvi Bloodfist, Warrior of our Clan!” There was a raucous cacophony of hooting, whooping, drum tattoos and applause.

“Congratulations, *nor karr*,” Gurtok saluted him. At first he was confused by the change in form of address; that meant “my lord,” not “sir.” That was when it finally registered; he was not just being

acknowledged as an adult, he was being adopted into the family! This was getting way out of hand.

“You are a man now, Bolvi,” Dorin told him, “with all the rights and privileges thereof. You may own property and you may choose a woman; but you must be able to support any woman you choose.”

Choose a woman? Even if he had any real desire to do so what a stupid idea that would be! He would only be here until he could figure out how to get out, or until Yathar came for him; and that would only cause great harm to the woman he dared to wed. And besides, they were orcs.

Why he looked up at that moment he did not understand, but it was Y’Anid’s eyes he met.

Y’Anid looked away and shook her head. She was entirely too fascinated with her new brother-in-law. Something about him drew her and the draw was almost magnetic. She wasn’t sure if it was the poet’s soul that he concealed – thinly! – in the skin of a hardened warrior, his protective nature, or some combination of that vulnerability and strength, but she knew now that every time she was near him her heart started racing. And she knew to be afraid. Those operas always ended tragically . . .

The party waged long into the night. Spicy ales were pressed into Shaundar’s hand one after another, and it did not take him long to

descend into an abyss of drunkenness. After a while, the pepper even started to taste pretty good and the pain in his tooth diminished to a dull throb. He wasn't sure who it was who eventually poured him into bed. He thought it might have been Corin and Gurtok, but it was hard to say. Things were a little blurry.

He woke with a start sometime in the deepest dark of the night with pasties on his tongue and a thick, throbbing head. Once again he had forgotten his spell. He quickly murmured the words and made the gestures almost reflexively.

Something still felt awry. Shaundar could almost smell it in the air. He tried to go back to sleep or reverie or whatever it was that he had been doing, to no avail. Besides, he couldn't stand the smell of himself between sweat, pepper, and alcohol. He reeked like an orcish brewery. So he got out of bed, grabbed some spare pants, a pair of utilitarian sandals, soap and a towel, and padded along softly down the corridor towards the communal bathhouse. The route took him into the great dining hall and through the large double doors into the courtyard area. He wondered how many party-goers were still going strong. His last hazy memory of the experience was of watching the women belly-dance with Corin and Gurtok, and he remembered flirting outrageously in true Yathar style with one of the young priestesses, who came to sit on his lap. He must have passed out not long after that. That was probably for the best.

The side door of the dining hall, the one that led into the solar and the women's half of the estate, burst open and Y'Anid tumbled into

the room. Her eyes were terrified and one of them was swelling and purple.

Shaundar glanced around quickly to assess the terrain, and his eyes focused on the pantry door. Without a word he picked her up, stuffed her into it, and closed the door and locked it. “Don’t make a sound,” he urged, and then he started meandering towards the double doors again as though nothing had happened.

A few moments later, just as he reached the bar and started to lift it, Targ barrelled into the room, naked to the waist and nostrils flaring.

“Where’s my wife?” he demanded.

Shaundar blinked at him. “How would I know that?” he responded irritably.

Targ drew himself up to his full height, used to towering over the other scro around him and intimidating them as a result, Shaundar guessed. He was undeterred. “I saw the door swinging!” Targ declared angrily. “I know she came in here!”

Shaundar laughed at him. “You saw the door banging because I tripped coming in here!” he lied. Then he snorted. “Still a little drunk, I guess.”

“What were you doing in the women’s quarters?” interrogated Targ slyly.

Shaundar shrugged. “Probably the same thing you were!” he retorted. “I don’t know if you noticed the cute little thing on my lap earlier, but . . .” He smiled in that self-satisfied manner of someone whose itches had just been scratched and let Targ infer the rest.

“What are you doing now?” pressed the Clan Champion suspiciously.

Shaundar raised his towel and soap. “Going to bathe,” he answered truthfully. “Maybe you should do the same. It’s good for the hygiene, you know.”

Now Targ pressed himself into Shaundar space. Instantly the scent of enraged male orc triggered something. Shaundar’s vision narrowed and adrenaline flooded into his system. *Just give me an excuse, Targ*, he thought with barely contained fury.

Targ must have seen that in his eyes because he backed off. “You just watch yourself, mercenary,” he sneered. “You’ve been asking for my fist upside your head since you got here. Keep it up and I’ll deliver it.”

“Anytime you think you’re ready,” Shaundar snapped back, “let’s do it.”

Targ laughed out loud. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you, mercenary? No, I won’t give you the satisfaction. Your defeat and humiliation will be before an audience at a time of my choosing.” He

stomped out the opposite door, towards the Warrior's Quarters. "If you see my wife," he called over his shoulder, "send her to my chambers."

"I'll be sure to do that," Shaundar told him. He did not bother to hide his sarcasm.

When the door slammed shut behind him, Shaundar forced his trembling, adrenaline-charged hands to unfurl from their fists. There were bloody triangles in his palms.

He opened the pantry door and Y'Anid fell into his arms. "*Nor lakaar,*" she whispered. "Thank you Bolvi. You saved my life."

"I would stay out of his way for the rest of the night," he advised. "I think I pissed him off even worse than he already was."

She shook her head; not in negation, but in something like disbelief.

"My suggestion is to go to the library until I get back," he said. "I doubt he'll come in there."

"I doubt it too," she agreed quietly. Her swelling eye looked awful.

"You've got to tell the *Zabu'karr* about this. I'm sure he wouldn't stand for it." Then he thought about that. Was he? It seemed contrary

to Dorin Bloodfist's sense of honour; but he could hardly claim he understood scro honour, did he?

Y'Anid shook her head. "I can't," she sighed. "It would start the feud again. You weren't here. You don't understand. There's a reason why there are so few sons and daughters of the clan." She met his eyes with her own, which pleaded for him to understand.

Shaundar did; but he knew there had to be a better solution. "The Bloodaxes aren't intending to end the feud by sending that jerk here," he observed. "I'm guessing their design was to implant a spy." He didn't realize that this was his opinion until it came out of his mouth. Then it all made sense. Of course; how else would the Bloodaxes have known that Corin was in the jungle on *Zabbak'Tarr*; naked and weaponless, with only an untried mercenary to defend him? His rage and his resentment of Targ grew.

Y'Anid's mouth trembled as she fought back tears. "That's likely," she agreed, "but the Bloodaxes are too powerful and no one can challenge the Overlord. So we can't act against them." She grabbed Shaundar's arms. "Please don't tell my uncle," she begged. "He will start the feud again; honour would demand it, and that would destroy the clan. *Your* clan, Bolvi Bloodfist. Promise me that you won't!"

Shaundar blew air through his tusks in irritation. "I think you're making a mistake, *karra*," he scowled, "but all right, I promise."

Y'Anid smiled and declined her head. "You do me great honour, Bolvi Bloodfist, to address me as 'lady' even though you are now a clan noble. I wish . . ." She sighed. "I will see you in the library when you're finished bathing, then?"

"*Gul, karra,*" he agreed, touching his fist to his forehead. She left the same way she entered.

The bathhouse was a luxury that Shaundar was becoming rather fond of; hot spring water bubbled into communal pools that were carefully shaped with some kind of masonry to pour out into the lake. But he didn't linger long this time, preferring to clean himself quickly so that he could check on Y'Anid. His head started to throb almost as soon as he hit the water and it hadn't faded at all by the time he got out, which did nothing to improve his irritation with the Clan Champion. He towelled his hair dry on the way to his room, where he fetched a shirt before heading to the library.

The sisters were huddled close together in that big chair by the window. Ynga was holding Y'Anid while she wept. The black eye had been healed. Shaundar almost turned to leave, but Y'Anid saw him and her hand and watery smile both beckoned him in.

"My gratitude, once again," said Ynga, "for protecting my sister."

“You don’t have to thank me. I said I would,” Shaundar reminded her.

“It will be more difficult for you now,” Y’Anid pointed out. “You are part of the clan.”

“I don’t think Targ sees it that way,” he observed, flumping into one of the other chairs. “He keeps calling me ‘mercenary.’ He can’t really have it both ways.”

“He could try,” Ynga admitted. “Maybe you had best stay out of this now.”

Shaundar was adamant. “Not happening, *karra*. I will reluctantly acquiesce to your wish to not inform the Almighty Leader, but you will not convince me to not be involved, now that I am. It’s too late besides; Targ hates me anyway.” The smirk that crept over his face was fierce and angry. “It seems to me that if that’s true, I must be doing something right.”

“You hate the Bloodaxes as much as we do,” observed all too wise Y’Anid. “Why? What did they do to earn your wrath?”

He looked at his sandals. Should he tell them? How much did he dare reveal? “I was their prisoner,” he admitted slowly, tasting the words reluctantly on his tongue; words he was forbidden to disclose in his own homeland among his own people. But it was the truth and he let them see his eyes so that they would know that it was. “They do not treat their

prisoners well. That’s why I couldn’t let them have Corin, no matter the cost.”

“How long ago was this?” Y’Anid inquired. Her eyes were enormous. He looked away, unable to resist the siren song otherwise.

“Some time ago,” he said vaguely. His voice was thick and gruff even to his own ears, even considering the difference in orcish tones. “I looked a lot different then. They would not remember me.”

“Is that where you got this?” Y’Anid asked him, and before he could stop her, she ran her almost delicate fingers over the whip mark on his ear; one of the many scars he had chosen to keep in his orcish form.

“Yes,” he replied with deadpan honesty. In the silence, he glanced up again and met Ynga’s eyes so that he would not have to meet Y’Anid’s. It was almost surreal, looking at the twins side by side, but knowing just by subtle cues that they were entirely different people.

Y’Anid reached out to touch him again. He got to his feet to prevent this. “I’ve said too much already,” he said; once again, a truth, but not quite in the way it was meant to be taken. “I should go to bed. Stay here tonight, *karra*. Don’t make your reappearance until morning meal. Sleep in the chair if you can.” He stepped back and saluted again. “Rest well, my ladies.” He turned on his heel and departed the library to prevent incriminating himself further.

Sleep eluded him until nearly dawn. He lay back on his pillow, wondering if he had said too much. But he was beginning to think he should take a different approach to all of this. He had been accepted as part of the Bloodfist clan itself! Should he perhaps stay where he was, and use his new position to work against the Bloodaxes? It didn't sound to him like any of the other scro liked them much, either. If they were weakened or eliminated, would this help the elven war effort? Would the rest of the scro leave off the War if the Bloodaxes were destroyed?

Approaching the Tomb of Dukagsh, Shaundar was overwhelmed by the immense scale of the structure. The black marble statues of the Founders and of Dukagsh himself had to be eighty feet tall. "There he is, Bolvi!" cried the clan leader, pointing and grinning. "That's our ancestor, Korr Bloodfist!" he exclaimed.

The large scro depicted at Dukagsh's side actually bore a resemblance to the scro beside him; though it was just perhaps something in bone structure. "You look like him, *nor'karr*," he observed.

Dorin shifted in a way that suggested that he was almost embarrassed by the comparison; kind of an *aw, shucks* sort of shrug of his shoulders. He said, "Well, that's nice of you to say, Bolvi. Thank you. But you know, I'm *durkarr* to you now. Corin is my son; that makes you my son too." He indicated to the enormous effigies. "That tradition started with those two orcs right there, I am proud to say. They were brothers in

arms, family in all ways but biology. They lived and almost died together many times. Thus the Oath.” To the crew he then commanded that they bring their Mantis ship in to dock.

A revelation struck him. “Your – *our* family took the name ‘Bloodfist’ because of the *na’kor* bond, didn’t we?”

Dorin blinked at him. “Of course, Bolvi. Where do you think it came from?”

Shaundar shook his head. Most scro names sounded violent and he had assumed something else entirely. “I’m not sure,” was all he said.

He read the name on the brass plate as they disembarked their ship onto a small docking strip and smiled. Dorin had named his personal craft the *Warrior’s Honour*. Shaundar was not surprised. He and Corin were directed to haul a crate that shifted with something metal and heavy. Shaundar was certain it must be the breastplate along with the rest of the items he had stolen from the Bloodaxes.

They headed around the edge and into the building through the imposing statues. Four guards stood at the entrance clad in red armour with no clan runes on their besagues, who bowed to Dorin as he strode confidently through the archway. They were in a receiving hall leading to a set of double doors in front of them and solid wood doors to the right and left. He strode straight forward and they followed.

The doors revealed no antechamber; instead, they opened up directly to an amphitheatre. In the center of a ring of lapis was the largest drum that Shaundar had ever seen; he figured he probably could have landed a flutter on it. The immense round frame completely dwarfed two podiums that flanked it. On the other side of the chamber, directly facing the entrance was a marble reliquary marked with two lapis eyes limned with that greenish faerie fire. Was this the final resting place of the legendary Dukagsh?

Evidently so. Dorin and Olaf stopped directly before the drum and bowed deeply to the reliquary. Shaundar and Corin followed suit. The clan leader then took up a carved stick the size of a great club from a stand slightly to their right. “Plug your ears,” he warned; and as the rest of them did so, he hammered firmly on the drum three times in short succession. The beats ricocheted through the chamber, causing shock waves and Shaundar’s teeth and bones to grind together.

He set the stick back in its stand. Shaundar now noticed it was shaped into a design that resembled an orcish fist. Dorin nodded to them and made his way around the drum and podiums, towards a door mostly to their left. It was carved and painted with the Bloodfist rune. On the other side of that door was the antechamber that Shaundar had expected near the entrance. It was actually a reasonably comfortable affair of sprawling chairs, gaming tables and couches.

Dorin lounged into a seat. “Now we wait,” he announced. “Might as well get comfortable. We could be here for a couple of days.”

Shaundar and Corin set the crate down on one of the tables. “Is there some kind of enchantment that carries the sound to the other clans, *durkarr*?” Shaundar inquired curiously.

The great scro laughed heartily and put an arm around his shoulders. “Yes, sort of!” he admitted. “The resonations cause the stone of the outer wall to glow for a time! House guards will see it and announce that someone has called a Parliament. Then the clans will gather. You should sleep, lad. You look weary, and there’s really nothing better to do unless you want a closer look at the reliquary.”

“May I?” he urged. It would give him an opportunity to explore the building more and maybe he would learn something valuable for the war effort.

“Certainly!” the elder scro agreed with a pleased smile, getting to his feet. “I’ll go with you.” This dashed some of Shaundar’s hopes, but he thought he would learn what he could anyway.

Olaf remained, dozing in his chair as the rest of the company headed back into the amphitheatre and along the wall to the reliquary. Each of the doors was marked with a different rune, Shaundar noted. Some of them looked as though they might be a little newer than the others, even though the wood was recognizably oak. Shaundar knew them all.

On closer inspection, Shaundar could see that the reliquary was constructed for strength, and there was, indeed, a removable lid. He stored that piece of information away, thinking that a well-placed explosive might shatter scro morale completely.

Dorin ran his hand over it reverently. “Here rests the progenitor of our race,” he sighed, his voice echoing through the chamber, “the scro who elevated us to a greater height of civilization than our ancestors.”

He met Shaundar’s eyes and Corin’s as well, as he turned to face them. “But do not make the mistake of many of our people by assuming that you are superior to other orcs. The difference between us is often merely one of education. Dukagsh knew the value of all beings and you would do well to remember this. Some other clans fail in this and they will know the error of their ways the first time the loyalty of their servants is tested.” He returned to contemplation of the relic. After a few minutes, he silently bowed again and returned to the Bloodfist antechamber. Shaundar and Corin followed without a word.

They were awakened from dozing on the couches by a sharp knock. “My lords,” said the guardsman at the door, “the Council is assembled.”

Dorin rubbed his eyes as he sat up straight in the chair he was slouched in. “When will they be ready to receive us?” he asked groggily.

“They are ready now, Lord Bloodfist.”

Dorin scowled. “We will be ready to present in ten minutes,” he snapped impatiently. “Bring us hot water for shaving.” The guardsman saluted him and closed the door.

“I’m missing something,” Shaundar observed.

“They know we’re napping in here,” Olaf grunted. “It’s a traditional courtesy to give us some time to clean up. Obviously they have forgotten this.”

“Trying to keep us off balance?” Shaundar reasoned.

“It’s not going to work,” Dorin observed. “We’re going to smoke a pipe and shave first and they can wait and be damned!”

Only when they were all clean and groomed did the Clan Leader permit them to leave the antechamber. Several armed and armoured scro were assembled in the forum. Shaundar's heart started to trip-hammer in his ears as he realized that this group was formed of all the enemy leaders, gathered together in one place. Every clan rune was represented and he recognized most of those present from portraits or images captured on sheets of crystal, but there were a few who had never been painted or imaged, such as the savage-looking brown scro with beaded braids and a ring in his nose, arms folded in front of his imposing hide breastplate, whose claw-mark rune identified him as the head of Clan Rageclaw.

Dorin nodded to the two boys, and then to Shaundar's surprise, he and Olaf took the Bloodfist spot in the circle, leaving him and Corin to make their way to the podium on the right side of the drum with their crate, all eyes in the room focused on them with seemingly deadly scrutiny. A drummer started thudding slowly when they entered, and continued until the Bloodfist leader was seated.

At that point, the scro behind the Bloodaxe rune stood up. All the others in the room, Corin included, rose to their feet and saluted. "Hail, Overlord!" they chorused. That was Shaundar's first live view of Narok Bloodaxe.

He was even more imposing in person than his portrait had implied, easily eight and a half feet tall and probably a hundred pounds heavier than Dorin. His tusks were half the size of his face; how he had learned to talk, Shaundar would never know. Fierce yellow eyes peered from beneath his thick auburn brow with disturbing intelligence. It was a comforting conceit, Shaundar knew, for elves to believe that the scro lacked mental prowess since elves lacked orcish strength, but he knew it wasn't so, and the Overlord was renowned among his people for his brilliant battle tactics, which had cost Shaundar's people dearly in blood.

That was when Shaundar noticed the scro at the Overlord's side, and his pores began to pour sweat freely and his tongue turned to ash. The Overlord's advisor was Garik Bloodaxe.

How many times had he seen that armour, that smug orcish face, watching solemnly as Sylria dragged body after elven body to the terrible smoking disposal pit with its maggots, its ravens, its charnel scent and empty, staring eye sockets? How many times had those steady yellow eyes observed as he and Yathar, sick with scurvy and as thin as tindertwigs, both crippled, had worked to exhaustion and past in the ammunition factory of the prison camp, just to prove that they still could so they wouldn't end up in the charnel pit? How many times had that clawed orange hand brought a whip, a scourge or a belaying pin down upon Shaundar's bony shoulders?

"Lord Bloodfist," the Overlord sighed in a resonant bass almost as deep as Dorin's, "why have you called us here?"

Corin grabbed Shaundar's kidney plate and pulled him down into the seat next to him. "What is it?" he whispered. Shaundar just shook his head.

"My lords," the Almighty Leader began, meeting all eyes in the room in turn, "I have come to demand justice for a dishonourable action against our clan." His eyes connected with those of the Bloodaxe leader last.

"And what action would that be?" the Overlord inquired, unruffled.

You know very well, Shaundar realized. The Overlord was just a little too cool.

"My son and his *na'kor* were attacked by a twenty-four man squad while out on his *na'kor's Zabbak'Tarr*," he said directly. Shaundar could not help but admire Lord Dorin's delivery. His voice was matter-of-fact and completely devoid of the rage that Shaundar was certain must have been seething beneath the surface. Shaundar, whose panic attack at the immediate sight of his concentration camp tormentor was bleeding into similar rage, struggled for similar control. *Later*, he promised the Bloodaxe Warden. *We'll have a private little chat later*. He forced his fists to unclench.

The clan lords were muttering amongst themselves. Shaundar watched their eyes carefully. He thought that the Almighty Leader of Clan Doodspear looked away in a manner which suggested that he knew something, but the Rageclaw chieftain was outraged. The reaction of the One-Eye clan, however, took him entirely by surprise. Their chieftain stood up, pounded on his podium for emphasis, and snarled, "Who would dare to profane the ancient ritual?!"

"Why," said Olaf with a vulpine smile, "our ancient rivals, naturally." He nodded to the boys. Shaundar and Corin exchanged a look and then they brought forth the star-chest and popped the catch to reveal the Bloodaxe breastplate. On an impulse, Shaundar reached under his breastplate to reveal his impressive *toregkh*, now mostly composed of tusks inscribed with Bloodaxe runes.

All eyes turned upon the Overlord, some full of doubt, others gravid with sour judgment; and a few, Shaundar noted, with what might have been a brief flash of fear. There was a long silence. It was the Almighty Leader of the One-Eyes who broke it. "This demands an Honour Price," he growled.

"Oh, come now!" the great grey orc protested, folding his arms. "Surely you are not taking the word of a clanless mercenary . . ."

"I see no mercenary," the Rageclaw chieftain observed. "No one's tusks are ungilded."

"The lad's got a lot of Bloodaxe tusks there," remarked a gruff greenish-gray scro with a scar across his cheek. His rune, an asterisk, indicated that he was the leader of the Starstrike tribe. "Seems an awful lot of teeth to have come from phantoms."

The leathery, scarred leader of the One-Eye clan turned to face the Overlord with a blazing orange eye and an empty socket, unmitigated by an eye-patch. "And there's the breastplate beside the point," he snarled. "No, Lord Bloodaxe—" Dorin smiled a little and Narok scowled, and it was a few moments before Shaundar realized that the One-Eye had addressed him not as the Overlord, but as the leader of his clan, thus bringing him down to the level of the other Almighty Leaders in the chamber — "there is no doubt. The Honour Price must be paid by ancient custom and decree."

The other clan leaders hammered their fists on the table. At Dorin's satisfied nod, Shaundar took this to be a signal of agreement.

To this, the Overlord declined his head slightly in acquiescence. "So be it," he nodded. "What is to be our Honour Price, then?"

The One-Eye shook his head. "Tradition dictates it should be slaves, land, women or a ship."

Shaundar secretly hoped for slaves. He was certain that that Bloodaxes did not treat their goblins and kobolds as well as the Bloodfists did. But he was disappointed. "They may have a ship," Narok Bloodaxe said magnanimously.

"The insult is to both of the Bloodfist youth," Olaf pointed out.

Narok's eyes flashed red for a moment. *Demon blood?* Shaundar wondered to himself. *He really isn't entirely mortal, is he?* Suddenly he understood the source of the clan leaders' fear.

"They may have a new ship," he clarified, "but do not push your luck, Bloodfist. Your son's *na'kor* was not a Bloodfist at the time. We owe him nothing." The great scro turned that gaze upon Shaundar, but Shaundar was not nearly as afraid of him as he was of the scro at his side, and even so, that fear was channelled back into fury. Shaundar fought desperately to rein the rage in. *Later*, he promised again. His breath seethed out between his tusks in short puffs. Corin studied him with unnerving concern.

"A Mantis," Dorin insisted, quiet but firm. "A man-of-war to take to battle against the enemy. Not a freighter or something obsolete." His arms were folded across his chest.

Garik scowled and opened his mouth to speak, but he was interrupted by the hearty guffaw of the Rageclaw chieftain. "Absolutely, I agree!" he chortled. "If two youths can defeat an entire seasoned warband of the ruling clan, it would be foolish not to use their prowess in battle against our ancient foes, I think!"

At this, a smile that Shaundar did not like in the least crossed Narok's tusky face. He put a hand on Garik's shoulder to halt whatever comment might have burst forth. "It will be as you say, Rageclaw," he acquiesced. "A new Mantis, free of defect, shall be granted to Bloodfist's son as an Honour Price. Of course," he added with a sneer, "we shall expect him to use it well against the enemy."

Dorin cast him a sharp look. "Of course, Overlord," he nodded, but Shaundar could tell that he didn't like the Bloodaxe's tone either. *I think he's going to deliberately put Corin in harm's way*, he realized. His stomach soured.

But Olaf laughed aloud. "I have no doubt that the elves will learn to fear them," he smirked.

"Are you satisfied, Clan Bloodfist?" the One-Eye leader asked.

Dorin said diplomatically, "The matter is handled according to custom." He looked to Corin, who nodded once and raised the mallet. Shaundar had just enough time to plug his ears before the gong crashed. The Almighty Leaders stood as one and pounded their chests in a salute. "Hail, Overlord!" they chorused before departing ceremoniously to their individual chambers. Narok cast them all a sour look and then a curt nod before his departure. His gaze lingered longer on Shaundar than he thought it should have.

Corin noticed it too. "What's the matter with you, Bolvi?" he asked after the clan leaders had gone. They were heading to the Bloodfist rooms and Corin put a hand on his shoulder.

Shaundar just shook his head. "I'm going to kill those two Bloodaxe bastards," he vowed softly.

Corin studied his eyes carefully. "It's a fool's quest, *na'kor*. Don't you think many have tried? Including my grandfather." He looked down and Shaundar understood exactly how that had ended. "I don't think he's entirely mortal. Our clan has enough of a quarrel with them. Don't start a personal one."

"It's already begun," he growled beneath his breath as they passed through the Bloodfist door.

Chapter Twelve

Shaundar bolted awake as the *Sword of Courage* shook violently. “What’s going on?” he rasped to Corin.

The big green scro took his hand and gave it a squeeze. “We’re landing,” he announced, breaking into a grin despite himself. “And there are no elf ships here. We made it, Bolvi!” He laughed aloud with the joy of his relief.

Shaundar leaned his head back into his pillow and let out a long sigh. His relief was just as palpable. But the sigh turned into a coughing fit. His chest had been fairly congested the past couple of days. He suspected the lifejammer had damaged his heart somehow, and since entering the asteroids, he had weakened rather than recovered. “Did we get all the prize ships?” he asked.

Corin nodded. “Good thinking, taking those ships, *na’kor!* Otherwise we’d never be able to prove we’d done anything but flee the fight in cowardice; and that’s exactly what the Bloodaxes will try to say too, the dirty bastards.”

Shaundar didn’t disagree. It certainly would be indicative of their usual politics.

Corin clasped his shoulder and added, “Better thinking to steal supplies from the elves! I’m not a fan of dried berries and that crumbly . . . what did you call that stuff?”

“Waybread,” he whispered. “The elves call it ‘waybread.’” And he was secretly enjoying the nostalgic taste – and more proper nutrition for his body – which he was getting from elven food. Would he ever be able to go home again? Did he even *want* to?

“Right,” nodded Corin dismissively. “I’m not a fan. But some food is better than no food. How you knew where to find that base, I’ll never know, but I’m not going to distrust the gifts of the gods.”

Shaundar didn’t bother to answer. Anything he said would have been a lie anyway. He closed his eyes. “Where did we land?” he asked instead.

“Golgatha Outpost. It’s a goblin port.”

Shaundar’s eyes snapped open. “Goblins? What clan do they work for? Can we trust them?”

Corin grimaced. “They’re an independent trading company. Graak and that little goblin named Ghost are negotiating with them. They’re willing to affect repairs, at least. And some resupply; though we’ll be limited on the cannon-shot.”

“Ghost? So the rescue mission made it?” He was astounded and pleased.

Corin nodded. “Most of them. Just like you planned it, Bolvi! They dispersed from that elven prize ship with the dozen Blades we had left and between them they rescued about a hundred and fifty survivors!” His smile faltered a little. “We lost three of them.”

Shaundar’s vision blurred as he coughed violently. The fit left him in a cold sweat. Corin grasped his hand.

Yathar nursed a beer quietly in the mess of the Permafrost base, wiping the streaks from his face and trying to collect himself. Reporting to Madrimlian had been hard, harder than he had expected. He didn’t know which was worse; saying the words out loud, admitting that Shaundar was dead in a way that could not be taken back, or the stricken look that had come over Madrimlian’s usually impassive face as he was given this information.

Lana sat down beside Yathar and laid a delicately clawed hand on his shoulder. He glanced up at her from the mug of ale before him. Her eyes were red. "I just heard the news," she murmured. "Kyrok, I'm so sorry."

Yathar didn't answer. He nodded once and swallowed past the lump in his throat.

"But I guess we knew the risks, didn't we?" she sighed as she took the seat beside him. "I don't know if you've noticed, but there's a lot less of us around here. Chow line's smaller."

Yathar had, but he assumed it was because people were out on assignments. He usually didn't spend enough time on base to really get a feel for how things were going. "How much smaller?" he asked her, concerned.

She shrugged. "Hard to say because I don't know what everyone is doing," Lana admitted. "But I know that I'm bumping elbows with less and less of us every time I come back."

Yathar nodded thoughtfully to himself. Yes, he supposed attrition was only to be expected. He supposed it would be his turn soon enough. Well, with Shaundar gone, what else was there, except to take as many orcs with him as he could before they brought him down? He downed his ale.

When he replaced the tankard on the table, his eyes were drawn from the mug's bottom to a pale, sinewy form moving through the entrance to the mess. It was a grey elf; one of those sorts called *faerie*. He was tall and his hair was as silvery as his fair skin. His irises were like glittering gold coins. Yathar didn't recognize him, but he was walking in tandem with Madrimlian and he was wearing several mithril crescents at his collar. "Admiral on deck!" he bellowed, and stood to salute in the

Orcish fashion. Lana, startled, followed suit; as did everyone else in the mess.

“As you were,” nodded the visiting Admiral solemnly. The marines slouched back into their casual activity almost immediately.

“Marines,” Madrimlian began, clearing his throat. “This is Admiral Belryn. He has recently been assigned to oversee the Permafrost Project.”

Oversee? Yathar mused. That meant that Madrimlian was now answering to him instead of directly to Lionheart.

“Nothing will change in the immediate future,” the Admiral was saying. “Lionheart just wants to keep closer tabs on the situation in case they have any input.”

“I don’t like the sounds of this,” Lana whispered.

Yathar didn’t either. Those assassin’s skills they had all been training focused on Madrimlian’s thinly drawn mouth, which initially he had attributed to the news of Shaundar’s death. Was it his imagination, or were there new lines of worry around their commander’s eyes?

“Would you like to meet the troops, *quessir?*” Madrimlian inquired of Belryn.

He nodded. “I would indeed,” he confirmed.

Madrimlian came over to their table first. “*Gor’tarek* Kyrok and Lana, meet Admiral Belryn,” he introduced them.

“How do you do, sir?” Yathar responded with a respectful nod. “These are some of our best operatives,” Madrimlian explained.

“Their record of successful missions is exemplary. I am sorry to say that they were both rather close to the fallen soldier we were discussing this morning.” His voice wavered only a little and he cleared his throat again. “But Kyrok successfully seized control of the Blacktusk Pirates and has set them to hit-and-run raids against the ruling scro clan. More importantly, he and his blood brother are the ones who brought us the location of Dukagsh.”

“Well done, marine,” Belryn affirmed. “How interested would you be in heading up a mission to prepare the way for the invasion?”

Yathar grinned maliciously. “It would be my honour and my pleasure, sir.”

“We need to chart the route to Dukagsh before we can send the fleet,” the Admiral elucidated, “and we need to maximize our chances of success. It occurred to the Captain that you could use the Blacktusks to accomplish the former.”

“Obviously since there is a tradition of not charting the sphere,” Madrimlian chimed in, “it would have to be done in secret. You would have to take a navigation team with you, who nominally would join the

pirates and confirm the information that you lads brought us. We also need more information about the solar years of the planetary bodies, special conditions, and we need to know why you were unable to contact me during your insertion. Do you think that you're up to it?"

"I'm up to it, sir," Yathar agreed. The scope of the work might take a couple of years. It would be dangerous. And the end result would be the vengeance he so craved. Blood thundered in his head and his palms oozed sweat.

The Admiral nodded his approval, his own eyes glinting with malice. "I am pleased to see that we are on the same page, soldier," he murmured.

"I look forward to that day, sir," Yathar confessed. "To be frank, I think it's what we all live for." He saluted the Admiral and the Captain as they carried on their way to address Herod, and in his pleasant thoughts of the endgame, Yathar did not notice Madrimlian's tight, strained smile.

It was not the Bloodfist holdings that the *Warrior's Honour* set down in when they left the Council of the Tribes, but Dukagsh City instead. Shaundar was again surprised when the men of the tribe left him entirely to his own devices. "We have an errand to run," Lord Dorin informed him in a brusque manner that told Shaundar that no more questions would be answered. "It shouldn't take that long, but why not

explore the Capital a little? Meet us back here at the start of the First Dog Watch; unless something keeps you,” he added wryly. “Oh yes, and here’s your pay and your allowance.” He fished around in his belongings and pulled out a sack of coin almost too heavy to be believed.

“Maybe visit the Temple of Luthic a while,” Olaf suggested; which produced a hearty guffaw from everyone. “And don’t hurry back, lad; we’re not in a rush!”

“Come on, son,” the Bloodfist Chief urged Corin gently, slinging an affectionate arm around his shoulders and leading him off. Shaundar was a little envious; he could not remember his own father ever doing that in public.

So he stood there among the great docks of Dukagsh City, which was partially a giant landing strip that reminded him of the wings of the Elven Navy’s Armada class ships, and partially a vast harbour not dissimilar from his home town Theraspar’s except in size, and wondered what in the Universe he ought to do with himself. Then it occurred to him; a better chance to scope out tactical information in the Capital, he would never find.

First he wandered in what appeared to be an aimless fashion around the docks, counting ships. It didn’t surprise him anymore to see that most of the coveted Manti were somewhere else; clan holdings, Shaundar guessed. But there were frightening numbers of dreadnaught-class Mammoths, Scorpion man-o-wars, Hammerships, Squidships, and

little fighter craft that appeared to be manned by goblins and kobolds. There were also several busy goldfish-shaped Tradesmen, which was a very popular merchant design.

When one of the dockhands asked him what he was looking for, he decided it was time to move on and he wandered into the city. He curled his lip at the scent of smelting, and looked up to see a black plume rising into the sky from a stone building nearby. *A factory*, he guessed. Suddenly it all came flooding back, that scent driving it; two years spent pumping a bellows in supernova heat, iron slag reeking in his nostrils, the pain and smoke and exhaustion so intense that he could hardly see or think, but not daring to pass out, knowing that would mean his death. Shaundar staggered against the wall of a warehouse and barely managed to stay on his feet. His heart trip-hammered relentlessly in his chest, thrumming against his mithril breastbone, and sweat oozed from the palms of his hands and his brow. His mouth tasted like wool and bile.

It took several minutes for the trembling to pass. *What in the Nine Hells is the matter with me?* Shaundar thought to himself, a little ashamed and glad that no one he knew had been around to see this. He wiped his face with his hands and sighed. He knew enough about the process from his own experience in the factory of Raven Talon Prison Camp to estimate that this building was for forging munitions, and by its size, he figured it would easily double the production rate. Keeping track of the cannon shot produced was one of the many things the inmates of the camp had done to keep themselves occupied, hoping that it would eventually be of some use against their captors; not that he could be

entirely sure of their figures in the stupor that defined their typical level of consciousness. He figured he should see if he could get into the building to explore their operations, but could not bring himself to do so.

Shaundar also noticed a second large building streaming smoke, this one made of metal. Closer inspection revealed that ogres and orogs were hauling metal sheets on trolleys to the dockyard, where a team of mostly common orcs were hammering them onto a solid wooden insectoid frame. Elves did not use metal ships and while their engineers had decoded the majority of the process, they had no idea how to manufacture the exceptionally tough metal plating that was the hallmark, and primary strength, of the deviously-constructed Mantis. Shaundar suspected it was an alchemical process of heating and cooling. He resolved to ask the Bloodfist clan lord more about it or find out who would know.

Shaundar had seen the ship framework before and he knew from the Permafrost engineers that it was a hardwood very like teak that backed the iron casing. It certainly explained why the catapult stones had been seemingly unable to penetrate their hulls. Elven artificers were at work on arcanology that would counter that and compete with Orcish cannons. He wondered how progress on that was coming.

The inevitable bars, inns, boarding houses and brothels came next. Shaundar smirked, amused by the awareness that some things never changed, and sailors were the same everywhere. Curiously absent

were the orcish cathouses, however. He wondered if the Bloodaxes had passed some law forbidding them or something.

But deeper in, just before the first wall, he saw a lovely marble building covered in ivy, with miniature waterfalls trickling like offerings from the hands of buxom female orcish statues. Live buxom female orcs were pouring water onto the soapy shoulders of powerful orcish men. All at once acutely aware of how dirty he was, Shaundar made a beeline to the bathhouse.

The structure had an entrance at each direction, accessed via bridges that crossed over the outer pool. Shaundar assumed that that water must drain through the floor and he marvelled at the perfection of it. Elves often had such technology, but not always, and much of that was left over from a more civilized time.

At the doorway, which was framed by a graceful arch and bas relief images of orcs engaged in various stages of copulation, he was greeted by a scro maiden, not naked but dressed in tight leather that left not much to the imagination. “Rest, weary traveller,” she intoned in a ritualistic fashion, and she knelt before him and unlaced his boots, which she placed carefully on a wooden rack next to several almost identical pairs. He couldn’t help but notice that his were starting to get scuffed and ragged; good enough when he was a mercenary, but probably poor showing on his new clan.

The maiden lifted his feet and washed them in a basin. It had been so long since anyone had lain such gentle hands upon him that he shivered. Seeing this, she smiled a little at the corners of her mouth and took even more time and care with the process, right up to massaging knots he had been unaware of until she touched them and the pain stopped. “*Nor lakaar,*” he breathed when she was finished.

“You *will* go for a massage, won’t you, my lord?” the maiden suggested softly. “It’s clear you have great need.” At something in his expression she added, “The wounds of war weigh heavy upon you.”

Shaundar surprised himself when a noise that was something between a cough and a snort came out of him. “I just came for a bath, actually,” he muttered apologetically. He wasn’t sure he wanted anyone getting that close.

The maiden just smiled and, after kissing the top of each foot, guided him into a private room with a steaming pool. Without waiting for him to confirm or refuse she unbuckled his armour and placed it carefully on a proper armour rack. It was amazing what relief he felt when its weight was lifted from him. Then she proceeded to strip him of the rest of his clothing in a careful but deliberate manner. These she took away without so much as a fare-thee-well, simply laying a lacquered claw upon his lips when he opened his mouth to protest; then she left him there, naked.

Options removed, he eased himself into the scalding pool one toe at a time. The bath was so hot that it hurt even to move, but as he became accustomed to it, all the tension drained from his body and before long he was dozing. He was startled when water was poured lightly over his aching shoulder. "It's all right, you're safe," a husky feminine voice whispered into his ear. Strangely, Shaundar believed her. As she continued to pour water from her cupped hands onto one shoulder, then the other, he allowed himself to be lulled back into a state of semi-consciousness.

He awoke when the musical trickling fell silent. "Come with me, warrior," the owner of the husky voice urged. With reluctance, Shaundar cracked his eyes open and they fixed upon a voluptuous brown-skinned orc woman with compassionate and wise green eyes. She beckoned to him and he gradually removed himself from the pool, which was still as hot as when he arrived. The orcish woman had a large, fluffy towel and she patted him dry from head to toe. He found that the next room had a massage table.

"I was just here for a bath," he explained a second time. The woman nodded and replied, "Lie down please."

He opened his mouth to protest, but the look she fixed upon him was so stern that his objection died in his throat. *What harm could it really do?* he thought, aware now of the stiffness in his shoulders and neck and how that had begun to ease after the hot pool; so he nodded and stretched out on the table.

Those same hands ran warm oil over his body and found deep-buried aches that he had almost forgotten, which she worked like dough until they softened beneath her skilled fingers. Weirdly she found the very spot where the bite scar marred his elven shoulder, though Shaundar knew there was no way that it was noticeable in his orcish form. She stayed there for quite a while, and after a few minutes, tears oozed from Shaundar's eyes like pus from a gangrenous wound. He wondered at this and he was helpless to stop it. The masseuse either didn't notice, or pretended not to.

"Let me take the war from you, soldier," the masseuse whispered. She started running those lacquered claws gently down his back along the long tendons at the sides of his spine. He shivered. And then she moved down his buttocks and the insides of his thighs. Heat flushed his body and a tingling began in his loins. Why he was responding to the touch of this orcish stranger when he had felt only revulsion for Captain Wintervale he didn't understand. But his flesh was drinking it up like water in a drought, and he didn't stop her as she eased him onto his back from his belly and took his manhood in her hands.

When he was finished, for no reason he could comprehend he began to weep. She held him in her arms until the tears finally stopped. Shaundar wiped at them angrily, completely mystified as to his own behaviour, but it didn't seem to surprise her. Like a mother removing a child's fingers from something he wasn't supposed to be touching she guided his hands away from his face.

When at last it ended, the orc woman kissed him softly on the lips and smiled in a gentle way that bespoke understanding and compassion. Then she cleaned him up with a warm damp towel. A soft knock announced the arrival of the maiden he had met at the entrance. When the woman nodded to her, she entered into the room with a soft robe and she placed it over his shoulders and helped him dress.

The two of them guided him out into the cool waterfalls that had drawn him to the bathhouse in the first place and they scrubbed him thoroughly with a sponge and soap that smelled like licorice or maybe anise. Shaundar remembered his father saying that anise oil removed body scent, and he smiled. With that, he realized that he felt better. It was as though a weight had been lifted from his heart. “*Nor lakaar, karra,*” he murmured as they dried his body together with more of those fluffy towels.

The maiden gave his clothing, freshly laundered, into his hands, and the masseuse smiled back. “The Temple of Luthic is always here to serve, my lord.” She tapped him in the mithril breastbone with a claw. “Next time, don’t go so long between visits. And come back soon; there’s still a lot of work to be done.”

“*Gul, karra,*” he agreed obediently with the hint of a smile peeking out from around his tusks. He dressed while they fetched his armour, and then they buckled it on him, as skilled as any squire. His step was a little lighter as he headed back towards the docks.

The Bloodfist men were waiting on the deck of the clan leader's ship, eating dinner. They raised tankards as he approached. "How was the Temple, lad?" Olaf inquired with a tuskly grin.

Shaundar smiled back, and they shared a laugh.

"Are they always that . . . friendly?" he asked them as he took a seat on one of the lifeboats next to Corin. They handed him a skewer of peppery meat and some kind of minty yogurt substance to dip it in. He found it delicious.

Olaf studied him with a discerning gaze. "Thought they might get hands-on with you," he nodded. "No, only if you need it, lad."

"They take the war out of you," Dorin explained. "When you've seen too much of death, they cleanse you by reminding you of life."

"Then you go back to your wives and children without the taint of war upon you," Corin continued. "I can't believe no one ever taught you about this, Bolvi! Your father must have died when you were pretty young, I guess."

"Do the wives know what goes on at the Temple?" Shaundar questioned in response.

"Of course they do, Bolvi," Olaf nodded. "Noble widows generally finish their days as Temple Priestesses."

“Why wouldn’t they remarry?” Shaundar asked.

Olaf choked on his skewer and Shaundar realized he had made a terrible blunder. But Dorin roared laughter and slapped him on the back. “Exactly!” he cried, enthused. “Why can’t a woman remarry if a man can? I don’t understand it either. It’s a stupid archaic holdover from our barbarian ancestors, if you ask me!”

The one-eyed scro rolled it in its socket. “Now you’ve got him started,” he groaned. “Don’t encourage him in his crusade, Bolvi. Nobody’s listening.”

“Bah, you just never mind, you old curmudgeon!” Dorin grumbled good-naturedly. “I’m telling you, this is the wave of the future. Dukagsh would have approved.”

“Then where would the Mothers of the Temple come from?” demanded Olaf. “Things are the way they are for a reason.”

“Should we give it to him now, do you think?” Corin prudently interrupted.

“Give who what?” Shaundar demanded, seizing on the opportunity.

“Give *whom* what,” Dorin corrected in an automatic tone. “Sure son, go ahead and fetch it. It really ought to come from you, I think.”

Corin flashed a wide grin in Shaundar's direction and stood up, leaving the lifeboat to swing and heading to his quarters. When he returned Corin was carrying a massive drum. Red wood lined with carvings formed a great seamless bowl, and the skin stretched over the top of it was an unusual bluish shade and exceptionally thick; yet it created a deep resonance that rung through the ship almost like a bell when struck.

Corin was beaming. "Every man needs a drum," he announced, and placed it at Shaundar's feet.

"You're not the first warrior to return from his *Zabbak'Tarr* without a skin to build into your drum," Dorin explained. "We thought that such an act of heroism deserved only the best. I don't know if you've ever seen one before, my boy, but that's a *surrush* hide, and the body is made of witchwood."

Shaundar took it in his hands, in no way needing to feign his awe. It was not nearly as heavy as it looked, but the wood had no flaws and he didn't think it was in any danger of damage or splitting. Its skin was fastened with brass tacks and bluish sinew. The scenes carved evidently depicted a *Zabbak'Tarr* ceremony, beginning with the anointing and ending with the etching of a tusk; and he realized with a start that at least two panels had been custom made, because one showed a lightly armoured scro standing on top of a rock aiming spears as a horde charged him, and the one that followed was of one scro biting out another's throat while an obviously wounded companion looked on.

"I don't even know what to say," he breathed. "Thank you. I will treasure it always."

"Well, come play it with us, lad!" Olaf laughed, clapping him on the back. So Shaundar sat down and the other men set up to play. All of them looked at him expectantly. He realized that of course, since the biggest drum was his, he would have to set the beat. He ran a greenish hand over its surface, listening to skin rasping on skin, and then he let his whole palm connect with the center, slightly curved to trap the air. A resounding *doom!* echoed through the air. The tops of his fingers made sharp *ba-dum-bum* tattoos on its edge, as rich and powerful as a drummer could want, and before long, the Bloodfist men were playing together.

When Shaundar looked up, night had fallen. As if driven by some group consciousness, all of them had stopped playing at once. The last resonance of his drum was still trailing through the air like the memory of a familiar scent. They looked at each other with the expressions of men waking from a dream, and they shared a laugh. "Time to take off, then!" Dorin announced. "All hands to stations."

"*Gul, karr!*" the rest of the crew replied, most of whom were stowing their own drums. Shaundar hadn't even noticed them joining in, so involved with the rhythm he'd been. As Corin clapped him on the shoulder in a half-embrace, Shaundar's heart ached with the weight of his duty. He was starting to care for these orcs, by the Nine Hells. He had to get off this planet and out of the Bloodfist house!

Targ was absent when they returned. Dorin seemed a little surprised, but Shaundar wasn't. What better opportunity to pass word to the Bloodaxes about what the Bloodfists were doing?

Orders also awaited them. Corin was to take his ship, as soon as it arrived, crew it, and make sail for a sphere called Moragspace. Shaundar had never heard of it.

Corin was grinning and his eyes sparkled. "Guess we'd better start recruiting the crew, hey Matey?" he cheered, slapping Shaundar on the back. Shaundar could understand his excitement; his first command! There was a time he would have been elated to achieve a Captaincy. He was also glad to be leaving Scrospace; he would try to reach Madrimlian as soon as they entered the new sphere.

"When do we leave?" he blurted out. The sooner he got to another sphere and a place where he could make planar contact, the better!

Dorin looked at him carefully. "As soon as you get crewed and supplied, I imagine. But the ship has to get here first."

Shaundar bit his lip and nodded. "Sorry, *durkarr*," he said. "Just eager to get back into Wildspace, that's all."

Lord Bloodfist laughed and clapped him firmly on the shoulders. "That's the spirit, lad!"

The women of the clan were waiting for them when they disembarked. “How did it go?” Elka Bloodfist questioned her husband as she came into his arms.

Olaf kissed her passionately. “I can die happy now,” he chortled. “I have seen egg on Narok Bloodaxe’s face.”

“Ship ahoy!” a lookout bellowed from the watchtower. “Mantis, my lords! She’s flying our colours!”

Dorin took out his glass, aimed it at the sky, and chuckled low in his throat. “We’ve been expecting them!” he informed the lookout. “Allow them to land and direct them to the loading berth.”

The lookout cried his affirmative and beat a tattoo on the large drum at his side. A few moments later, someone on the deck of the Mantis answered back and the man-o-war landed at the dock nearest to the estate.

Targ stepped off the gangplank. “Thought I ought to go and get Corin’s ship,” he said mildly. Shaundar’s training immediately spotted it as a lie. *Too ready of an explanation*, his mind noted, and he was glancing to the right, not the left. *He’s making up a story, not remembering a fact*. But he said nothing as they headed into the doors of the estate, Corin’s arm around Ynga, and Targ’s wrapped firmly around Y’Anid in way that was meant to imply affection; but Shaundar could see

that Y'Anid's neck was rigid and Targ's muscles taut, preventing her escape. He curled his lip and looked away.

Crewing the ship was more like crewing a merchant or pirate vessel than an Elven Navy ship. Corin and Shaundar spent a week screening more volunteers than they could reasonably handle, rather than accepting whoever the Mithril assigned. Shaundar would have liked to have taken Gurtok with him, but the House Guard was by no means a decorative post, as it often was among the elves, and his duties prevented it.

They ended up with a decent set of officers and senior crewmen, better than Shaundar expected for a new ship under a brand new commander. Their Ship's Priest and Navigator was a Warpriest named Sarga, who for some reason still had both of his eyes. He was young, eager, and exceptionally clever, and also gifted with a wicked sense of humour that appealed to Shaundar's elven sense of mischief. The Sailmaster Katha was actually recruited from the *Warrior's Honour*, a tough and sensible old orc ("not scro!" he insisted jovially,) and their Artillery Commander Thorgir was pockmarked with flak scars from his wrists to his elbows, apparently a veteran from another ship that had been destroyed who had been required to wait for a new posting.

"Shot down at the Battle of Leira!" he informed Shaundar as he flicked his remaining ear with its black pearl and gold hoop. Shaundar tried not to look too startled, wondering if Queenie had been the ship responsible. "Quite frankly I'm glad to have the post, my lord. They don't

think I fired quick enough, you see.” He looked embarrassed. “But I never saw ‘em. Little elven fighter craft came out of nowhere and blasted us with magic fire that targeted our powder and shot. We never had a chance.”

Shaundar nodded. “Sometimes luck just doesn’t go your way,” he agreed, knowing how lucky the elven forces had been in that battle. “I am sure you’ll have a chance to prove yourself.”

This seemed to please Thorgir immensely. He straightened up and beamed with a mouth that was minus a few teeth. “I won’t let you down, sir,” he promised.

Shaundar nodded and smiled. “I believe you,” he said, and he clapped him on the shoulder.

Their boatswain was Rathgar, quiet except when his ire was roused. Shaundar remembered him as the *nardek*-playing scro from his evening of carousing with the men, and might have chosen him based on that alone, except that he was also imminently qualified for the job. Like Shaundar, he had been reared onboard ship and so they shared a common experience.

The Second Mate was the only one Shaundar didn’t like. He was a surly and resentful old scro with a series of scars across his face that looked like claws of some kind. Miraculously the rake marks had missed his eyes. Ronkor was his name, and he had married into the clan from the

Banebloods just a few years back. It was probably the constant flood of anti-elven vitriol that spewed from his mouth full of filed teeth that sparked Shaundar's hostility, but it could have been his generally miserable disposition as well.

Their crew compliment was a full seventy-five men, which actually overloaded the ship by fifteen (and they were all, indeed, men, just as in the Blacktusk Pirates,) most of whom were scro and common orcs, but twelve were support crew and they were mostly goblins. The head cook, whose name was Graak, was burly for a goblin at maybe fifty pounds, and he was the undisputed master of the galley. He stood on top of a table, directing the scro and orcs who were loading up the crates and bags of foodstuffs, waving a spatula as though he were conducting an orchestra. And they were listening to him, too. Shaundar was impressed. There were also goblins assigned to the artillery crew, who helped to manipulate the claw-grapples as well as standing to the guns as support crew. One of them stood out because he was pale and white-skinned; an albino, Shaundar guessed. He didn't catch that one's name.

Hot-bunking was the standard procedure, rather than an act of desperation as in the Elven Navy, Shaundar noted when the men were assigned quarters; and when he learned that the original deck plans granted the Matey an enormous seven by fifteen foot room all to himself, he just couldn't do it, even considering that part of the space was occupied by the ship valuables, a desk and an empty bookcase. "Corin, what do you think about sharing a room?" he suggested. "We can put up a curtain between us."

Corin scrutinized his similarly vast space. “Good idea, *na’kor!*” he grinned as he slapped Shaundar affectionately on the shoulder. “That’ll be great for morale!” And the men applauded as the bookcase and desk were put into storage and Shaundar’s bunk was moved. The Warpriest was then inspired to share his space with the three acolytes who served beneath him, and there was more space for hammocks for everyone. The clan leader nodded approvingly as he observed this shift of living space with his hands on his hips.

Provisions did, indeed, consist of cages full of small animals, some of which were egg-laying fowl, just as Shaundar anticipated; as well as crates full of hard, salted jerky, hard tack crackers, and spices enough to blister an elf’s mucus membranes. There were also bags upon bags of rice and rice flour; plantain flour, fruit and dried chips; dried beans, corn, mushrooms and quinoa; and barrels of water and that spicy ale and a distilled variant, the scent of which made Shaundar’s bowels knot up as he remembered the last time he had tasted that horrid brew. Inevitably there were also enormous woven plantain bags filled with potatoes, and barrels of pickles of various stripes. Shaundar suspected, based on what he knew of scro cuisine that most of these would be some sort of pepper as well.

Dorin spent some time (and no shortage of money, Shaundar suspected) directing his shipwrights to add three turreted eight-pounder cannons to the somewhat sparse standard Mantis ship armament of the grappling rams, the heavy catapult and two medium ballistae on turrets. “Why don’t they come armed with the six weapons standard?” Shaundar

asked him curiously. He could not understand why they would not make full use of the ship's capabilities.

Dorin laughed out loud. "Because scro rely on their strength in hand-to-hand combat, lad!" he chuckled. "But I believe in the words of Dukagsh: 'Disdain no weapon that gives you the advantage in a conflict; for the enemy certainly will not!'"

With the additional ordnance most of their twenty tons of cargo space was occupied. Shaundar could almost hear the metal groaning under the strain and moving about the ship in places was simple only for the goblins. He was glad they'd made extra room.

They were not the only Bloodfist ship making ready to set sail. Targ spent the week directing his crew and the clan servants in the preparation of his Mantis ship also. Shaundar noted that he had not accepted the standard armament of the formidable man-o-wars either and the *Elfrender* was also bristling with cannons.

The tribe threw a massive celebration for their departing crews. Two of the house concubines tried to seduce him while he drunk and he was lonely enough to actually consider it. But when they went to fetch him more ale, Ynga and Y'Anid came to sit beside him while Corin and Targ were occupied in an intense discussion with his father and a visitor from the Banebloods, and the concubines were forgotten. Y'Anid's pregnancy was beginning to show by the gentle rounding of her jade-green belly, which was clearly exposed by the cursory bustier that

appeared to be fashionable among scro women. Shaundar found something so desirable in that waxing curve that it dried the saliva in his mouth. He wanted to rub his hands over it. He shook his head to get a grip on himself.

"I wish I could go with you," lamented Y'Anid. To his silence she answered, "I realize that isn't proper behaviour for a lady of the clan, but I would rather be near to the action where I might be able to do something, rather than waiting here and hoping and praying for news."

"I would value your healing hands, *karra*," Shaundar said.

Ynga beamed. "You really do understand, don't you?" she observed. "You don't consider it improper at all."

He shrugged. "That's how I would feel, so why shouldn't you feel the same?" he wondered aloud. "Though I don't think you *should* feel one way or the other about it, actually. War is a nasty business." He thought about Narissa and how unhappy she had been when he and Yathar had joined the Navy, and he sighed.

Ynga studied Shaundar's eyes carefully. "How do you feel about war?" she asked him.

Olaf glanced over in his direction, so Shaundar chose his next words with care. "I have seen nothing but suffering from war," he confessed, "and yet if my people are fighting, I would rather be one of those who defends them." And that was the naked truth.

Y'Anid nodded vigorously. "It's one of the least quoted verses of Dukagsh, I think," she agreed. "I hate war, as only a soldier can."

Shaundar's laughter burst from him in a hearty guffaw. "Really? He said that?"

Y'Anid looked defensive. "*An Ode to the Blood of Heroes*," she told him with flashing eyes. "Page thirty-seven in the One-Eye translation."

"I believe you!" Shaundar assured her with a smile as he threw his hands up in surrender. "It's just not what everyone else seems to think of Dukagsh, is all."

Her expression softened. "I'm sorry Bolvi; I'm just used to having my knowledge challenged."

Shaundar shook his head. "How in the Hells would they even know? When do they ever even *read*?"

Ynga burst out laughing. "Indeed!" she agreed.

Shaundar glanced over at Targ and his hands curled into fists subconsciously.

Y'Anid noted his blazing stare and she followed the line of his gaze. "If he had any love for the Bloodfists he'd be an excellent Clan Champion," she said softly. "He can fight like a demon."

Shaundar held his tongue, but he groaned as he realized that he and Corin would be taking their orders from Targ. “What is it?” Ynga asked him.

“Nothing important,” he temporized. And truthfully, what difference did it make? Once they got out of the sphere, Shaundar would confirm their orders and pass the information on to Madrimlian or to Lionheart, and then he would find a way to extract himself from the Bloodfists at last. His heart leaped as he thought about seeing Yathar again.

Corin came to join them then. He was scowling. “Love, how would you feel if I took a second wife?”

Ynga looked surprised, but she said, “Well, you’re the Clan Heir. That’s kind of expected, isn’t it?”

He sat down. “The Banebloods want to secure an alliance,” he explained. “I’ve been offered the Almighty Leader’s second daughter. Quite an honour.” He cleared his throat. “Her name is Nakyra.”

Ynga smiled and laid a delicately clawed hand on her husband’s arm. “You would be a fool to pass this up,” she told him. “We need all the strength we can get.”

He looked uncomfortably at Shaundar out of the corner of his eye. “I tried to convince him to betroth her to you, Bolvi, but apparently a mere clan noble isn’t good enough.”

Shaundar laughed again. “When she can have the Clan Heir? Makes sense to me.” He was relieved that there was an excuse to avoid that complication.

Corin chuckled too. “I was afraid you’d be resentful, *na’kor*,” he confessed. “But don’t worry, we’ll find you a bride yet!”

“I’m not in a hurry,” Shaundar said honestly. Y’Anid glanced at him out of the corner of her brilliant blue eyes.

Corin raised an eyebrow. “Sowed your wild oats a little as a mercenary? Well, that’s sensible. You may not know this, but if you want them to be accepted as clan scro, you’ll have to fight for that right when they come of age.”

“I didn’t even know it was an option.” He let them believe that Corin had guessed correctly. Perhaps it would divert his determination to play matchmaker. For some odd reason, Sylria crossed his mind then. He wondered if she was still with her parents or if she had gone back to the War. His heart ached enough to surprise him. “When is the wedding happening?”

“In a few months, when we get back from this voyage,” Corin replied, “now that Ynga has given her approval.” He smiled and took her hand.

Ynga smiled back. “I look forward to meeting her.”

Y'Anid sat back, a little surprised at the resistance that had risen in her belly when a potential bride for Bolvi was mentioned. How could that possibly bother her? Was she afraid of losing his protection, then? Or was there something else at work that she hardly dared to name?

Corin named his ship the *Sword of Courage*. Shaundar did not warm to it quickly. It was, after all, a Mantis, and none of his memories of Manti were good ones. It was, like most goblinoid vessels, constructed mostly of hard iron and steel as opposed to warm and friendly starfly leaves. It was not in any way decorated with the subtle art of elven vessels; it was strictly stark and practical, even considering it had just come from the dockyard. The machinery and the engine seemed devoid of compassion and feeling to Shaundar. Even their rooms were Spartan military affairs with bunks made of bolts and steel frames. Shaundar settled his things in as best he could, such as they were; but Corin insisted upon making room for the drums and so they decided they would share a desk rather than keep their own. The purple Dukagsh wood softened some of the lines of the place a little.

He warmed much more quickly to the ship's worg, a great big beast named, appropriately enough, Bahgtru. Shaundar had encountered a few on his missions as a Shadow-Soldier. The orcs kept them in place of *cath'shee* or *tressym* to hunt rats and guard their property, so he was a little wary of the horse-sized, savage-looking lupine creature at first. But he soon found that if you were supposed to be on ship, the exceptionally

clever animal was downright pathetic in its doglike displays of affection. Shaundar had always loved dogs but practicality never allowed for such a pet. And, he quickly learned, these creatures were hardly pets. For some reason Bahgtru took a shine to Shaundar as well, and the worg followed him around the ship and responded to him with surprising intelligence. Shaundar quickly got into the habit of commanding him like any other sailor, except that he had no opposable thumbs.

Corin seemed more at home in the position of Captain than Shaundar might have expected. He prowled the ship from the oil and pistons of the grapple machinery to the marine's quarters, but even he, Shaundar noted, was forbidden from entering the helm room without permission from the young Warpriest and his acolytes. As they were settled in their room after the first dog watch, the only time that neither one was on duty nor sleeping, Shaundar asked him, "So where did you get your command experience?"

"Oh," Corin observed between draws on his pipe, "all adult males are required to serve three years in the military if they're in fealty to a clan. And of course you know how it is; nobles get officer's training."

"That's good to know," Shaundar nodded. "I wasn't sure if you had any command experience or not. I feel better."

"Where do you think I got these scars?" Corin exclaimed indignantly, flexing his hands and wrists to draw attention to the axe marks and blade nicks. "It wasn't from my *Zabbak'Tarr!*"

Shaundar laughed at him; whereupon he was assaulted with a pillow. But Corin was laughing too. “Where’s a beer mug when you need one?” he demanded in mock irritation. Shaundar just laughed harder, amused by his peevish expression, and the next thing he knew, they were scuffling in a mock wrestling match. Bahgtru eagerly jumped up, wagging his tail, and managed to knock them both over in his desire to get involved in the playfight.

Someone cleared his throat. The two of them looked up, startled, to see Sarga standing in the hatchway. “Sirs,” he said uncertainly, “The Commander is asking permission to board.”

“Well, drum him on!” Corin snapped irritably. He began to straighten his hair and his armour. Bahgtru sat back on his haunches with an almost comical expression of irritation and offered a canine snort by way of commentary.

Sarga snapped a sharp salute and departed. Shaundar began to straighten himself up as well. “We’re expected on deck, I take it?”

“You could skip it if you wanted,” explained Corin, “but it looks better if you don’t.”

Shaundar fastened his hair back with a leather tie. “Are we expected to be armed?”

“Generally when we’re on duty,” Corin nodded, grasping his axe as though Shaundar’s question had reminded him. Topsides, a deliberate and martial drumbeat began.

Shaundar buckled on the two utilitarian short swords he had acquired in lieu of his Elvish blades. “I have an odd question, Corin,” he mused. “Why does Sarga still have both of his eyes? All the Warpriests I’ve known have just the one.”

Corin looked at him long and hard and then shook his head. “I should slap your father,” he grumbled. “Because he serves Dukagsh, that’s why. The one-eyes serve He-Who-Watches.”

Another blunder. Well, he had asked. Not bothering to hide his genuine embarrassment, he persisted, “I guess it must be because mercenaries deal with a lot of common orcs. We must have ended up with all the ‘old-fashioned’ ones then.” He pondered it and then asked, “So is Dukagsh the One-Eye’s replacement?”

Corin barked a laugh. “Don’t tell Uncle Olaf that!” he jested. Now in the passage and at the foot of the hatchway, he dove through the opening and once on the opposite side of the gravity plane he skipped onto the floor of the top deck. It was a manoeuvre unique to seasoned spacefarers because it was the most expedient, but groundlings usually lacked the confidence in the gravity plane to make it work. Disdaining the handrails provided for less seasoned crew, Shaundar followed suit, ignoring the customary flash of nausea at the shift in his inertia, to

observe the ship's crew lining up at attention as he stepped onto the hardwood. "Seriously though, it's a bit of a controversy," Corin confessed. "Dukagsh's divinity, I mean. He was a mortal orc once; the first scro. Some don't think we should be worshipping him at all. Respect, revere, sure, but *worship*? My father shares that opinion, which makes him unpopular among some of the newer Warpriests."

As Shaundar was digesting this, one of their crew was bellowing, "*Tath'Darrak* on deck!"

Shaundar stood at attention at Corin's side and prepared to receive Targ in his official capacity as commanding officer.

The grey-skinned scro boarded and like professionals, Corin, Shaundar, and their crew saluted. Targ returned it sharply and approached them. "At ease," he nodded – approvingly, Shaundar thought – and they both relaxed into a military "at ease" posture.

"*Karr'Tarr* Corin," Targ nodded, "I would like to observe as you conduct your first crew inspection."

"*Gul, karr!*" he nodded in reply, and he started going over the crew with a jaundiced eye, berating them and offering them disciplinary assignments for out-of-order uniforms or surly responses. Shaundar smiled; the discipline was not unlike that of the elven ships he grew up on, though punishments tended to be more physical here. It made him feel a little less out of place.

When the galley helpers, the gear oilers and the deck swabbies had been assigned, Corin returned to Targ and saluted again. “I hope this meets with your satisfaction, sir,” he said. There was not the least hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Nor was there in Targ’s nod of approval. “It does,” he rumbled agreeably. “You run a tight ship, Captain. Good work. Walk with me, lads,” he invited in that distinct senior officers’ tone that was actually a command, and they fell in step with him as he strolled up the deck with his large hands locked behind him in the “at ease” posture. He took them away from the remainder of the crew.

“We’re being sent to Moragspace to prepare for a classified initiative,” he informed them without preamble. “But the Grand Council is also suspicious of their commander, Warpriest Morkitar. We are to report anything . . . dubious. Is that understood?”

“*Gul, karr.* What do they suspect him of, sir?” Shaundar wanted to know. Was this a possible ally?

Targ shrugged. “The Council wasn’t clear. We’re just supposed to observe him. I think they suspect him of trying to create his own little army out there. He’s certainly been secretive.”

“Morkitar,” Corin ruminated. “Wasn’t he the one who was claiming that Warpriests were the true spiritual heirs of Dukagsh a few years back? Calling for the abolition of the clans?”

Targ nodded grimly.

The big scro shook his head. “Right then. How did he get command of a classified initiative out in the wilds of space without supervision?”

Again the Clan Champion shrugged. “No idea. But he’s not without influence, you know. The One-Eyes are sympathetic to their cause, for example. Not supportive,” he amended, “but sympathetic.”

Corin nodded. “Right; orders received and understood, sir.” He snapped a salute. Shaundar mirrored it. Targ responded with a crisp nod.

When he had departed their vessel and the course was laid in, Corin confided to Shaundar, “Father doesn’t believe that leadership by the clergy is what Dukagsh would have wanted. Some of his writing suggests that too much religious fervour contributed to the loss of the First War. But they’re picking up more supporters because people don’t know what else to do about the Overlord; and I can’t say I don’t see their point. I think you and I may have to try to win over some hearts and minds, Bolvi.”

Shaundar considered his words and wondered how this information might benefit the Elven Navy; but much later, when he considered it, he would admit that even then he was concerned about Corin and the Bloodfists getting caught in the crossfire.

Chapter Thirteen

A cool, damp cloth on his forehead brought him back to partial awareness. Corin was wedged in beside his bunk and he had a bowl and some thin blood porridge set out on their bedside shelf. Bahgtru was occupying the remainder of the space. Seeing that he was awake, the big lupine creature whined and stood up to lick Shaundar's face.

"Get out of there, Bahgtru," Corin rumbled. Then to Shaundar he added, "Targar says you have to eat."

"Easy for him to say," Shaundar croaked. The last thing in the world he wanted was food. But as Corin drew up a spoon of the stuff for him – just *klar* with some fresh blood in it; the traditional convalescent's meal – he made himself swallow, because it was Corin who was asking. He found once he tasted the gruel that he was starving and he ate it as quickly as Corin fed it to him. He was still unable to hold the spoon.

"Targar brought some willow bark tea for you," Corin told him when that was finished.

Shaundar let out a rasping chuckle. It seemed so strange, hearing about willow bark tea from his orcish blood brother! It was something incongruent; a piece of his elvish past grafted onto the present. "Is this how low I've sunk?" he coughed. "Herbal tea?"

Corin shrugged. “The goblin shamans say it’s good for you. It will reduce the fever.”

Shaundar was hanging in there, but the fever was beginning to make him woozy and it hurt to breathe. His chest rattled like a snake’s tail, coiled to strike. “They’re right,” Shaundar admitted. “It should help with the heart palpitations too.” He coughed again while Corin helped him shift up on the pillows. “Well, give it over,” he went on when the fit had passed. “Did they have the good grace to put honey in it?”

“They did, actually.” Corin pressed the cup to his lips and he drank it obediently. Shaundar was pleasantly surprised by the flavour of that powerful orcish ginger-root as well. “You and your girly drinks.”

“Honey’s good for you too,” he retorted when he’d finished the cup. It was a little too hot but it felt good on the back of his raspy throat. “Keeps sickness away.”

“Did you hear there’s a Warpriest of *Luthic* now?” the scro remarked. “Can you imagine? Maybe you missed your calling, *na’kor*. I always thought you should have been a Warpriest, with your wit and common sense and all that stuff you know about healing.”

“Not faithful enough,” Shaundar argued.

“Look at us,” sighed Corin. “A couple of broken old warriors.”

“How goes the resupply?” Shaundar rasped, not wanting to dwell on this point; and not wanting to explain that by elven standards, he was still rather young.

“We’re almost done,” Corin told him. “Just loading the ammunition.”

Shaundar nodded, relieved. The sooner they were gone from the sphere, the better. He hacked a great green ugly splat of something into a bowl. “Targar says that’s good for you so keep it up,” Corin encouraged. He looked worried. Shaundar was worried too.

He closed his eyes and sank back into the pillow, exhausted from the effort of sitting up. He had never felt this weak; not even in Raven Talon.

“I’m wearing you out,” Corin realized, shifting his chair to get up. “I’ll leave you sleep.”

“No,” Shaundar protested, opening his eyes to fix his gaze on Corin’s. “If you have duties, that’s one thing, but . . . I’d rather have your company.” And he genuinely meant it. He didn’t want to admit it, even to himself, but the weakness was not recovering easily and he feared the congestion might be pneumonia. He was scared and he didn’t want to be alone.

Corin smiled and sat back down. “I’m here, *na’kor*,” he said.

“Shaundar?” came the mental summons across the Spheres and into Shaundar’s brain. There had been several more but he had ignored them. “Shaundar, answer me if you still live, damn you!”

Shaundar did not reply. He couldn’t think of anything to say.

It was fortunate that Madrimlian was reading when Shaundar’s voice streamed into his brain from across the Void, because otherwise he might have walked directly into a wall or fallen down a flight of stairs. “Attention Captain; Teu’Ruan Sunfall reporting,” Shaundar began. “Attempting to re-establish contact. Have arrived in Moragspace with Clan Bloodfist fleet. Please respond.”

“Corellon’s blood!” the Captain swore. He dipped a quill to transcribe Shaundar’s messages and sent back immediately, “I hear you loud and clear, Lieutenant. It’s damn good to hear your voice! What’s your status?”

Shaundar’s relief and amusement were both unmistakable. “Alive and well. Have been accepted as full member of Bloodfists in blood brother ceremony. En route to Moragspace rendezvous with attack fleet, objective unknown.”

Madrimlian scratched down the report. He was delighted. Shaundar had made it! And somehow he’d been accepted as a full

member of the Bloodfists? The Black Arrows had never been that effective! That would have to be handled very carefully indeed.

“Acknowledged,” he sent back. “Will confirm situation with Command. Remain on mission for now; continue to report tactical information. Will expect more regular reports from you, marine.”

The reply was, *“Scrospace prevents planar contact. Will do my best. Let me know when I can come home, sir. Last message for today.”*

That meant either that Shaundar had exhausted the limit of his daily message spells, or the invocations needed for planar contact. *“Understood,” he replied. “Welcome back, lad! Report tomorrow if you can; I’ll be listening.”* There was, of course, no response; but Madrimlian had not expected one.

Well, that was the best news he’d heard since Admiral Belryn’s arrival on base. With only the hint of a scowl, he took his report to Belryn’s office door, knocked, and waited.

“Come in,” Belryn bade him. He entered and saluted sharply, trying not to look around the room. Most of it was adorned with grisly trophies of Belryn’s successes during the First Unhuman War, including an entire orc chieftain’s head, stuffed and mounted above his desk. “What can I do for you, Captain?” the Admiral asked absently from the paperwork he was sorting through.

“Sir,” Madrimlian began, “we’ve had a report from Lieutenant Sunfall.”

The Admiral looked up sharply. “Wasn’t he confirmed killed in action?” he demanded.

“Av, *quessir*,” Madrimlian agreed. “Lieutenant Kyrok witnessed it himself. Guess he was mistaken.” He handed over the transcribed messages and stood at rest.

Belryn read through the parchments and a smile crossed his face. “This is outstanding. How in the Abyss was he accepted as a full Bloodfist clan member?”

“I’m not sure, sir,” the Captain admitted. “I hope we’ll find out in subsequent reports.”

The Admiral leaned back in his chair and rested one delicate white finger on his lips as he pondered the situation. “This is far too useful a situation not to take advantage of. How long can Sunfall stay in the field?”

Madrimlian shrugged. “Hard to say, sir. That modified *alter self* spell the lads were taught before their insertion should keep him reasonably well hidden. But he’s in over his head, Admiral. We trained our operatives for short insertions, not long-term espionage. And we certainly never trained them to act alone.”

“He’s managed it this long,” the Admiral argued.

Madrimlian said nothing. Truthfully, he was of two minds. What he said was true. And yet, the Admiral had a point. When would they ever have this opportunity again?

“Let’s leave him in place,” the Admiral decided. “Find out more about the situation. Take advantage of the tactical insight. Maybe get him to eliminate a couple of clan leaders while he’s at it. And let’s not tell his unit he’s still alive. It will reinforce their fighting spirit to believe otherwise, and it will protect his cover.”

“*Av, quessir,*” Madrimlian acknowledged. He didn’t like that, and he knew that Yathar would never forgive him once he’d learned the truth, but he respected the need for it. The less people who were aware of the situation, the less chance there was that orcish spies – and there had been a few – would find out. “Sir, I have a question. Weren’t we concerned about a possible secret weapon at that base in Moragspace?”

“We were,” Belryn agreed. “Has the Lieutenant confirmed one?”

“Not yet, but I will direct him to find out.”

Belryn nodded. “Keep me posted on the tactical situation,” the Admiral commanded. “Like when we find out where that fleet is going.”

“Av, quessir,” Madrimlian affirmed, and with a salute that was only a little awkward, he took his leave.

Admiral Belryn contemplated the parchments and wondered how he could best make use of Sunfall’s survival in his ongoing plans.

Taking advantage of her husband’s absence, Y’Anid decided to make a trip into Dukagsh City and visit the Temple there. Ynga took her up on the invitation to join her. Purchasing supplies for the winter months was, nominally, the reason for the expedition, but Y’Anid had a different motivation.

They took a Dragonfly, crewed by a contingent of marines at the Almighty Leader’s insistence. Y’Anid took the helm with great pleasure, watching the world from the perspective of their ship as if she were flying over the great mountains herself. She laughed aloud as they sailed through a few high cirrus clouds and the humidity tickled her face. She so enjoyed being at the helm of a ship! She only wished women were permitted to do it more often.

“At last, a chance to speak freely,” Ynga smiled at her sister as she came into the helm room. All the accruements of the Warpriests had been hastily removed and a shrine to the Den Mother established in their place. Y’Anid thought they ought to appropriate the ship for their personal use on a regular basis.

“Is something on your mind, *nar’karra*?” Y’Anid smiled back over her shoulder.

“Several somethings,” Ynga confessed. “What do you think about this marriage proposal from the Banebloods?”

“I think it’s suspicious,” admitted Y’Anid. “They’re Silver Axe to the core, not Handers. Why they would seek an alliance with us is beyond me.”

Ynga nodded solemnly. “That confirms my own thoughts.” She pulled up a stool to sit by her twin. “An assassin, do you think?”

Y’Anid clutched the armrests of the helm tightly like a raptor tightening her talons. “She’d better not be.”

Ynga laughed. “It’s good to see your blood boil! Sometimes you suppress your Orcish blood a little too much I think.”

“It’s my duty.”

Ynga sighed. “I know.” There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, and then she pressed her lips together and said, “Do you think that Bolvi might be an assassin?”

Y’Anid was shocked. Her gaze focused a little more on the room around her instead of the skies about the ship as she turned to look at her sister. “You think this and you asked him to try to protect me?”

Ynga shook her head. “He’s hiding something. You know it and so do I. I thought at first that he was a breath of fresh air. A random opportunity. But it seems too convenient, now that he’s Corin’s *na’kor*.”

Y’Anid considered it. Yes, it was clear that their new Clansman had secrets. But she thought she knew what they were. “I think that the Bloodaxes did something terrible to him. Something not only hurtful but degrading. Torture, maybe. And I think that he doesn’t want to tell anyone, for fear that we’ll think less of him.” Yes, that was the nature of the guarded hurt, wasn’t it? She recognized it because she knew it in herself.

Light sparkled in Ynga’s eyes. “Ah! That rings true. And that’s good, because I’m really starting to like him. I have a friend there, I think. Do you believe it’s possible for a man and a woman to have the same sort of mutual respect that sister-priestesses and brothers-in-arms often do?”

Y’Anid smiled. “I hope so,” she said. Yes, that would be good. She would like to be Bolvi’s friend, since circumstance and necessity prevented her from being his lover. Yet she could not deny, at least to herself, that she wished it were otherwise. Was it wrong for her to hope that her husband never returned from this mission?

“We’ll know more about the Baneblood situation once we’ve talked to the Grandmother,” Y’Anid assured her sister. Ynga nodded in agreement. Naturally in the tempestuous world of Scro politics, with the clans and the priesthoods and all their fingers in various pies, the Temple

of the Mother was not without its own information network. Soldiers and nobles often said things they shouldn't in pillow talk and when they figured that their wives and concubines were not listening or couldn't understand. The Grandmother was the most powerful priestess on Dukagsh and there really wasn't much she didn't know; whether she chose to share it or not was another matter. The sisters were hoping to decant some political information for their clan.

The Grandmother was happy enough to receive them in her lavish suite of rooms where younger acolytes of the Sisterhood attended to her needs. She reclined in her chair like a queen on a throne, and Y'Anid supposed that she was the closest thing to a queen that her people had. Draped in gold and finery, silk and fur, she regarded them with sly amusement. Her silver-frosted black hair, still full and luxurious, formed a fine mantle about her terra cotta shoulders.

They did not bow or make obeisance. They were ladies of the Bloodfist clan, and they declined their heads in mutual respect; a gesture that the Grandmother matched. She folded her six-inch lacquered claws beneath her sharp chin. "Welcome, Ladies Bloodfist," she greeted them with a twinkle in her eye. "I've been expecting you. Leave us," she said to the acolytes sharply, and they obediently filed out after touching fists to foreheads.

"Thank you for receiving us, Grandmother," Ynga smiled respectfully.

“Gul, nor lakaar,” Y’Anid added. “But I am sure that if you’ve been expecting us, then you know why we’re here.”

“I can hazard a guess.”

“Then are we correct, Grandmother?” Ynga asked. “Have the Banebloods sent an assassin among us?”

The Grandmother shrugged. “Our Overlord paid the Banebloods a visit not three days before the proposal came. And a week later, five Manti were delivered to the Banebloods’ Summer Estate.”

Ynga pressed her mouth into a thin line. “What can we do?”

The Grandmother frowned. “It would be grave insult to refuse the betrothal at this point. Which could well be the Overlord’s purpose. I imagine if that were to occur, the Banebloods would declare right of feud, and the Bloodaxes would suddenly reveal a defense pact with the Banebloods.”

The twins nodded. That was pretty much what they had suspected and feared.

The Grandmother rose to her feet and made her way to her vanity. From her neck she took a small silver key, and with this she unlocked the bejeweled box that occupied the center. From this box she removed a fine blown-glass bottle with a decorative stopper. It contained a transparent indigo decoction.

“Essence of Lady’s Tears,” the Grandmother smirked. Y’Anid hitched in her breath. This was extremely rare and expensive. It took thousands of Lady’s Tears blossoms to make even a dram of the essence. It assured that the woman taking it would conceive only boys.

Ynga’s eyes widened as her fingers folded around the elixir. The Grandmother’s sneer spread and her cat-green eyes glittered with hard diamonds. “I resent the Overlord taking a hand in the Lady’s matters, but I don’t think Nakyra is a nasty creature. Just frightened. Assure that you bear the heirs to the blood of the clan and she does not. But win her over if you can.”

“*Nor drakaar*, Grandmother,” Ynga nodded solemnly, and she made the decanter disappear.

The Grandmother nodded just once. “Don’t stay too long,” she warned. “The Temple cannot be seen to be partisan to anyone. But we know who serves our needs . . . and who does not.”

The twins took the hint. “We appreciate your time, Grandmother,” Y’Anid said. And they made their exit, much reassured; on Ynga’s behalf, anyway.

Shaundar was, to say the least, dismayed when he received Madrimlian’s orders. He ran his hands through his hair and groaned. A wave of anxiety and loneliness washed over him.

Yet, it made perfect sense, and he supposed, when he thought about it, he would have done no differently himself. From a tactical perspective, he was an asset they already believed was “off the board,” so to speak. Expending him if necessary was only sensible.

Madrimlian questioned him about the circumstances of his infiltration, but he knew the circumstances were likely unique. He had a more favourable response for the Captain when asked about charting the sphere, however. Shaundar had continued his observation of the astronomical bodies of ScroSPACE by charting planetary movements, sun cycles and celestial phenomena, and he thought he probably had a good starting point for the Navy’s navigation department. At Madrimlian’s direction, he sketched what he knew onto a parchment which he kept folded up in his copy of the *Tethka Tarrak*. He was to give it into the hands of some mercenaries sent by the Navy, who were pretending to have been chartered by the Wrackbloods, if he found them.

Madrimlian’s last order was wrought with enough concern that Shaundar at least knew he had not been forgotten. “*Protect your cover by whatever means necessary,*” he was instructed. Shaundar returned, “*Av, quessir. Duly noted.*”

When they sighted Gamaro Base, Shaundar was seated on the bulkhead practicing the *nardek*. Rathgar, full of encouragement, had continued his instruction on their journey in their spare time while his little brother Gardak dodged out of cabin boy duties long enough to

listen, and he was beginning to be able to make the thing stop squawking like a strangled cat. He put it away and pulled out his glass to have a look.

From a distance it looked like a gammaroid tumbling through space. He couldn't imagine why the utilitarian scro would build a base to look like a giant turtle. But then he realized it was the corpse of a gammaroid, bolted together with sheet metal and bristling with ships. Most of them appeared to be tiny fighter craft entirely composed of steel.

They disembarked in the aft bay of the hulking corpse; which was located exactly where you might expect on such a creature; though of course, any of the associated biological matter was long decayed save shell and bones. Twenty or thirty Manti and a significant fleet of ships that varied from Ogre Mammoths to human Dragonflies shared docking space with them. They were met in the bay by a chamberlain or a secretary in Warpriest armour. He introduced himself as Krak "of no clan worth mentioning, my lords." He was polite but Shaundar sensed reluctance and resentment behind the respect being offered.

"We ask that you try not to antagonize the other races, my lords," the Warpriest urged. "Racial tensions are strained. And you should be aware that we have some . . . unusual guests." He walked ahead of them to guide them through the lengthy corridors. A pack of bugbears slouched by with surly looks.

"Such as?" pressed Targ.

“We’ve hired a few mercenaries,” he explained. “Lizardmen, humans, giff, and a handful of . . . well, bionoids.”

“Bionoids?!” exclaimed Targ in alarm. Shaundar wanted to do the same. Bionoids were created by the elves in the First Unhuman War. They were living weapons; originally elves who were empowered through some sort of magic to transform into humanoid insectoid creatures capable of incredible destruction.

“None of them are *spirra*,” he assured them hastily. “They were all of human stock.”

“That doesn’t really concern me,” Corin growled. “The tactical intelligence of having soldiers once loyal to the enemy in our midst is what concerns me. How do we know we can trust them?”

“Most assuredly we can’t,” Krak acknowledged. “But they have no love of elves, of that you can be certain.”

“And what’s to stop the elves from inserting one who *is* loyal to them as a spy?” Targ demanded; which almost made Shaundar cringe. “How would we know?”

Krak shook his head. “I acknowledge that you have a point, my lord. But their tactical contributions have been crucial to the war effort and therefore, I judge it to be worth the risk.”

Shaundar thought the situation might bear watching. If any of them were still loyal to the Navy, he or she would be a valuable ally. But he had to admit, he couldn't imagine why they would be, when the Navy had abandoned them so thoroughly.

After a long series of corridors, during which they passed by kobolds, bugbears, hobgoblins, a handful of humans and a small squad of giff, they were shown into a scro common area. Shaundar was discouraged to see that perhaps half of them were Warpriests. Most of them narrowed their eyes suspiciously at the delegation when they entered the room.

Morkitar came to greet them. He was a large brown-skinned scro of about Dorin and Olaf's age, and though he wore an eye-patch, the line of a sword cut that ran through the heavy eyebrow that arched over it told Shaundar that it was not because he worshipped Gruumsh. His regulation common-scro's black studded armour was adorned with steel spikes as opposed to teeth and claws, and an unusual tooled art display of stars that Shaundar recognized from the skies of Dukagsh. It was talented work. His torso displayed an impressive *toregkh* and the medallion that marked him as a Warpriest – which, in his case, exhibited the Eyes of Dukagsh as opposed to the Eye of Gruumsh or the Sword of Ilneval.

“Champion and Heir Bloodfist,” he grunted, standing up to meet them. But he did not salute, Shaundar noted. “Welcome to Gamaro Base. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?” His voice was

moderate and pleasant, but Shaundar was not fooled. His assassin's training noted the slight tic that had developed at the corner of the Warpriest's eye.

"Commodore," Targ acknowledged him (and the tic worsened; Shaundar supposed that the large force obviously present here might seem to warrant a title greater than "Commodore" but guessed it was a calculated insult on the part of their Clan Champion), "we've been directed to rendezvous here and begin an assault against Caer'Thunspace. Our orders." He presented a sealed scroll.

Morkitar took it with a perceivable scowl, broke it open and scanned the page with a jaundiced eye. "Understood," he nodded, though the tic was still present. "I suppose I'm glad that the Council has finally seen fit to do something useful. But I am somewhat dismayed to find out that you, and not I, are commanding the assault, Champion Bloodfist."

Targ shrugged. "I suppose the Council felt that you were too valuable to the war effort here," he said graciously. "You are to bring us up to speed on your present project and how it is proceeding."

Morkitar nodded again. "I am willing to do so, but the facility can only be thoroughly inspected by one of your Warpriests. This is for your safety, nothing more."

Targ screwed up his face at the insult; but Corin piped up, “I am sure that will be fine. Sarga, you’ll accompany us on our inspection.”

“Of course, my lord,” he agreed readily.

This averted a coming storm between Targ and Morkitar; of that, Shaundar was certain, as the bristled hair on the backs of their necks began to soften. The Warpriest led them back the way they had come, though he took a left turn instead of a right upon their return.

Six bugbear guards stood aside as they approached a colossal metal door thicker than the hull of the ironclad Manti. Striding through the doorway, the delegation found itself on the floor of an enormous auditorium chamber with a smouldering hexagonal fire pit at its center. On the portside was a statue of a cyclopean orc whom Shaundar assumed to be Gruumsh holding a burning torch; on the starboard side was the same orc brandishing a spear. The deck they were on opened up at about the belt level of each statue and formed a curving overlook without balconies. As they passed through the chamber, Shaundar noted that the statues were of cast bronze and the fire pit was ringed with iron spears at each point and contained the charred remains of humanoid bones. The walls were painted with scenes that Shaundar assumed must have been inspired by the First Unhuman War, mostly of elves and goblinoids and their allies and ships in battle. A few of the scenes were more than a little disturbing. In one, a bionoid ripped its way through a village, including non-coms, women and children. In another, an entire planet was visibly shattered through the force of some elven spell.

The chamber ended in a semicircular dais displaying a set of gilded double doors. Two bugbears in ceremonial armour on each side pulled them open upon their approach.

The stench that immediately assaulted Shaundar's senses was nauseating. The room reeked of tar and slime and acid and burning flesh. On a platform, nine Warpriests sat in a ring and chanted and rocked continually, locked in some kind of ritual. Over the edge of an observation platform, contained in a chamber lined with giant bones and crossed with thick strips of metal, rolled and roiled a creature that hurt the mind to see. It was immense and sluglike and it left a trail of toxic snot in its wake. The mass of mottled grey flesh heaved and pulsed with whatever passed for the monster's breath, and as it twisted itself over slowly, like a mountain shrugging, Shaundar could see parts of a massive lamprey maw filled with giant pointed teeth, each one longer than he was tall, radiating light and heat from within like a blast furnace. It was so vast that he could not see the entire maw at once.

"Gentlemen," announced Morkitar, "this is the secret weapon of the Scro Empire."

Cold fear settled into Shaundar's blood. There was only one thing this creature could be. The scro had a Witchlight Marauder.

"Mercy of the Den Mother," whispered Corin. Shaundar was surprised to realize that his scro companion's shock and horror was no less than his own. "What are you doing, Commodore?" he breathed.

“What the Council has directed,” Morkitar snapped. “Preparing for the worst.”

Targ nodded. He had known, Shaundar realized. This was not a surprise to him. “The Council is most eager for an update on your progress. Have you discovered how to control the creature yet?”

Morkitar said, “We’ve discovered that the secret is in a talisman; a Witchlight Key. We don’t have it yet but we have an idea where it is. There’s an unmarked map from the Wandering Times but it has no names on it. We have people seeking it out.”

The Champion frowned. “That eliminates the possibility of using it on our mission, then. Unfortunate.” He nodded to himself thoughtfully. “How long before you have it?”

“Hard to say.” Morkitar’s face revealed nothing. Shaundar tried not to gnash his teeth. What people? Where were they now? Ironically the coveted position he currently occupied within the Bloodfist clan would likely prevent him from finding out. He could see how Krak was scrutinizing their party through slitted eyes.

“Right then, we’ll have to proceed without it,” accepted Targ with reluctance. “Perhaps you should show us to our quarters and then we should convene in the Grand Strategy Room to discuss our plans.”

“*Gul, karr,*” agreed the Commodore.

After they had reached their barracks and Morkitar had promised to meet them in the Strategy Room, Corin turned on Targ with fire in his eyes. “You knew about this,” he accused. “You knew and you didn’t tell us.”

“Why should I?” demanded Targ, outraged. “Who in the Nine Hells do you think you are? I don’t answer to you.”

“Not yet, my lord,” pointed out Sarga, his eyes shooting ice daggers, “but you will.”

“That remains to be seen,” Targ observed with equal venom.

“What is *that* supposed to mean?” demanded Shaundar. Here was his first real confirmation of the conspiracy that he had long suspected was fermenting beneath the surface of Targ’s heavy brow.

But Corin, either due to naivety or barely-controlled anger, did not hear him. “My father would be furious,” he hissed instead through gritted teeth.

Targ laughed. “Do you think your father doesn’t know about it? He’s on the Grand Council; he is the Almighty Leader, after all!”

“He would never agree to this. The horror, the loss of life . . . on both sides . . . doesn’t anybody *read*?”

“It’s a weapon of last resort,” Targ assured him. “The Council doesn’t intend to release it frivolously. Besides, at the moment it’s the only one we have, and as you heard, we don’t have the means to control it. So we can’t do anything with it anyway.”

Corin put his hand to his eyes. “Nothing that eats worlds is worth using. Nothing. No matter how desperate.”

“Will you say that when you are faced with the survival of our species, Corin?” the Clan Champion argued. “I think you are naive. The elves will stop at nothing to destroy us. Why should we do less?”

Was this what they really believed? Shaundar thought the War of Revenge was motivated by just that – revenge. Was it possible that it was motivated by *fear* instead?

“Gods help us, Targ,” Corin murmured, “I hope it never comes to that.”

Targ clasped his shoulder. “So do I. But what if it does? We need to be prepared. ‘Disdain no weapon that gives you the advantage in a conflict; for the enemy certainly will not!’”

Corin shook his head. “Dukagsh also said, ‘Hold fast to your honour, brave warrior; for only honour elevates us out of barbarism.’ My father might know of this,” he acquiesced, “but I am certain he would not approve.”

Shaundar knew that his first priority was to pass this information on to Madrimlian so that Madrimlian could inform Lionheart. But for the first time he began to wonder whether or not all the scro sanctioned Raven Talon, or if it was just the Bloodaxe clan. And he wondered if they might be better off seeking a diplomatic solution.

Madrimlian once again came into Belryn's office. This time he offered only a cursory salute. Belryn snapped, "I expect proper respect from my subordinates, Captain!" Gritting his teeth, Madrimlian repeated the gesture in a sharp and formal fashion.

"Now what can I do for you?" the Admiral demanded.

"Sorry, I forget myself, sir," Madrimlian growled through a carefully-neutral expression. "I have news of some urgency. I have heard from Lieutenant Sunfall."

Belryn sighed impatiently. "And? Has he discovered the nature of the weapon?"

"Av, *quessir*. He says it's a Witchlight Marauder."

Belryn looked up at him sharply. In the silence he cleared his throat. "I will inform Lionheart. Someone will have to investigate further. But we shouldn't risk Sunfall's cover. Tell him to destroy it, but

only if opportunity arises. Lionheart will have to decide what to do about it.”

“Understood, sir.” He was unhappy about this stance. Had Belryn ever seen the aftermath of a Witchlight Marauder attack? Yet it was clear that Belryn had no intention of listening to any advice offered by him, today or on any other day. “May I be dismissed, sir?” he requested.

Belryn waved his hand dismissively, and Madrimlian took his leave with another crisp salute and, just to be a bit of an ass, a perfectly executed parade wheel and march. Belryn took notice and the corner of his mouth folded into a scowl, but he said nothing.

Shaundar stood on the deck of the *Sword of Courage* and stared at the semaphore from the *Elfrender* with rage and disbelief.

“Never mind, Bolvi,” Corin grunted. “We will do our duty.”

They were on the attack approach to Trinhea, a cluster-world on the edge of Caer’Thunspace. It was a little off the well-charted Flow of the Radiant Triangle, but it was significant because it sported no less than two starfly mother-trees. The classified initiative they’d been assigned to out of Gamaro Base was to raid the Trinhean elven base, which was poorly guarded for such a significant target, and steal a cutting of one of the plants for the Warpriests to study.

Shaundar had dutifully reported all of this to Madrimlian, of course; along with the presence of the Witchlight Marauder at Gamaro, the identity of the base commander and numbers of troops he commanded, and fleet presence (and what the scro knew about elven fleet presence) as displayed in the spectacular brass systems models of Gamaro's Grand Strategy Room. He was directed to destroy it if he could, but not to break his cover; and Lionheart was grateful for the information. The opportunity to annihilate the creature had not arisen.

His orders regarding Trinhea were more startling; he was to proceed with the raid and arrange to leave the crystal portraits he had acquired of the Grand Strategy Room somewhere that they could be found. That suggested to Shaundar that Lionheart intended to permit the raid to take place, and that baffled him. He was pretty sure that maintaining his cover did not trump protecting starfly plants.

Why he was angry was that Targ didn't know any of this, and Targ had just directed the *Sword of Courage* – and, of course, the heir to the clan – to take the lead in the attack and charge, alone, into the fray.

Someone had to do it, of course. But the Clan Heir? Elven nobles never would have taken such a crazy risk, whether the heir were brave enough to take it on or not. Was this really the way that scro did things?

"He's trying to kill you, *na'kor*," Shaundar observed.

“It doesn’t matter, Bolvi,” Corin sighed. “We can’t refuse the order. And I wouldn’t anyway. ‘A true commander is first into the fray and last to leave it,’ Dukagsh tells us. Sarga! Full tactical! Give us everything you’ve got!”

“*Gul, karr!*” the Warpriest bellowed from the helm, and the *Sword of Courage* leaped ahead of the flotilla escorting her.

The flotilla of elven Men-o-War guarding the cluster rose like a swarm of angry bees to greet them. They fanned out into a Court Dance formation; Shaundar had seen it before and remembered it from his tactical training. Apparently Targ recognized it too. The flag signals came up to direct them into an Arrow formation rolling ninety degrees.

Corin barked the command. Shaundar leant a hand to the bowline to make the roll. With agonizing slowness their flotilla formed a perpendicular V to the incoming elven ships with the *Sword of Courage* as its leading point. The signal from the flagship then directed them to fire at will.

“Hold your fire until we’re right on top of ‘em, lads!” Corin translated to his crew; a decision that Shaundar thought wise. “Prepare to ram!”

“Prime yer guns, boys!” Thorgir commanded, and the scro gun commanders aimed, the ogres loaded, the orcs rammed and sponged,

and the goblin ventsmen covered the vent hole while loading, then filled the vent with black powder.

With creaks and groans and swearing from the crew, the claw grapples lifted themselves into a raised position. Shaundar knew of their use and tactics from his Permafrost training, but he never had occasion to see them in combat and he was a little nervous about it. He could see all around them that the other Mantis ships in their small, five-ship flotilla were doing the same.

The seven Men-o-War broke their formation and whirled themselves into textbook Pinwheel arms to deal with the perpendicular Arrow; the ones to their portside curling down and the starboard ships swinging up. Shaundar saw with a start that the vessel that formed the pin in the wheel was Madrimlian's ship, the *Ruamarillys*.

"Open fire on the center point!" Corin bellowed, and Shaundar's heart pounded like a trip-hammer in his chest as Thorgir shrieked, "Fire!" and the fifth men in the cannon crews touched slowmatches to powder, the world filled with noise and smoke and heavy balls of iron roared towards his uncle's ship with the promise of death and pain.

"Incoming!" called Rathgar; and Shaundar saw what his sharp eyes had spotted; a gleaming object racing towards them at an oddly straight trajectory. Two others followed but they were slightly offset; Shaundar could tell by their almost imperceptible swerve.

“Pitch up twelve, roll fifteen!” cried Corin; and Shaundar scrambled to obey as Sarga leaned the *Sword* to the directed bearing. The object skipped off of the mainmast and skittered along the deck, harming nothing. It was a simple brass ball about the size of a shot-put, now twisted into a weird amoeboid shape. The other two shot by like tiny comets. “Hold fire! One-eighty swivel!” Corin called out. Surprised, the artillery crews managed to get their turreted weapons twisted to the rear, just as Corin cried out, “Brace for impact!”

The *Starflower* suddenly filled the sky off their port bow; and the ships kissed past each other, with the skate blades of the Mantis’ landing gear just scraping the leading edge of one of the *Ruamarillys*’ graceful wings. Shaundar winced but the damage, he could see when he whipped his head around, was minimal. They were hardly even slowed by the collision. “Return fire,” Corin grinned a moment later, and the now rear-facing weaponry let loose and the *Sword of Courage* shuddered. Shaundar watched in horror as the heavy catapult stone bounced right through one of the *Starflower*’s eye windows. They were still close enough that Shaundar heard the tinkling of shattering glass for a split second before they drew away.

The *Ruamarillys* stopped dead in space. “Nice shot, lads!” Corin crowed. “We got their jammer!” And the crew cheered and Shaundar tried not to be nauseous as he remembered Garan’s brains on the floor and blood everywhere. He knew the spelljammers on Madrimlian’s ship and wondered with a shudder which one of them they had just killed.

The other ships were all engaged and they flew on towards Trinhea's cluster unchallenged.

"Starfly tree sighted, sir!" Gardak called out from the crow's nest in his wavering, not-quite-a-man's voice. Shaundar squinted into the Void and saw what he was looking at: something like a gleaming crystalline tower was sprouting from one of the larger asteroids in the approaching cluster. "Six degrees off the port bow!"

"Take us there, Sarga!" Corin cried eagerly.

"*Gul, karr!*" the Warpriest returned and they made a beeline for the structure. It was only then that it occurred to Shaundar; firing through one of the eye-ports might take out a weapon, but a projectile would have to bounce through the bridge before reaching the helm; and while that might be possible, it was certainly unlikely. He smiled a little.

As they raced in towards the mother-tree, stable weapons platforms on asteroids fired at them. "Evasive manoeuvres!" Corin commanded, and Sarga, with the assistance of the sail crews, managed to slip and dodge everything except one of the heavy catapults, which dented in the starboard hull. When they zigzagged closer to the strange body, Shaundar realized why the Navy wasn't guarding it more possessively. Crystalline roots coiled around the meteor, and crystalline branches stretched towards the stars, but there was not a single fruit or leaf on it.

Shaundar saw his opportunity as the *Sword of Courage* flew closer. “Marines, follow me!” he commanded; and when Corin directed the crew to land the ship directly on the loading dock instead of one of the stardocks, Shaundar dove over the side with a small orcish horde behind him.

They did not go unchallenged. A platoon of elven marines rushed to intercept them. Shaundar winced as he unslung his boarding axe. “*Maintain your cover at all costs,*” he’d been told, right?

One of the elven marines vaulted into their vanguard, and Shaundar realized with a start that he was whirling about in the graceful lines of the bladesong. His dancing blade carved neatly through the tendons behind an ogre’s knee and continued on to slice an orc’s carotid artery. Both marines fell.

But Shaundar knew what the rhythm of the dance looked like; he’d spent enough time watching Yathar practice, and he’d spent enough time trying to emulate it as a child. When the bladesinger’s humming sword came back around for him, Shaundar’s axe was there to greet it. He shouldered into the elf and allowed his greater size to bowl the marine over; then he brought his axe-blade down on that dangerous weapon arm while the elf was still staggering. There was a thunderous crack and the bladesinger shrieked in pain and shock as his forearm was more crushed than severed. Blood sprayed and bone fragments burst through the skin as the graceful longsword and the hand that gripped it fell one way and the elven warrior another. He ran on. *Better maimed*

than killed, Shaundar justified to himself, and he hoped the bladesinger would be able to find a good healer, or a medical artificer to match Yathar's.

Up close, the mother-tree almost looked like a mineral sculpture of a tree. Its pseudo-wood structure gleamed iridescently in the harsh sunlight of space. Again, he could not find a single leaf or fruit. He ran over the sprawling root system searching for a tendril that was easily removed. His heart thundered in his ears.

"Got it, sir!" called Rathgar at a distance, holding up something that flashed brightly in the sunlight. His face was splashed with what Shaundar assumed was elven blood, since Rathgar didn't seem to be injured.

"Get another one!" Shaundar commanded, hoping that it wouldn't hurt the tree; and in the meantime he searched for just the right spot to leave the selenite and quartz he had imprinted with the images of the Grand Strategy Room. He found a good niche in a large root near the base of the trunk, and bending down as if to take a small offshoot, he poured the crystals into the opening, relying on the aura of their enchantments to reveal them to searching *N'Velahrn* later.

"Got the second cutting, my lord!" another scro in their crew announced.

Shaundar straightened up. “All right then, let’s go!” he ordered, and the Bloodfist horde charged back the way they’d come.

The *Sword of Courage* was besieged by the elves of Trinhea Base. Two and three deep they clustered around the Mantis ship while the crew desperately did their best to repel them. Boarding pikes and belaying pins, swords and axes flashed between the brass and steel railings, and the blood spread from the scro vessel in an oozing pool. Shaundar saw Katha and Corin wading in with the rest, their axes coming down again and again as they chopped through their encircling foes.

Shaundar’s attention was drawn by an expanding glow. He looked to his left and saw a mage conjuring fire in a globe between her hands. Thinking quickly, Shaundar seized his boot dagger and tossed it end over end. The hilt struck the sorceress in the temple and though it did little damage, her spell fizzled in her hands due to the distraction. She shook her head and turned her angry green eyes on him. Hating himself for it, he charged her, knocked her down, and stomped hard on her fingers with his orcish war boot. He didn’t meet her eyes but he couldn’t help but hear her agonized shriek.

“We’re never going to get back on the ship, sir!” Rathgar despaired. Shaundar saw the truth of it. They would have to kill every elf on the base, and even if he were inclined to do so, the Bloodfists were vastly outnumbered. Casting around for an idea, his eyes settled on a flitter perched on the drydock, her ladder extended and crates abandoned at her landing gear.

“Follow me!” Shaundar roared; and he made a dash for the tiny winged boat. Leaping up the ladder two steps at a time, he dropped into the chair that replaced a proper helm in some of the depowered loading vessels and took the tiller in his hand. His senses joined with the little ship. It seemed surprised by his presence. “Get in!” he demanded, and the dozen surviving marines who had followed him wedged themselves into the craft with prayers and a shoehorn. When they were all aboard, he took to the air and sailed over the siege to bring the flitter down on the Outer Deck with an expert hand. To his surprise, Bahgtru was there to meet them and he seized the flitter’s mooring line in his teeth and began to wind it around the capstan. “All free hands to the sails!” Shaundar ordered as soon as he was through the hatch and running on the deck. “Sarga, get us out of here *now!*”

“*Gul, karr!*” the helmsman cried; and before the surviving marines could find places at the sails and the oars, the Mantis was lifting off from the loading dock with a boarding party of elves in tow. Some of them, realizing what was happening, leaped free. Others, either too caught up in the battle or physically incapable, were carried with them when the *Sword’s* gravity drew away from the base. One elven warrior clambered up to Corin’s position at the rail. “Surrender!” the scro demanded in accented Espruar; and when he didn’t, Corin bashed him in the face with a thrust of his axe and the wounded elf careened into the gravity plane. Blood spurted into the air and sailed around the circumference of the ship after his floating body.

The fight only lasted a few moments after that. Half a dozen elven survivors finally cast down their weapons and allowed the orcs and the scro to pull them onto the deck as their comrade orbited in the ship's gravity well, moaning and dripping blood on everyone topsides. It was Katha who rescued him by leaping into the air, catching their injured foe in his arms, and allowing his momentum to carry them both around to the other side of the deck.

Perhaps the remains of the flotilla guarding the base saw that they had hostages. They held their fire as the *Sword of Courage* sailed between the *Ruamarillys* and its nearest mate; though shots were still being exchanged between them and the other ships of their small fleet. One elven ship was completely still and most of a delicate wing was in flinders; and the *Elfrender* was missing its starboard claw.

When Shaundar judged that they were about ten hex-lengths clear of the fight, the other ships in the Bloodfist flotilla began to retreat, firing as they withdrew. The elven defenders watched them go, with no more than a couple of pot-shots to answer their escape.

"Once our ships are clear," Corin announced to the elven prisoners, "you will be permitted to board your little boat there, and take yourselves back to Trinhea."

"You're not taking prisoners?" queried one of the marines, aghast.

“Too expensive to feed,” Shaundar joked; and the crew laughed heartily, bolstered by their victory. His unhappiness at having to harm elven soldiers was mitigated by Corin’s gesture of mercy.

The elven marines boarded the flitter under the watchful eyes of Rathgar and Bahgtru; though the elf that had been struck in the face by Corin was blinded and a good part of his face had been crushed by the blow. He had to be carried up the ladder by his comrades.

Before the flitter had cleared their gravity plane, the *Elfrender* directed them to form up and prepare for full spelljamming speeds. Rathgar clapped Shaundar on the shoulder as he reached for a line and the Warpriests went about seeing to the dead and tending the wounded. “I don’t know what the elves did to deserve your personal wrath, my lord,” he said, “but that was pretty ruthless, dismembering a warrior without finishing him off properly. Remind me never to get on your bad side!”

Shaundar tried not to chuckle at the irony, but the smile he returned was thin. He hoped that Madrimlian would find those crystals easily enough, and that the information they carried was worth the two elves he had crippled.

Chapter Fourteen

It was taking a gamble to leave the Grinder in a unified fleet, Corin knew; but it had been Bolvi's last suggestion before he lost consciousness, and his blood brother's strategic assessments were almost never wrong. "They don't have enough ships to patrol the whole field," he assured Corin in a whisper. "They can't be everywhere at once."

"That's what we thought when we invaded the sphere," he had reminded his *na'kor*.

But Bolvi just shook his head. "Those corvettes . . ." he rasped through belaboured lungs. "They weren't finished. Had to . . . send them anyway . . . to meet the threat."

Corin had no idea how Bolvi would know such a thing; but then again, he was considered one of the foremost experts of the Empire on elvish tactics, and if Bolvi said that was the case, he did not doubt it. Then he recalled that elven ships were grown, not built. Yes, the smaller ones would have been harvested early, wouldn't they? "Shouldn't we split up?" he had argued, conceding that point. "Less likely that we'll be discovered that way."

Again his blood brother had disagreed. "No. Makes no difference. But if we do find them . . . more ships means we'll do better in a fight. Strength in numbers."

So under his direction, the fleet had left the Grinder together, towing their elven prizes loaded up with additional foodstuffs, and additional survivors, behind them.

At best it was eighty days to the crystal shell. Corin was pretty sure that they weren't going to make it. But they had to try. And if they did make it, would his *na'kor*?

"Don't you die on me," he hissed through gritted teeth, mopping at Bolvi's sweat-dampened brow. "Y'Anid will never forgive me."

Beside him, Bahgtru whimpered and licked softly at Bolvi's palm. Bolvi went on breathing.

Gruumsh's Eye was half-lidded from Dukagsh's orbit when they returned to Dukagshspace. As the entirety of the crew secured the lower decks and then went topsides for landing protocol, the *Sword of Courage* touched down on Luthic, Dukagsh's moon. Its surface was a rolling ocean of gleaming white sand dunes. In the half-light they left long claw-shaped shadows on the moon's face. There was only one habitation; a smooth adobe warren surrounding a steaming body of water that might have been a lake or an inland sea. Vegetation that Shaundar associated with tropical island climates clustered around the steaming sea; palm trees, coconut and plantains, mostly.

The crew, shoulder to shoulder in the enclosed space of the upper deck, was downright jovial. It was a relief to see the pall of Shaundar's first scro funeral finally being cast off as the spacefarers caught sight of the temple. Six of their number had been killed in the Trinhea assault. Shaundar went over the gestures and chants of the *tarrak'za* in his mind that Corin had carefully instructed him in. He had tried not to shudder when he realized that the white gloves used to close the eyes of the dead were made of tanned humanoid skin. He couldn't tell what race they came from; but he doubted, based on their pallor, that they were made from the skin of orcs.

"Twenty-four hours leave, boys!" Corin announced.

The men hit the shore with grins and joy; even those who had been close to the dead crewmen were smiling a little. Priestesses of Luthic came out to greet them. "Let me take the war out of you, soldier," they said. One by one, they were led away; to baths, to massages, and to private places where, Shaundar did not doubt, a more hands-on form of healing was taking place.

"Hey," Corin remarked, indicating the docking facilities, "isn't that the *Warhammer*? Garik Bloodaxe's ship?"

Shaundar's veins frosted when he heard that name. He turned and looked. He didn't know what ship the former prison warden had been assigned to following his, Yathar and Sylria's theft of the scro's Dragonfly from Raven Talon. But if it was his ship, that meant he was

here. And if that was true, that meant that he might be vulnerable. The acrid taste of bloodlust flooded Shaundar's mouth. His fists flexed. "Is it?" he asked in a mild, disinterested tone. "Too bad; they'll stink up the place."

Corin laughed out loud. "Too true, *na'kor!*" he agreed. He narrowed his eyes at Shaundar's expression. "You're not thinking about blaspheming the Temple by shedding *blood* in it, are you?"

Shaundar scowled. "Of course not," he lied. He sucked at his tusks. Damn it all; now, of course, if anything happened to the bastard he would be immediately suspect.

Corin sighed. "*Na'kor*, I wish you would confide in me. What do we owe him a debt of vengeance for?"

He shook his head and closed his eyes. He gazed into the face of the past and saw the Prison Warden's blasé expression as a little elven child, crying for her father, was shot down like a dog. He wondered if he should make up a story to tell the Bloodfists, but he wasn't sure where to begin. Would Corin have done the same in that horrible place? Would Corin have been the one to aim his crossbow and take the life from that beautiful little girl? He didn't think so. And yet, how could he know? The simple concern in Corin's voice made him ache with loneliness. "I wish I could tell you," he lamented.

“Go see the Priestesses,” Corin urged. “Tell them your story if you can’t tell me. Maybe then you can find a place to start.”

I wish it was that simple, Shaundar thought. “All right,” he grunted in feigned agreement.

One of the ladies of the Temple guided him into a private bath, but he didn’t stay. He would never have a better opportunity to spy on his enemy and he was going to take it. He formed a kilt out of a towel from a nearby changing area and wandered into the Temple complex. The air was warm and humid enough to create floating clouds of mist that drifted by at random. He padded softly through a shrine-room. Strangely, he felt no discomfort in the presence of a jade statue of the orcish goddess, who nestled an orcish baby to Her buxom breast with lacquered claws of Her own. Almost unconsciously he touched fist to forehead.

The Temple seemed exactly like a cave network; which he supposed was appropriate for a goddess called the “Cave Mother.” Scro and orcs were unusually interspersed rather than segregated. Priestesses of both species tended to the warriors, some of whom were badly wounded. There were also lounge areas. He froze outside of one of those rooms when he heard a familiar laugh. Then he heard another one, and this one belonged to Targ.

He slipped back into the room he’d just left. Incense smouldered away on braziers, permeating the Temple via a clever series of windows

and vents. Rooting through the storage cupboards produced a square of gum Arabic wrapped in paper. While he had privacy, he plucked out an eyelash to attach to a dab of it and whispered the invisibility incantation. Then he made his way back to the lounge where he had heard the laughter.

This time the door was shut. Shaundar swore under his breath. But just then, a goblin maid came by with a snack tray in her little green hands. Shaundar fell in step behind her, and when she opened the door, he followed.

“. . . not having much luck,” a familiar deep baritone was pointing out as Shaundar entered the room.

The Bloodaxes halted their conversation when the goblin girl came into the room. “Lunch, my lords,” she said with a bow. She left the tray on a side table and turned on her heel so suddenly that Shaundar just about ran into her. He sucked in his guts and skittered to the side so that she could depart without revealing him.

Shaundar observed the gathering. This gentlemen’s lounge would not have looked out of place in Waterdeep. *What I wouldn’t give for one of my “orcish surprises,”* he wished silently. Targ, Garik Bloodaxe and the Overlord himself were reclined into luxuriously padded chairs along with several other scro males whom Shaundar did not recognize. Narok Bloodaxe had a large mug of something in his great grey hand, and Garik was smoking a calabash pipe. Targ was lighting his own pipe with a

long match. One of the Bloodaxes seized a skewer from the snack tray and began devouring it. It smelled of pepper, chilies and ginger.

“Can’t expect this to be easy,” Targ muttered around his pipe stem between draws. The bowl flared red and emitted great puffs of spiced smoke.

“I suppose that’s reasonable,” the Overlord grunted. He sighed as he imbibed his drink. It was a sour-smelling peppered spirit. Shaundar knew that scent all too well. “What about this mercenary then?”

Shaundar froze. Were they talking about him?

“Bolvi?” Targ sneered. “Pah, he’s beneath your concern, my lord,” he growled dismissively.

Garik leaned forward in his chair. Shaundar resisted the urge to seize the silver tray and decapitate him with it. “I disagree,” he said. “He’s proven himself to be an obstacle more than once.”

“Luck,” grunted the Bloodfist Clan Champion. He reached for a skewer and just about grabbed Shaundar’s improvised kilt. The elven spy flattened himself quietly against the wall.

The Overlord chuckled. “Are you so sure?” he demanded. “Once is lucky. Twice . . . ?”

The corners of Targ's mouth tightened around his tusks. "He's just a mercenary," he grumbled. "But I can add him to the list if you want, my lord. I'd be happy to kill him anyway for interfering in my business."

Narok Bloodaxe's great brow slammed down like a shade. "You need to control your rage, Targ. You *know* you can't treat scro women like that. Orcs, yes, but not scro. Why don't you get yourself a concubine?"

Shaundar did a double take. Could it be that Targ's behaviour towards his wife *wasn't* normal?

Targ looked sour. "It's still none of his business," he protested.

Narok put down his mug and fixed the Bloodfist Champion with a steely glare. "No," he agreed, "but it will be if you bring lasting harm to the girl. And that will only end badly for you."

Targ scowled and looked at his boots. "*Gul, durkarr,*" he grumbled. Shaundar shook his head. Well, that explained much.

The Overlord sat back and regarded his offspring with a steady expression. "I share Garik's concerns. One must wonder if this Bolvi is some sort of plot by the Upraised Hand, or maybe even the Spice Grinders. He shows cunning and training far beyond the scope of a typical mercenary. Especially if what you tell me about the Trinhea

assault is true. Killing is easy, my son. Having the control to maim in combat . . . well, that's a skill."

Targ nodded. "I see your point, my lord. But mercenaries do see a lot of action, especially on the conquered worlds. And I understand they have a brutal life. It's his ability to understand the politics and social forms that I doubt."

Shaundar couldn't help but agree. He was constantly playing catch-up with the rules. It effectively made him the ignorant rube that Targ believed him to be. The more time he spent among them, the more he decided that he understood exactly nothing about the scro social structure. It was like there was a large piece of the puzzle missing and he had not realized it until he had it about half finished. What did he not understand that he should?

Then a flash of inspiration struck him. They had the same regard for him that some of the gold and grey elves in the EIN had for the more earthy green elves. To the aristocracy of the scro he was a clueless hick.

That had some outstanding potential.

"All the same keep an eye on him," Narok urged. He quaffed his tankard and wiped the foam from his fleshy lips with the back of his hand, scraping it across his thick black beard. "And kill him if you can. But don't go out of your way."

“*Gul, karr,*” the Champion nodded. “I’ll remember.” He tapped out his pipe and asked, “Are you going back to the Winter Estate?”

“After the Games,” the Overlord agreed.

“I’d better get back.” He took his leave just as if he were departing the presence of a superior officer; there was no familial affection displayed at all.

Shaundar shadowed Targ as he left the room. It perhaps spoke to Targ’s instincts that he stopped once he was through the door and down the hall a ways, sniffed the air and turned around. But by then Shaundar was squashed into an alcove between rooms and the Champion did not notice him.

When he had reassured himself that the passage was empty, Shaundar resumed visibility and returned to the central baths. Corin was already there. “Where did you get to?” he asked with a relaxed smile. A pretty young priestess with reddish skin was rubbing his shoulders as he soaked in the hot communal pool. He winced as she touched a sore spot, still paining him due to overextension in the fight.

“You might have torn a tendon,” the priestess informed him as she eased off her ministrations. “I’ll offer some prayers for it.” She hummed an incantation that oddly, did not sound dissimilar from the imitation utilized by the Black Arrows healers, and just as with every

other genuine healer he knew, welcoming golden light radiated from the cupped palms of her hands and into Corin's shoulder. He sighed in relief.

"Why didn't you get Sarga to heal that?" Shaundar wanted to know. He shucked off his towel and eased himself with caution into the bath. Too much movement was uncomfortable in the heat of the water.

"It was just a muscle ache," Corin answered dismissively. He closed his eyes and relaxed into the back rub. "Hardly seemed worth bothering the Warpriests about." But he opened his eyes again and tilted his head back to gratefully smile into the face of the buxom young woman behind him. "But I sure won't say no if it's offered," he amended. "*Nor lakaar.*"

"My delight, noble warrior," the priestess replied with a gentle answering smile. "Your turn next, clansman?"

The last was directed at him. Well, why not? "I would be most grateful," he agreed. The heat of the bath was beginning to take some of the tension out of his shoulders that had settled in upon sight of the Bloodaxe ship. He sank down a little more so that the back of his neck could be reached. "Corin, do you think I'm a rube?" he inquired.

Corin coughed and then cleared his throat. "Well . . ." he began; and seeing Shaundar's expression, he continued in a rush, "You do lack a certain . . . sophistication. I mean, it's not your fault of course; you can't be expected to know, considering your upbringing. And you're learning

quickly,” he added lamely. The flush that browned his green face told Shaundar that he was embarrassed to admit that he thought this.

Shaundar smiled a little. “Well, *na’kor*, I don’t want to be a rube,” he told him; no lie, this. “I don’t want to embarrass the family at formal functions. I’m going to start asking questions, even if I think I might look like an idiot. Is that all right?”

Corin grinned. “That’s brave of you, Bolvi. I approve. I’m sure *durkarr* and Uncle Olaf will too. Ask away.”

Shaundar smiled. “My appreciation, and my gratitude for not mocking me,” he said. This was going to make things a lot easier.

Shaundar had intentions of taking advantage of the sleep cycle to sneak on board Garik’s ship. He wanted to know why he wasn’t still at Raven Talon. Was it because the planet was destroyed and every elf a casualty of their genocide, or was it because the Navy had driven them off of it? He also wanted to see what he could learn from the Warden’s personal effects and log books and how he could use those things against him. But it was not to be. At dusk every door in the place was sealed shut so that any entry or exit would be extremely conspicuous, and outside, a hoary frost coated everything in a matter of minutes. The metal doors groaned against the temperature shift. Suddenly Shaundar

understood why only this one hot spring on the moon's surface was inhabited.

They made their way home in the morning. Sunrise on Dukagsh was spectacular. It began as a violet gloaming that spread over the horizon gently, like one of the veils from the dances of the orcish women being drawn slowly aside to reveal the planet's feral beauty. The violet was followed by a red-and-gold half-light that remained for several hours, very pleasant to Shaundar's elven vision. Then about mid-morning, a golden glow washed over the landscape that illuminated everything in the long-shadowed brightness that Shaundar associated with autumn. It faded by about the start of the first dog watch.

"Oh right, it's the Equinox," Corin observed. "I wonder if they've packed up the estate yet."

Shaundar looked at him, mystified. "Oh, you can't stay in the lower reaches in the winter," Corin explained. "The storms can be lethal. So we have estates in the mountains, carved mostly underground. They say that those were the original habitats built by the Twenty-Four when they arrived here. Much better defended, but no windows." He chuckled. "Ynga hates it."

They landed at the Summer Estate to much cheering and celebration; but Shaundar could see the servants of the Bloodfists loading possessions on to ships. A goblin and a kobold were carrying a canvas-wrapped portrait between them with solemn reverence.

“Welcome back, my sons!” Dorin Bloodfist greeted them as they disembarked. He clasped them both in a firm embrace. Once again Shaundar was struck by the immense size of this orcish warrior. “We have heard word of your victory and your bravery! Elka is preparing a celebration at the Winter Estate in your honour.”

Corin radiated joy and pride at this praise. Shaundar couldn’t help but feel a little of that himself, even based as it was on false pretenses. But perhaps his mood was just better because Targ was absent. Apparently the tribes were now to gather for a week in Dukagsh City for news, trade, politics and traditional games (“most of which are a chance to try to get one up on each other without axes,” Corin explained cynically,) and Targ had gone ahead with the Bloodaxes. After the Games they would return to their ancestral lands to see to the business of the Winter; growing the desert and mountain crops, repairing, rebuilding, and at least taking some rest between battles for family and making babies. Or so Corin said.

Ynga was waiting for them at the entryway. Shaundar was happy to see her, but surprised by how disappointed he was that Y’Anid wasn’t with her. “Welcome home, noble warriors,” she said; and instead of taking them left from the entrance (which had already been cleared of its bronze statuary, Shaundar noted,) she guided them to the right. Through the library she led them, which had been divested of its books, and into a bathing room that reminded him of the Temple of Luthic in Dukagsh City, only in miniature.

She stripped their armour and their clothing and began to pour water over their bodies with a bowl. Shaundar noted that Ynga had no more fear of touching him than she did of her husband. She smiled at them both. "I'm glad you're back before the Winter. You look weary. And by the way, congratulations on your victory," she beamed. "I heard you acquitted yourselves with bravery and honour." Her smile widened. "I would expect no less."

Shaundar shook his head. Targ's tactics had been entirely inappropriate and heroism should not have been necessary. Based on the numbers of ships they should have all flown in as one cohesive unit. The more he considered it, the more he felt that his intuition about Targ's intentions was accurate.

"Does the battle trouble you?" Ynga asked him. "It's my calling to soothe those pains, you know, Bolvi." She put a gentle hand on his face. The tips of her lacquered claws tickled his cheekbone.

He smiled. How long had it been since anyone had touched him like that? "Not in the way you mean, *karra*," he reassured her.

"You ought to get into the bath," she urged them. "I'll get the massage table ready." She left them some towels.

Shaundar followed Corin's lead and eased himself into the bathwater, which was again, amazingly hot. "She's beautiful, isn't she?" Corin asked him with a raised eyebrow.

Shaundar chuckled in ashamed disbelief. He could no longer lie to himself about his desire for the twins, and he wondered if he was just lonely, or if he was as perverted as Captain Wintervale. Yathar would have found this very amusing, he was certain. “Undeniably,” he agreed. At Corin’s look he added, “You’re a lucky man, Corin.”

“Not really,” the big green scro confessed. “Custom demanded we marry. My children wouldn’t be nobles of the clan if they didn’t descend from one of the clanswomen. Since I was the Heir . . .” He shrugged. “But it is nice that we actually do love each other,” he concurred. “In that I’m luckier than many.” His gaze turned to Shaundar and he clapped him on the back. “Don’t worry, we’ll find you a suitable wife yet! Given the circumstances, you might be allowed to take one of the lesser cousins as your First Wife. Perhaps Nadia.”

“Speaking of wives,” Shaundar began to change the subject, “your new betrothed ought to be waiting for you at the Winter Estate, I guess?”

Corin nodded. “I’m excited and I’m more than a little nervous; but I suppose that’s normal, *gul?*” He shook his head. “I’ll have to fight their Clan Champion at the Nuptial Games. Do you know anything about Ardak Baneblood? I’ve met him but only briefly.”

Actually, Shaundar did. Strange that Elven Intelligence was about to be useful in Scro politics! “He has a reputation for being quick to

anger,” he offered. “Piss him off and he’s liable to make stupid mistakes.”

Corin returned his advice with a smile. “*Nor drakaar, na’kor!* That’s very helpful.”

Ynga returned to the room then. “The table is ready,” she invited. “Which one of you would like to go first?”

“Oh, I think Bolvi needs it more than I do, my love,” Corin smiled. His black bushy eyebrows wagged. Shaundar just snickered.

“Well, come on then,” she smiled too, apparently oblivious to the innuendo.

“I can take over if you want to attend to Corin,” the wonderfully welcome voice of Y’Anid offered from the archway between the rooms. Shaundar turned to look at her and a grin spread across his face. The moon curve of her gravid belly had waxed still further, pinned under a shift and a fur vest that was straining a little at the button. Her eyes were as welcoming as her voice. She exchanged a glance with her sister, who looked at her questioningly; and then Ynga smiled and handed her a towel. Corin bit his lip but remained silent. Shaundar knew that Targ would not approve of this, but he doubted that anyone present would betray her.

Shaundar lifted himself out of the hot bath and Y’Anid towed him off, sending shivers through his body. He thought then of Narissa

and guilt assailed him. At about half-mast he allowed her to guide him on to the massage table.

Y'Anid slicked her hands with oil and began with his shoulders. "You cloak guilt and shame about you like a shroud," she observed. "What troubles you, Bolvi?"

Damn that empathic insight of hers anyway. "It's not important," he grumbled.

She stopped and blinked at him with those enchanting blue eyes. "Didn't you find a Temple of the Mother before you came home?" she demanded.

Shaundar smiled a little. "I wasn't interested in talking to the priestesses at the time."

"I wish you would talk to me, Bolvi," Y'Anid lamented. Her concern was heartfelt; he could see it in her eyes. He wished that he could be honest with her. He looked away.

When she saw that he intended to continue to keep his own council, she sighed and continued to rub at his shoulders, then his back and lateral muscles. Whatever was in the massage oil warmed with her touch and began to soothe the coiled tension clutched in his body.

"Y'Anid," Shaundar asked, "would it be improper for me to ask if I could massage your feet and back? I'm sure they must be painng you."

He remembered little snippets of his mother when she was pregnant with his little sister Selena, and it seemed to him that his father had spent a fair bit of time doing just that.

Y'Anid was obviously surprised because she took her hands from his back. "*Gul*, it would," she decided. "That's the privilege of my husband."

Shaundar curled his lip. "May I do it anyway? I'm willing to bet that your husband won't, and he's not here to complain."

She hesitated a long moment, so Shaundar sat up on the table and met her eyes. "Sure," she whispered then, so he took the towel and carefully dried her hands. She slid her bottom backwards onto the table. Shaundar removed her soft fur boots and then pulled a stool over to sit on while he gently worked the massage oil into her ankles and feet.

N'Velahrn training served him well; knowing where all the little nerve clusters were also told him where to touch and press to relieve them. Her toenails were as red-lacquered as her fingernails and though the calluses were softening, her feet were hard under those soft boots. These were not the feet of a pampered noblewoman. These were the feet – and the calves, he couldn't help but notice – of an intrepid explorer. His heart ached for her. Y'Anid was a prisoner in more ways than one.

“Where did you learn this?” Y’Anid demanded. “This is a healer’s art.”

“I did consider being a Warpriest for a while,” he responded, reciting a lie that was becoming rote. “And my mother was a priestess.”

Carefully she scrutinized him. “I believe that’s the first time you’ve ever lied to me.”

Thin ice, here. He had to tread carefully. “No, I never wanted to be a Warpriest, you’re right,” Shaundar admitted. “But my mother was a priestess.” And his cheeks reddened, embarrassed as he was to be caught in a lie by her. It already went against every instinct he had to speak untruths in her presence.

Y’Anid smiled. “More men could take some time to learn a woman’s art.”

He smiled, relieved. Well, if she wanted to chalk his embarrassment up to that, let her.

Y’Anid sighed and curled her toes as she leaned back, and for just a fraction of a second, Shaundar caught a glimpse of the woman she might be if she were freed from Targ’s yoke. Her auburn tresses draped over the table and a beatific smile transformed her into a radiant, exotic goddess. A dagger thrust itself into his heart and twisted. *There’s no way this can end well, Shaundar*, he chided himself angrily. *You’re sixteen different kinds of fool. Leave well enough alone.*

In the meanwhile, Y’Anid allowed herself this single moment of indulgence, and flirting with disaster, she was thinking almost exactly the same thing. “I should go,” she blurted, standing up and fishing for her boots.

Shaundar watched her with carefully solemn eyes. “*Gul*, you probably should. Forgive me.” But he did not cast his gaze downward. He was not sorry, not really.

She tried to read his expression, but there was too much going on there. There was a dangerous flame licking over coals. Was that smouldering rage? Desire? Regret? She couldn’t tell. “I’ll see you at the departure,” Y’Anid promised, and she fled the overwhelming gravity of those eyes at full tactical. Shaundar watched her flee like a comet, and he wanted to stop her; but he didn’t.

The Equinox Ritual took place in the courtyard. As the wife of the Heir, in the absence of a Clan Lady, Ynga lit a flame in a small brass brazier from the hearth fire, and gave it into Dorin’s enormous hand by its chain. “Almighty Leader,” she recited, “it is time to return to the mountains, and live in retreat as our ancestors began. I give to you the care of the fire of the Bloodfist Hearth. Guard it well.”

He touched his fist to his forehead in symbolic reverence. “I accept and honour your charge, Priestess of the Den Mother,” he swore,

“and I will guard this flame with my life.” He spun on his heel with military precision, and led a ceremonial procession, complete with solemn drumming and an honour guard of household warriors forming a gate of their crossed spears, to take leave of the estate on warships and sail barges. Gurtok nodded to Shaundar and grinned as he boarded the *Sword of Courage* behind Corin. Ynga was the last one to leave. She commanded the hindmost of the House Guards to seal the entrance. The great bronze doors shaped with the Bloodfist emblem were cranked shut with a lever and bolted. Then Ynga invoked a clerical seal of protection upon them with great fanfare and broad, sweeping gestures. With that, she boarded the last of the sail barges and the Honour Guard made reverence to her.

As they lifted into the air, Shaundar could see that the ocean was turbid and dark. Waves were high and sweeping, and there was already a significant storm brewing in the deep sea. “What causes the storms?” he queried, indulging his natural curiosity.

“That, we think,” Corin replied; and he pointed into the sky at a bright comma making its way through the first of the evening stars; early at the start of the dog watches.

“A comet?” asked Shaundar curiously.

“Tarrak Garr,” nodded Dorin. “Harbinger of War. It carries dust and fire and magical energy. When it comes close to Dukagsh it causes

tides to shift and winds to whip themselves up into hurricanes. But it also causes amazing auroras.”

Shaundar recalled the auroras of Permafrost, the only such sights he had ever seen since his little homeworld wasn't subject to them. “I suppose that's almost worth the trouble,” he nodded.

Dorin chuckled. “Not really,” the Clan Leader disagreed. “Our whole culture is based on those storms. Dukagsh is a world of great treasures, and greater peril. In the early days of our history, we migrated to the lower jungle regions where the Summer Estates are now as soon as the need for security passed. But the storms almost wiped us out. The mountains are safe, but they don't yield enough food to survive the whole year. And the Summer and Winter crops have to be tended in different ways.” He studied Shaundar critically. “Have you spent much time in high planetary altitudes? The air is a little thin at first.”

“Dad,” Corin chided, “he's a seasoned starfarer. I'm sure he'll be fine. You've been in poor air conditions before, haven't you, *na'kor*?”

The *Starshark* came to mind. “Less than you might think,” he confessed, “but I did all right.”

As they sailed over the mountains and above Dukagsh City, Shaundar looked into the model-sized city on the edge of the vast desert below him, and embracing his image as an ignorant country cousin, asked, “So why is Dukagsh the only city that is built on the desert?”

It was Y'Anid, joining him at the rail, who fielded that question. "There's a large oasis in the center of the city. You have seen it, of course?"

Shaundar could see it now. It was a gleaming pool that could almost be called a lake. And he knew the water of the Temple of Luthic in the city limits must be sourced by it. He nodded.

"Most of the Great Desert is completely without water. I guess . . . do you know how weather patterns work, Bolvi?"

"How do you mean?" he wanted to know. He wasn't completely devoid of knowledge; there had been some instruction in the nuances of planetary climates in his survival training. But he would hardly consider himself an expert.

"Well, you know that weather patterns on a world move in relation to the poles and the equator, I assume?"

He did. That was basic spelljammer lore meant to aid in safe landings. He nodded.

"The prevailing winds in this tropic move west," she pointed out. "And the higher a weather front travels, the more of its moisture it loses because of the colder temperatures. You know that too, right?"

Shaundar believed there had been a mention of that in the survival courses. Something about surviving water worlds by travelling to higher ground. “I’ve been told that, yes,” he agreed.

“Well,” she went on, “our one continent is in this tropic for the most part. Which is probably just as well; the poles are too wet and the equator too hot to support life for long. And you know how the eastern shore is that large band of jungle and wetland?” Y’Anid was animated now, excited about her subject matter. She didn’t pause for him to answer and it made him smile. “Rain comes off the ocean and soaks the jungle. It climbs the Great Mountains and spills its water. There’s enough left to support crops in the Winter Estates, but by the time the weather fronts get over the ridge, they’re spent. There’s a band of stillness just over the mountains – that’s where Dukagsh City is – and then winds whip up the sand and dust of the empty desert and tear everything of flesh to shreds.”

Shaundar could see it. So the small areas where the scro had built were the only ones that could reasonably support life on this planet. “A harsh world indeed,” he realized, struck with a grudging respect for their orcish ancestors. “And Dukagsh City is watered by the runoff from the mountains?”

“And the Oasis,” she nodded. “And so is the farmland that surrounds it, which is under the collective protection of all the tribes. That’s why the City was built, actually. And why we still need an Overlord. His job is to administer the distribution of most of the Winter

Crops. For that, we gather at the Spring Equinox. This time of year we pay our taxes.”

“A bond between lord and servant,” Olaf added, “is signified by the taking of food. Were you aware that when you sat down to eat at our table for the first time, you were accepting the post and charge my *na’kor* had offered you?”

Shaundar chuckled. “I wasn’t,” he confessed. “But I suppose it doesn’t matter now. I appreciate the insight though.” He turned his smile towards Y’Anid. “Thank you for the explanation, *karra*.” A small nod was her only reply, but her eyes were sparkling.

They descended rapidly into Dukagsh City. The streets were filled with more scro than Shaundar had ever seen in one place. They landed on a strip next to a walled and gated adobe manor house. Entering it gave Shaundar a sense of *déjà vu*; aside from the material of the walls, it was very similar in layout to the Summer Estate, including a copy of the statues of Korr Bloodfist and Dukagsh in marble (or perhaps it was the other way around) at the entrance, division of quarters, and even a portrait hall with similar, but not identical, paintings of Clan Leaders and Champions, reaching back twenty generations.

A kobold in ceremonial clothing made its way towards Corin and saluted. Shaundar had never seen a kobold so richly dressed. It was clad in the robe of a scholar and the ivory tone was a striking contrast with the creature’s forest green skin. A medallion of the clan rune adorned its

throat. “My lords,” he began, “the Baneblood delegation has arrived and your bride-to-be awaits you in the family den.”

Corin blinked in surprise. “I wasn’t expecting them, Chamberlain,” he admitted. “I thought they would be at the Winter Estate. You’ve seen to their needs, I trust.” The kobold chamberlain gave him an incredulous look. “Sorry,” he added immediately. “You know I had to ask.”

“That’s fine!” chortled Corin’s father. “Let’s go make them welcome!”

Several black-skinned scro awaited them, and they stood respectfully as the Bloodfists made their entrance. Shaundar noticed a sturdy, ebon-skinned scro maiden with tusks of average feminine length and a bright red topknot that trailed down her back like a banner. Her eyes were green and Shaundar noticed them sweeping across the Bloodfists and making assessments. Her gaze dismissed him contemptuously and flashed with challenge when she saw the twins; but she was all smiles for Corin. Shaundar disliked her instantly.

“Welcome!” Dorin greeted them with jovial heartiness. Shaundar assumed that the scro whose wrist he clasped in greeting was the other Almighty Leader; Elven Intelligence knew nothing about him other than his first name, which was Raxx. Olaf clasped arms with a scro who matched the description of Ardak Baneblood (he was known for an

unusually long red beard, braided almost like a dwarf's,) and Ynga and the maiden bowed to each other politely.

"Gentlemen," nodded the Clan Chief in a voice deep enough to rival Dorin's, "I would like to present my niece, Nakyra."

"Delighted to meet you at last," rumbled Corin.

"Likewise," Nakyra replied in a musical tone that belied her solid appearance. She was curvy and had a rounded line to her hip that was probably considered especially attractive among orcish races; "childbearing hips," he guessed they were called. Ynga's smile was a little tight around the edges. Shaundar supposed that could be the result of feminine pique (one thing he had learned is that in a culture where much of feminine power was bound up in sex and reproduction, competition among females regarding appearance seemed downright cutthroat,) but he was also aware that the Banebloods were Bloodaxe supporters. Perhaps his work as a spy was just making him paranoid, but he found himself wondering whether or not this marriage proposal had anything to do with the conversation he'd overheard in the Lunar Temple.

The opening of the Equinox Games was an elaborate ceremony. A fanfare was played on brass trumpets, long horns harvested from great beasts and mounted on stands so a player could blow them from a podium, and an orchestra of war drummers. In full military parade, the

contestants from the Twenty-Four Tribes filed out on the arena floor. Shaundar was among them, marching next to Corin, Sarga, Rathgar, Ronkor, Targ and Gurtok. Gazing into the stands, he was astounded by the teeming throng of goblinoid races. There were thousands of them, maybe millions. He had never seen so many people in one place.

It was a bit of a nasty shock to Shaundar to learn that he was expected to participate. “Guess you’ve never been to the Games before, lad,” Olaf grumbled. “Each clan sends their best warriors, but the sons of the Almighty Leader who have had their *Zabbak’Tarr* are expected to take part. It showcases our strengths.”

“I used to rather enjoy the Games,” Dorin lamented, “but it’s considered inappropriate for an Almighty Leader to participate. Those were some good times, *gul, na’kor?*” Olaf laughed heartily. The Clan Leader clapped him on the shoulder. “You don’t have to participate in all the events; you’d be exhausted. Choose some you think you’ll show well in. It’s dangerous, but most things worth doing are.”

Shaundar nodded. “I can’t disagree, *durkarr.*”

They were filed under banners with their clan symbols, and each of them was introduced to the spectators in turn. Shaundar was not at all surprised to hear the rousing cheer that greeted Corin; but the division of cheering and jeering that greeted “Bolvi Bloodfist” was a bit of a surprise. He hadn’t realized that he was so famous.

“Go back to Wildspace, mercenary!” one of the Bloodaxe contestants bellowed; a younger scro about Corin’s age whom he didn’t recognize. Well, nice to know he was in familiar territory anyway. He grabbed his groin in what he knew to be an orcish rude gesture and bared his tusks in a sardonic smile. The crowd erupted into a cacophony.

Corin clapped him on the shoulder. “The crowd likes you, Bolvi.”

Gurtok chuckled. “Guess they’ve heard your story, my lord,” he smirked. “You’re the common scro’s hero.”

Shaundar shook his head. That was hardly an enviable position for a spy. But he waved to the crowd anyway.

The first event was a test of strength; pretty much a raw weightlifting competition. All that weight training on Permafrost came to naught. His physical prowess was outstanding for an elf, perhaps; but that made him merely a capable scro. Corin put in a very good showing and so did Targ, but the young Bloodaxe took the competition and hardly even broke a sweat. Shaundar’s jaw dropped as the youth hefted a dreadnaught’s mainmast above his head in a perfect clean-and-jerk, set it down, and growled his triumph.

“Well, damn,” said Shaundar.

The next one was a test of endurance as well as strength and strategy. Over a period of a ship bell, you had to move as much weight as possible from one side of the arena to the other. You could lift a few

heavy weights or many light ones. Shaundar chose a steady, unhurried rhythm of medium weights.

It surprised him the first time that one of the other contestants – one of the Blackclaws, he thought – tripped him about halfway through and kicked at him with a heavy boot. Shaundar rolled out of the way and brought his own boot up into the scro's groin. He knew how to take a groin shot and just grunted, but the momentary distraction was enough for Shaundar to yank him down by claspings the Blackclaw's hands firmly to the weight and overbalancing it. Then he kicked the prone Blackclaw in the face with the back of his heel and took his weight from him. He finished the lap with the stolen burden and went back. The Blackclaw loped along behind him with his nose bleeding, the moderate weight that Shaundar had abandoned in his own hands. After that, Shaundar was much more wary; but when they tallied up the total mass carried, Shaundar had won. Ironically for the Blackclaw, the margin of his victory was the difference between the one medium and one heavy weight. The audience loved it.

A couple of hours later, Shaundar stood on the deck of a rigged up decommissioned ship next to twenty-three other clan nobles. His only adornment was a loincloth and bronze medallion, engraved with the Bloodfist rune. All the other contestants wore similar costume, and their bodies were lightly oiled. Shaundar was uncertain whether this was intended to make them a little more difficult to grab, thus increasing the difficulty of the contest, or if it was in order to give the ladies of the clans

something to do. It amused him to think that it was more likely the latter than the former.

He gazed up into the labyrinth of rope and canvas cobwebbing above them. This game, he thought, was rather clever. The contestants would scale the rigging and take each other's medallions. Losing yours disqualified you from the contest. You could leave at any time, but once you had, you could not return. Though points were awarded for acquiring other medallions, the last one who remained was the winner. The only other rule was that killing the other contestants was forbidden. Shaundar could not help but notice that such things as "maiming" were not specifically excluded.

Clan Bloodfist had limited options when it came to possible contestants, but Shaundar volunteered the moment he saw the maze. Having been raised on ship, and being an elf, he probably had a good thirty years more experience, and considerably more natural grace, than even the most hardened starhand who dared to take part in the event. The strange half-light of the Equinox sun would not be of any benefit to orcs, but to his elven vision, it was a significant advantage. Stealth, skill in combat, endurance and patience would be the best strategies; though he suspected for some, it would also involve teamwork and then treachery.

Some of his suspicions were confirmed when he caught a peripheral glimpse of Ardak Baneblood murmuring to the Bloodaxe contestant; some hulking brute of a scro he'd never met. They chuckled together.

To his surprise, a strapping lad from the One-Eye clan leaned close to him and muttered, “Watch out for them. I think they mean you harm.”

Before he could thank the One-Eye for his help, brass trumpets and traditional hollowed-out horns sounded a fanfare. All around them in the arena, the audience roared.

A great band of ceremonial drummers rolled out a tattoo. It was the ship signal to “charge!” Just a split second after everyone else, he was off and running to the labyrinth.

Most of the beginning of the contest was concerned with scrambling up the rigging and masts. There were a couple of half-hearted attempts to bat each other off of the lines, but nothing serious; though they seemed to please the crowd immensely. Shaundar swung over from the cable he was on to the foremast, and began to scramble rapidly up its height. Stealing a glance below, the Doomspear contestant stomped down at him. Shaundar skittered aside and dug his thumb claw into the tendon on the side of the knee that still supported the Doomspear’s weight. His leg buckled and he yelled out, now only supported by the grip of his hands and overbalanced because of the kick. Shaundar pinned one of those arms with his elbow, then reached across with his outside arm and yanked the medallion from around the Doomspear’s neck. The drums below beat the tattoo for “man down!”

“Son of a . . .” the Doomspear swore, shaking his head in disbelief. But he nodded to Shaundar with respect as he retreated, and though the elf had now blocked the crowd mostly out of his mind, they stood up in their seats and roared like a living thing.

Peering into the rope and canvas directly above him, he could see that the Bloodaxe and the Baneblood were waiting for him. His eyes narrowed.

Shaundar leaped onto one of the stays and grabbed hold of the studdingsail. Using his momentum to swing around and, choosing the more accessible of the two targets, the elf in scro form landed his feet in the Baneblood’s solar plexus. He fell screaming to the deck. The Bloodaxe reached for Shaundar and managed to grab his big toe, which broke with a sharp crack.

He bleated in startled pain, but he didn’t allow himself to be distracted enough to lose his grip, knowing he would fall if he did. Clutching for dear life he reached for one of the stays and landed on it with the arch of his feet. The toe was numb now and he knew he only had precious seconds before that condition changed. The Bloodaxe proved he was no groundling by quickly rebalancing and then skipping towards Shaundar with all the ferocity of a charging boar. Shaundar reached for the shroud so that he could get better footing, but when he turned around again to face his attacker, the One-Eye who had issued the warning was perched on the groundling rail like a raptor, and he belted

the distracted Bloodaxe in the side of the head. Surprised, the Bloodaxe toppled from the foremast.

Shaundar nodded his thanks. The One-Eye shrugged. “Don’t think I won’t take advantage of that injury later,” the scro assured him, “but it’s the principle of the matter. There was no tactical reason to target you.”

“*Nor drakaar,*” he smiled; but the One-Eye was on his way up the mast.

Heat burned from the broken toe and began sending shooting throbs of pain up his leg as far as his groin. He winced and continued the climb up the shroud. Another scro was waiting for him at the top. There was a scuffle, but Shaundar had the better footing and was feeling piqued. Rather than try for actual combat, he clawed his opponent in the bridge of the nose and, while he was blinded, yanked his medallion hard enough to pull it free from his neck. The scro jerked and yelped. A string of curses followed, and the unfamiliar scro started making his way down. Shaundar studied the medallion and its symbol marked its former owner as a Starstrike.

Shaundar then holed up in a spot where the extra rigging provided for the maze created a rat’s nest suited to concealment and waited for a few minutes. Twice other scro passed nearby and twice he ambushed them from behind with one of the sheets and pulled their

medallions free while they were struggling to disentangle themselves. He freed them immediately after so that they would not reveal his position.

After a time, the maze fell silent. Shaundar strained to hear breathing or shifts of position, but there was enough of a breeze to ruffle the sails and none of this could be detected. Stealthily he ventured from his hiding place and made a slow, careful tactical sweep of the labyrinth. Finding nothing, he almost left, confident that he had taken the contest; and then he smelled orcish musk.

Reaching behind him, he found a tan orcish arm, and a surprised grunt snorted hot air onto the back of his neck when he locked it at the wrist and pulled it hard, knocking left ribs and cheekbone of the One-Eye who had aided him against the mainmast. The One-Eye swore and kicked backwards at him. Shaundar gripped the One-Eye's collection of trophies in one hand and twisted so it was tight against his opponent's throat for just a moment. The One-Eye threw his shoulders backwards to shake him free, overbalancing them both. Shaundar almost fell, but mad scrabbling with his claws on the way down found a line and the One-Eye's ankle. Seeing one of the shrouds below him, he hooked his legs around the sheet and smacked that ankle with a knife hand. The One-Eye slipped and managed to grasp hold of the line. Shaundar braced himself on the sheet and tore the One-Eye's clan medallion free.

He laughed aloud. "Good move, Bloodfist," he acknowledged. "Won fairly and with honour. I'll take myself down now. I think we're the last ones." He glanced down and smiled. "Thank you for leaving my

trophies. I appreciate the gesture.” Unhindered now by Shaundar, he climbed back up onto the stay, and then started making his way down the mast.

Shaundar had not intended this consciously. His choice to remove the one medallion was made out of pragmatism in that one was much easier to remove than several; rather than in some obscure code of honour that he was not familiar with. But he smiled to himself anyway. He was glad that the One-Eye would not be leaving the game empty-handed.

He made one last sweep of the maze just to be sure, and then, satisfied that he was the only one who remained, made his way down the mast.

When he emerged, the crowd made a noise like breaking ocean surf against the Evermeet shore. The drums beat a thunderous victory roll. Off to one side, the Baneblood, the Bloodaxe and a few others were being tended by healers. “Victory to Bloodfist!” cried a herald with a speaking horn. Shaundar waved to the crowd. His lip curled when his eyes met the surly glares of Garik and Narok. But then the Bloodfist clan was all around him, slapping his shoulders and cheering. Y’Anid’s eyes were radiant but clasped firmly at Targ’s side, she said nothing.

It was Sarga who volunteered to represent the clan for the last game of the day. The arena was divided into corridors and at the center of each corridor a six-foot circle was painted on the hard-packed earth.

Sarga grinned confidently and hefted up three javelins while rolling his shoulders. Corin patted him on one of them. “Give ‘em hell,” he encouraged.

“Don’t you worry,” Sarga assured him. He grinned at Shaundar. “You ever do any spear hunting, my lord?”

“Not really,” he admitted. Elves hunted with bow and arrow; not that he’d even had much practice at that aside from in survival training.

Sarga laughed. “Well, watch how it’s done; you seem a quick study.” And he made his way out into the arena.

While all the contestants were lining up, Shaundar sat with the rest of the family in the box seats specifically reserved for their family and cheered along with them as Ynga and Y’Anid raised and waved their flag. Nakyra was sitting with them as well and she reached out to assist the twins.

“*Nor drakaar*,” Ynga smiled at her.

She simpered. “Well, if this is to be my new clan,” Nakyra said, “I might as well get used to it. And I will do it just as proud as I did my clan of birth.”

Corin studied her carefully. “Nakya, I like you a lot,” he began, “and I think I could love you easily. But if you really don’t want to be here, I won’t have you. That will do none of us any favours.”

Nakya tried to smile but it was strained. “I’m unhappy to be leaving the clan I have been raised in all my life,” she admitted. “But you’re a good man and this is a good marriage. I would be a fool to pass it up. I thank you for honouring me, actually.”

Corin reached out to take her hand and she squeezed his reassuringly. Ynga smiled. Y’Anid sighed, perhaps wistfully. Targ cast a glare in her direction.

“So what’s going to happen here?” Shaundar asked as a distraction.

“Watch!” Olaf grinned.

The drums rolled out a tattoo and a gong sounded. With that, gates on the sides of the corridors were opened and the creatures that were released were those purple and green funnel-web spiders Shaundar had seen in the jungle. They charged towards the contestants with frightening alacrity. There was one on each side of them.

Sarga waited for the first one to get about halfway through the passage before throwing his first spear. It pierced the creature and its abdomen splattered. He whirled to face the other one and it was almost upon him by the time he cast the second spear. The javelin skittered

along the creature's carapace and the spider kept coming. Sarga braced the third javelin to receive charge and the arachnid stabbed itself through. Even so it continued to try to press onwards up the spear, stretching out with its pedipalps and mandibles to reach Sarga, who held it stubbornly at bay until it finally wriggled and died.

Some of the other contestants were not so lucky. The Baneblood, for instance, was prone and rigid on the hard-packed earth while the spider chewed through his armour. Nakyra cried out and stood up in her seat. It had made a decent hole by the time handlers came to smoke the thing into a stupor and lift it into a cage, which they carried out. Only then did the healers go to work.

"Is he still alive?" Shaundar wanted to know. "Is he going to be all right?"

"Yes," Ynga assured him. "The Widowmaker's venom leaves you paralyzed. Sort of a state of hibernation, actually. Most of your bodily functions cease and you can't move anything. But you're completely aware of all that goes on around you, they say." She shuddered. "Sounds like a horrible way to die to me."

"It's a tradition," Dorin explained, "to leave you for a day or so and make fun of you if you are bitten in the game. But we don't do that, Bolvi. I just don't think some things are funny."

"I'm inclined to agree with you, sir."

The judges, after having conferred about such varying factors as speed, accuracy, style, and so forth, declared the Rageclaw contestant, who had been true with both of his initial strikes, the winner; but they declared Sarga the second. Shaundar barely noticed as the family broke into raucous cheers and applause. An idea was congealing. “Where do they get the spiders?” he wanted to know. “Do they capture them wild or do they breed them?”

“Oh, they’re bred for aggression, speed and venom,” Corin informed him. “There’s a kennel in the arena.”

“I imagine the handlers would have to be exceptionally careful.”

Y’Anid replied, “Oh yes; even the slightest scrape of a fang will have the same effect.”

Shaundar bared his teeth in an entirely humourless grin. A vision struck him like a meteor and it was so powerful that he could barely breathe.

The Shadow Soldier crept out after everyone else was asleep. As a matter of fact, most of them were drunk and full-bellied as well, having come from a formal courtship dinner put on by the Banebloods. In this instance, his habit of taking his time over his food, savouring every bite, had served him well; no one had noticed him dithering over both it and his ale.

Getting into the arena was not difficult. He looked up into the bright crescent moon and knew its light would play tricks with orcish vision; while in the meantime, his elven eyes picked up the light and expanded it until he saw as well as if it were full daylight. The guards were lazy and not expecting any more trouble than rowdy drunks. He supposed they had no reason to do so; this was Dukagsh, the heart of the Scro Empire.

The arena corridors were dark and quiet. He was half-expecting to find a cage full of elven prisoners-of-war, but he did not. He did find pens of sleeping gladiators, but most of them were goblinoids. The occasional human was interspersed among them. He briefly considered trying to rescue them but, failing to see any way in which they could successfully escape Dukagsh, he figured they were probably better off. Besides, he had no real idea what qualified someone to be a gladiator. Were these prisoners of war or hardened criminals? Or something else?

The spiders were kept in individual cages. That was ideal. Shaundar made his way over to one of them and it hissed and spat. He nodded to himself, donned some leather gloves, and opened a belt pouch to fetch the ceramic jar he'd acquired from the kitchen. He flexed his fingers, steeled his courage, and jerked his empty hand towards the arachnid. It leaped at him and he hooked the jar beneath the creature's fangs and pulled. Sputtering, the spider spilled milky greenish venom into the container. Shaundar supposed that four hundred years of breeding for aggression had done its work; it didn't even try to escape from him.

Shaundar bared his tusks at it and growled back, and it hissed again and released even more of the dangerous toxin.

“*Nor lakaar,*” Shaundar whispered, and he jerked the container down and away. The spider tried once more to get at him through its bars, flexing its pedipalps as well as its mandibles.

The venom had an acidic odour, but not one that was easily detectable. Shaundar put the cork in the container and, careful not to bump it around, he brought it back to the Bloodfist estate. There he took a cloak pin and carefully coated its tip in the venom. And he waited.

It took several minutes, but eventually he did notice a few pockmarks on the metal pin. His subconscious nod was grim. The venom was indeed corrosive to metal. Quietly he made his way into the courtyard garden, and after several minutes wandering among the plants – grapes, olives, frankincense – he found what he was looking for. It was a gum tree of some kind, with fragrant yellow pompom flowers, and long, sharp thorns. He didn’t know what it was called, but he’d seen a few of them in Dukagsh City. Discretely he harvested a few of the thorns, each of which was about two inches long, and returned to his room.

He placed the ceramic jar, cork up, carefully into his largest belt pouch, and wedged it upright with rags. To this he added the thorns, standing upright on their points, and re-corked it. Then, knowing that there was nothing else that he could do until morning, he went back to bed; but neither sleep nor reverie came.

The next day's events began with a contest that Shaundar thought with a shake of his head only orcs could possibly come up with. Two opponents faced off, and one would hit the other in the head. Then the other one would, if he could, shake off the blow and then strike the first one; and they exchanged blows back and forth until somebody passed out or gave up. Shaundar was pleased that it was Targ and Ronkor, and not Corin who had been selected to represent the Bloodfists. He figured they would do well.

Shaundar didn't watch it. Instead he kept his eyes on the spectator box of the Bloodaxe clan and watched them. Narok Bloodaxe observed the proceedings with the dignity of an emperor; which Shaundar supposed he was. *You're next*, he promised silently, and his hands trembled a little as he considered what he was about to do.

He just about jumped out of his skin when Corin slapped him on the shoulder. "Wish me luck, *na'kor!*" he grinned. Shaundar realized with a start that the contest that Targ had been participating in was over and the next event was up. He didn't even know what it was.

"Good luck!" Shaundar said readily enough, manufacturing enthusiasm, and he pounded Corin on the back for good measure. Corin beamed and carried on to whatever sport awaited him.

But the event Shaundar had been waiting for was happening; Garik Bloodaxe was leaving the spectator box. Shaundar made sure that

Corin was lining up for the event, and then he made his way down to the privies, hoping to intercept the former Prison Warden.

Once he was clear of the interior of the crowded arena, he availed himself again of some of the gum Arabic he'd stolen from the Lunar Temple and an eyelash. He made his way silently across the open street, careful to walk with slow, sliding steps so no one would see footprints magically appearing from nothing.

Creeping around the line-up that Garik Bloodaxe stood in, Shaundar lurked behind the privy. His heart was thundering in his chest and his palms were sweating. He reminded himself that he had now done this kind of thing a hundred times. But then he realized that it was excitement that motivated him, not fear.

Carefully he once more donned the leather gloves of the previous night. In one hand he pinched two or three thorns, and then, so there would be no accidents, he replaced the cork in the jar. In his other hand he took a wad of rags in the palm and a pinch of sesame seeds.

Eventually he could no longer see Garik Bloodaxe at the front of the line; which meant he was next. He listened to the person before him in the queue enter the privy and use it. The reek was mind-numbing. *Must have been a gnoll*, he guessed.

The creature banged its way out and the Bloodaxe Champion grumbled his way in. Shaundar waited with bated breath until he had

locked the door behind him and started urinating; at which point, Shaundar rubbed the sesame seeds between his fingers, murmured the incantation, and leaped through the privy wall and onto the latrine.

Garik looked up, startled; but Shaundar slammed the hand with the rags in it over his face, his index finger digging into the Champion's orbital cavity, and shoved him backwards as the other hand, pinching the poisoned thorns, stabbed for the groin. It connected to skin, but Shaundar ground the points into his flesh just to be sure. The taller scro made a muffled growl. He struggled and tried to peel Shaundar's hand back from his face; but it was at that moment that the paralytic effects of the poison hit and he froze in a rictus.

Shaundar gave it a moment to be sure and then relaxed. He realized that he had managed to lift the larger scro right off the ground by his face. His hands were shaking and he made them stop with a titanic effort of his will.

He lowered the scro onto his feet and leaned him against the wall. There was a bloody half-moon beneath Garik's eye from Shaundar's claw. Unfortunate, that, but probably not fatal to his plan. Shaundar had also been splattered with urine and the palm of his hand was scored by the Bloodaxe's tusks. But all in all, he'd come out of it well.

Grinning to himself, he leaned close to Garik's ear. "You deserve to suffer so much more," he whispered, "but it's not expedient. But know

this: you have no honour, and you will die without dignity. May Yurtrus take your soul!”

Shaundar lifted up the latrine lid and seat, and then he turned the rigid but pliable scro upside down and stuffed him in head first. Just for good measure, he pissed all over the scro as he sank into the muck, face frozen in a fierce, death’s head grin. Once again he made a ball of an eyelash and incense, and tapped the Bloodaxe’s boot. The scro vanished from visible sight.

Shaundar then cast a quick illusion to make himself look like Garik Bloodaxe, down to the armour and the runes on his tusks. He took a deep breath and did his best to recall the Bloodaxe’s mannerisms. He found it easier to do than he might have imagined. How often had that face and voice haunted his dreams?

At that point he knocked back some rice spirits and lurched out of the privy. Weaving his way across the field, he adjusted his belt, and headed into the arena. Once inside, he ducked into an alcove and dropped the illusion, then carried on up to the Bloodfist box.

“What kept you?” Dorin asked him. “Corin’s taken the tusk-wrestle! Did you see it?”

Corin was coming up the steps now, grinning and rubbing his jaw. “Well done, *na’kor!*” Shaundar cheered him in order to avoid answering the question.

While the family prepared for the remaining two events, Shaundar cast one last incantation for the day; this one with a more elaborately worded arcane formula and a puff of fleece. And while Bolvi Bloodfist ran the Cannon Relay with the rest of his clansmen before an audience of thousands, Garik staggered into the Bloodaxe box reeking of rice spirits, pleaded illness, and sank into a chair. There he slumped in a stupor until Bolvi Bloodfist entered the ring in the Bear Pit competition, at which point he got up suddenly and fled the box.

In the latrine, Garik Bloodaxe's invisible body sank deeper and deeper into the waste. Silently the scro screamed for mercy, but unable to move, make a noise or swallow, eventually he drowned in the urine and excrement. It took a long time, several hours in fact, due to the reduced bodily processes imposed by the spider toxin. By that time his body was completely submerged. Yathar and Sylria would have approved.

Chapter Fifteen

Corin had not slept more than a few hours a night for two weeks. Beside him, propped up on his bunk, Bolvi went on breathing. That was about the best that could be said. His olivine skin was ashen, except where fire burned from his cheeks. Corin kept running cold dripping rags over his face, but he could still feel the heat radiating from his *na'kor's* body, as warm as glowing coals. The bellows of his chest rose and fell, rose and fell again, though the rattle and wheeze from his gasping lungs was audible in the passageway and indeed, through most of the deck. Occasionally it would stop entirely, and Corin would tense like a cat, waiting. Usually a breathless fit of coughing would clear the obstruction eventually, leaving his blood brother trembling and exhausted; but twice now the bellows had just fallen silent, and Corin had leaped up and folded his *na'kor* forward and pounded vigorously on his back until he gasped and hacked and globules of phlegm and blood sprayed from his mouth.

“He’s not going to make it to Dukagsh, Thorgir,” he admitted at last.

Thorgir studied Bolvi’s unconscious form and his brow furrowed and his eyes darkened. “No my lord, he won’t,” the elder scro agreed reluctantly.

Bolvi screamed and swung his arms around, knocking the water bowl on its side and pouring its contents on the deck. The bowl itself rolled under the bunk with a clatter. It startled Corin but it had happened before as the fever made his *na'kor* delirious. Sometimes Bolvi cried out in Orcish and sometimes in Elvish. Mostly it made no sense, but every once in while there was the fragment of something that sounded like a memory of war or torture. Corin whispered soothing words and stroked Bolvi's burning brow until he was calm again, and wished, and not for the first time, that the common-born scro was less reticent about his mercenary's past.

"What can I do?" he demanded in desperation. Thorgir shook his head helplessly.

There was a sharp rap on the side of the doorframe. "My lords?" queried a small voice. The two scro turned to see Graak lurking at the entrance.

He swallowed under the weight of their scrutiny. "My lords," he persisted, "has anyone searched for a Warpriest or a shaman among the survivors gathered by my nephew?"

Corin stiffened as if poleaxed. Thorgir burst into a hearty guffaw. "No, Graak," he said. "I don't think anyone has."

"All stop!" bellowed Corin, lurching to his feet. "Yeoman, signal the fleet; all stop!"

There was a short hesitation before the order was roared back for confirmation; and the men shouted their affirmatives as they ran the signal flags up the mainmast. The *Sword of Courage* began to decelerate.

“Graak,” Corin breathed, “is your nephew still on the helm?”

“*Gul, karr,*” Graak confirmed. Since Bolvi had been removed, the crew had taken turns; one new helmsman each day on a rotating schedule. Corin had not exempted himself. He considered the horror of those twenty-four hours and again resisted tears as he thought about how long Bolvi had endured it.

“Get him off of there,” he commanded. “And send for a healer among the fleet right away.”

Standing on the threshold of the Winter Estate was almost as glorious a view as a fly-over, and this had the benefit of being stationary, so Shaundar could take in all of the view in his own time. At the foot of Mount Bloodfist to the west were the plantain fields, and beyond them the rice paddies, recently harvested and left to weather the rainy season as best they could; then farther on, the rolling, churning sea. To the east were the corn fields and the villages of Korr and Tathka, Bloodfist clan holdings; and beyond that more vast fields and then Dukagsh City. Beyond that was nothing but desert, and the sky above it was a white sandy blur. Olaf told him that the most notorious criminals of the Empire

were exiled into that land of death. Shaundar rather thought he might prefer a clean execution.

One would expect it to be cold up here; and it was, enough that he was clad in a sheepskin jerkin over his red clan armour; but the flesh-rending chill anticipated was absent. He stared out over the long bridges between perilous peaks, where little crops of peppers and quinoa huddled in the lee of the stones and herds of mountain goats, sheep and small yaks or perhaps imported Torilian bovines called *rothe* wandered the rocks under the watchful eyes of the goblin and orcish shepherds. And he just about jumped out of his skin when someone cleared her throat.

“Bolvi, it’s just me,” announced the familiar feminine voice.

Shaundar turned to meet those intoxicating blue eyes that had begun to haunt his dreams, interspersed with images of Narissa’s lovely oceanic blue ones with their golden elven sparkles. Y’Anid’s eyes had no elven glitter, but they sparkled just the same. Her lovely auburn hair trailed like a banner in the wind and she smiled around her dainty tusks. The rest of her was a bulky bundle of fur.

“Aren’t you in the bridal party?” he asked her in a gentle voice.

“Yes, but I’ve been asked to fetch you. You’re needed to lead the Honour Guard.”

“Oh,” he replied, “all right. Sorry.” He turned to head in.

“What were you looking at?” Y’Anid inquired, her eyes filled with the intelligence and curiosity that so endeared her to him.

He smiled. “This world,” he explained. At her continued quizzical expression he elaborated, “It’s beautiful.”

“I should think,” she observed as they headed through the gate into the stone burrow, “that Dukagsh would fail to impress a seasoned starhand like you. You must have seen so many varied landscapes on so many different worlds.” Her eyes were brimming with longing.

“Rarely are they so starkly beautiful,” he confessed as the scents of the orcish den and the torch scones closed around them with the gloaming. Well, perhaps Permafrost. But only when the aurora was visible. And Nedethil at night, when the stars and the other small worlds of Garden gleamed in the sky, and the Color Spray Nebula danced. He sighed.

They descended into the warren of connecting cells, which eventually opened into a massive central chamber, borne up by elaborately carved stone pillars. There the delegation awaited; Bloodfists and Banebloods both. “That way,” indicated Elka with a lacquered claw, and Shaundar hurried down the hallway indicated.

The men of the clan were gathered in the reception chamber. Corin glanced up nervously as Shaundar came through the door and relief relaxed into his face. “Where’ve you been?” he demanded.

“Sorry, got distracted by the view,” he admitted. “Is everyone ready?” He shucked off the jerkin and hefted up his spear in his hand.

“Lead on, lads,” Olaf encouraged. Sarga nodded. Dorin beamed.

The men of the clan marched in a processional to the center chamber while Targ and Gurtok sounded their drums. They chanted a war chant in unison, banging the hafts of their spears on the stone.

They were met by a delegation of the Banebloods led by Ardak, brandishing his own spear. He thrust the tip pointedly at Corin’s torso. “Who dares approach the Clan Baneblood with arms in hand?” he demanded.

“I am Corin Bloodfist,” Corin announced, stepping back to thump his breastplate. “I have come to carry off the beauty called Nakyra.”

Ritualistically Ardak saluted with the spear and aimed it back in Corin’s direction. “You shall not have her without a fight!” he declared.

“So be it!” Corin acknowledged, and they began to circle one another as the witnesses cleared the floor. The conditions of the combat had been established prior to the fight. This one had been until one of them yielded or was knocked out. Shaundar understood that asking for a fight to the death was perfectly within the rights of the bride’s family, but it was rarely exercised.

They circled for a few minutes while all the men gathered around, chanting and beating on the ground in rhythmic unison with their spear-hafts. “Come on,” urged Corin with wickedly twinkling eyes. “You look like a lame boy with that spear! I thought you were a warrior!”

Ardak did not immediately rise to the bait. Shaundar chuckled quietly to himself, amused by Corin’s poor manipulation skills. “Save it and fight me, Bloodfist,” he snapped.

Corin’s eyes lit up. “Still stinging over my victory in the tusk-wrestle, are you? I don’t know how you felt you had a chance anyway, with those wimpy little snaggle-teeth of yours . . .”

That had considerably improved effect. Ardak growled low in his throat and hefted his spear in impatient hands.

“But then again, what do you expect from the male Banebloods?” Corin asked rhetorically. “I mean, look at Dargat, first out in the Spider Hunt . . .”

Apparently that was sufficient to annoy the volatile scro warrior. He uttered a snarling noise and charged.

Deftly Corin slapped his spear haft into the upper thighs of his opponent, knocking him head-over-heels, and when he was sprawled out on the floor, Corin’s spearhead snapped around to prod under the Baneblood’s red bearded chin. “Yield,” he demanded.

To his credit, the seething Clan Champion cast aside his spear. “Well damn,” he swore, “you were *trying* to piss me off, weren’t you?”

“*Gul*, I was,” Corin confessed.

“Good job!” He added the ceremonial words, “I yield to the Bloodfist! Will you care for Nakyra, and claim her issue as your own?”

“I will,” Corin promised.

“Then take her,” he said, “and send your sons to our clan so that we both may prosper!”

“I thank you,” Corin replied, and as he helped Ardak to his feet, they clasped wrists to seal the agreement. With that, Corin made his way over to Nakyra, clad in a ceremonial dress that left little to the imagination, and carried her off to his quarters; to the raucous cheers and applause of the gathering on both sides. “Well done, Corin! Nicely played!” Uncle Olaf cried enthusiastically as they took their leave.

“Time to eat!” Dorin announced. “The Den Mother and the clan ladies have prepared a high feast to celebrate. Let us show you our hospitality.”

The feast was truly spectacular. Shaundar had never seen such a spread of food. One of those enormous boars was the centerpiece of the feast, garnished with a large fruit in its mouth and pineapples scattered around it on the platter. It was an unwelcome surprise to Shaundar to

learn that he was expected, as Corin's *na'kor*, to carve the swine and he found himself grateful for the more practical applications of assassin's anatomy training. This feast was accompanied by several of those small upright lizards on skewers, fresh corn bread and buttered corn-on-the-cob, something entirely outside of Shaundar's previous experience; a thick curry made from lentils; smoked fish, *hargol*, and a raw pepper salad; hot and sour soup; and then a great gelatinized fruit flan topped with thick cream, and an unusual concoction of plantains in ice cream, drizzled in melted chocolate, for desert. Rich and heady wine, spicy ale and *graf* were served throughout the meal and after it, and there was chocolate as well as honey to mix in the bitter stimulant. Shaundar went ahead and did so, nicely buzzed enough on the alcohol to not care what kind of odd looks the males in the room were giving him. Ynga served him since he was unmarried. Knowing where her husband was and what he was doing, Shaundar watched her for signs of unhappiness. She was pretty good at hiding her concern; only the slightest tightening of her mouth around her tusks betrayed her, and he was fairly sure he was the only one who noticed. Except maybe Y'Anid of course.

After the meal, the men retired to the den to continue to drink and to wax rhetoric about the Games, the War, and other such matters. Shaundar put the scribe in his back brain to work, knowing there was likely to be a lot of relevant intelligence; not that he had any means of passing it on until his next excursion from the sphere.

"So the Raptor Fleet is in the hands of a new Admiral now," the Chieftain of the Banebloods was saying.

“Oh?” Dorin inquired as he quaffed *graf*.

“Apparently the Wrackblood manoeuvred Captain Hrathgar Rageclaw’s little brother into an indefensible position. You know how the Rageclaws are Handers.”

Dorin was nodding. “And the old guard Wrackbloods certainly wouldn’t have appreciated that.”

The Almighty Leader sipped at his tankard. “Well, the Rageclaw called him out and won.”

“Good for him,” Olaf smiled.

Strange, thought Shaundar, how the scro could continue to surprise him by behaving like orcs in such a *civilized* way. “What is a ‘Hander?’”

“Part of a political faction,” Olaf explained. “The Upraised Hand. You saw the gesture that the Overlord made at the Distribution Ceremony?”

It was exactly that; a hand upraised and open. Shaundar nodded.

“The faction believes in sharing with all who take part in serving the tribe; fair distribution, an even balance of power, that sort of thing. Your *durkarr* is one of the leaders.”

Many things suddenly became clear. “Ah,” he mumbled, drinking his *graf*. A thought occurred to him; but this was a question he did not feel he could reasonably ask, even under the cover of his “uncivilized” persona, especially not with the possibly hostile Banebloods present. He manufactured a yawn. “Would you consider me rude if I made an early night of it? I don’t mean to be discourteous, but we came from a military assignment to the Games to the wedding and I think it’s all catching up with me.”

“Well, I guess you can’t blame it on the drink, eh Bolvi?” jested Dorin; with affection, Shaundar noted. “Well, go on lad, go to bed, gods know you’re still young and I’ve been that tired many a time myself . . .”

Shaundar downed the rest of his *graf* and stood up. He acknowledged them all with a short bow. “Good night,” he bid them, and made for his room.

Removing armour alone was a struggle. He was able to manage the greaves only after the vambraces because it was too awkward to move his elbows at the right angles otherwise. He mounted them carefully on the armour stand that was brought from the Summer Estate, and inspected it with a critical eye. The mountain air had been hard on the leather and he would need to oil it properly soon. The breastplate was designed to be removed one-handed but it still wasn’t easy to shuffle out of.

“May I help?” asked Ynga from the doorway.

Shaundar looked up at her from his perch on the edge of his bed. “Do I look that awkward?” he inquired, a rueful smile seeping from behind a tusk.

“No,” she answered honestly, taking that as an invitation, “but removing and donning armour are always easier with an assistant.” She slipped the torso section from his body over the right arm, so he only had to undo one set of buckles.

“My appreciation,” he smiled, and touched his fist to his forehead.

“You left early,” she observed in response. Shaundar knew he would not get rid of her easily.

Take her into his confidence, then? “I wasn’t lying when I said I was tired, but it wasn’t why I left,” he admitted. “I need to know more about the politics, the factions and the like. I thought maybe the library could help, and I didn’t want to embarrass us in front of the Banebloods.” An idea came to him. “Perhaps you could help.”

“Perhaps I could at that,” she smiled. “Okay, you want to know about the different factions? What’s out there, why they believe what they believe?”

“And which clans are allied with which,” Shaundar smiled.

Ynga sighed. “It’s not that simple. Most clans have a general leaning in one party or another, but some have two or three. There’s always exceptions, and there’s always alliances of convenience. So it’s hard to say for certain which way a given clan is going to lean.”

Shaundar nodded thoughtfully. He understood. The Durothils, for example, seemed to come in two varieties. Their ancient title and arcane honour codes divided them into either the most dedicated elves to the defense of the land and the common people you would ever meet; or the extreme aristocratic types primarily dedicated to preserving their “ancient birthright.”

Ynga seemed to see that he grasped the concept because she began to delineate the parties. “The Red Swords want unending war until all elvenkind is exterminated. They believe that strength is through conquest and that might makes right. A lot of Warpriests are Swordsmen and they tend to ally themselves with the interests of the church of Ilneval. Many of the commoners of the Bloodaxe lean that way.”

Shaundar made an encouraging circle with his hand. *Go on*, he urged. He privately thought that the Doomspear commander he’d met on his first mission for the Black Arrows was likely of this stripe.

“The Silver Axe believes in the manifest destiny of the descendants of the Twenty-Four. Bloodaxe nobles tend to support that faction.” He made a noncommittal snort. Ynga’s eyes twinkled.

“The Upraised Hand you’re heard about. There’s a lot of One-Eyes and Rageclaws, surprisingly, who are also Handers, but they usually have to balance the goals of the party with the needs of the church of He Who Watches, so they’re more conservative than we are. The Spice Grinders believe that the day of the Twenty-Four Tribes has passed. They want an egalitarian society. Some just focus on scro, some on all orcs, and some believe it should be equal for everyone.”

Shaundar could not imagine a society in which there was not at least some kind of designation of a ruling class; how else would you establish a chain of command? But, “I have to admit, the thought is appealing. So how do they differ from the Handers?”

The scro woman sat next to him on the bed unselfconsciously. “The Handers still believe in the aristocracy, but they believe that it is the duty of the nobility to serve their people, not the other way around.”

“Ah.” That sounded much more sensible to Shaundar. “You said, ‘they.’ I take it you don’t share that opinion?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure what I believe. Other than I think that our duty is to protect the people. It would be a lot easier for me to support the aristocracy if I didn’t find the expected roles of caste so restrictive.” Her eyes met his as though in challenge.

Instead he chuckled. “You won’t hear any argument from me. I’m not very traditional that way, I guess. I believe that each should fall to

his or her own natural inclination and serve the tribe in his or her own way; except if that inclination is laziness. And I've seen a lot of that." Certainly some of his classmates from his childhood seemed to believe their purpose and destiny was to wave their fat purses around and judge everyone else.

Ynga's smile broadened. "That's what I like best about you, Bolvi. You see people as they are, not as what you expect."

"Not always," admitted Shaundar ruefully. "Sometimes I'm pretty oblivious."

Ynga grinned. "I find that difficult to believe." She turned to go. "Sleep well, brother."

Shaundar did not sleep. He stared unblinking into the dark, and his thoughts were of Narissa, and of Y'Anid, and seeing things for what they were, and the nature of duty.

Narok Bloodaxe was furious. It had been two weeks since Garik had disappeared at the Games. Today his body was found in one of the public latrines at the arena. There was nothing left of it but the bones and strips of rotting flesh, crawling with worms. Even the armour was completely ruined; all they managed to recover was the Clan Axe, covered in the stinking filth of the lesser races. What an ignoble death,

everyone said; getting drunk on rice spirits and falling into the latrine to die. Everyone knew he hadn't been the same since Spiral.

Except that Narok didn't believe it. Granted, his cousin had been known to drink heavily on occasion, but never in public like that. And he was acting oddly before; aside from being drunk and ill, that was. He would have been hard-pressed to say exactly how it was odd, but Garik just seemed *off* to him somehow. Not himself.

The Overlord paced in his palace while his concubines shrank away from him. The War, at least, was proceeding as well as could be expected. The Tarantula Fleet had been decimated at Spiral and forced to flee, it was true, but the reinforcing Raptor Fleet was holding its own, aided by those Blacktusk Mercenaries. Narok rather liked their new leader, Captain Tharr. He was clever and brutal, and his men were loyal. He wasn't fond of the Captain's willingness to accept Priestesses as mercenaries, but they were common scro and that was really none of his business; although he'd begun to suspect that Tharr was really the illegitimate scion of a clansman by the way he carried himself and his careful dodging of questions about his ancestry. He wondered if one of the clans would lay claim to him at an opportune time in the future, and watched him just in case.

In the meantime, the fighting in Winterspace was in full swing and it was heating up in Dragonspace. And Intelligence reported that there was a secret fleet gathering in Greyspace; the descendants of refugees from the War of Shame who wanted payback. Narok rather

thought that they would prove useful. The Dragon Fleet in Realmspace slugged along as they had for months now, but they weren't making much headway.

Narok knew enough about warfare to already be concerned. Their blitzkrieg had not gone nearly as well as anticipated, and as best as he could tell it was for two reasons: one, the elves only appeared to have demilitarized after the War of Shame, but they had kept many ships and armaments in reserve; two, their magical abilities, which the scro could not match (Warpriests aside) kept their lines of communications and supplies open much more easily than their own. That was something that he and the High Council had anticipated, but they had gambled that with their vastly superior numbers and surprise on their side, that they would be able to counter that. But those damnable elves managed somehow to keep a small flotilla here, and an unseen base there; just enough to pass around information and keep supply lines open. Furthermore, some of the allies they thought they could count on, who should have united with the Scro in mutual hatred of the *Tel'Quessir* as they fancied themselves (and what arrogance, calling themselves "the People?" As if they were even "people!") had proven to be unreliable or even reluctant, which baffled Narok completely. But he supposed he should never be shocked at the unwillingness of sentient creatures to exercise that ability with full capacity. There was no shortage of fools in the Universe.

Even these difficulties would not have been challenging, except that there had been many other niggling little issues that, individually, were minor concerns, but taken together, presented serious problems.

For one thing, solitary leaders, separated from their superiors, seemed to take their isolation as license to build their own little system empires. Take that Morkitar, for example. Narok knew that he fancied that somehow he would earn himself a place as a noble by using that Witchlight Marauder at Gamaro as leverage; but Morkitar's days were numbered because Narok's own spies had orders to eliminate him as soon as he became a problem. Which would be soon, according to reports.

For another thing, the lesser races could not be counted on for their loyalty. You would think the need to eliminate the hated *spirra* would be enough to bind them together, but none of them seemed eager to recognize the superiority of the scro and so pogroms had been necessary. And as soon as you turned your back, or displayed any weakness . . . it was the only reason why Morkitar had not yet been removed from command and exiled to some obscure little backwater to organize kobold miners or something. That, and his support was high among the Spice Grinders and Warpriests, so his removal had to be subtle, or very properly formal.

For a third thing, Narok was beginning to suspect that the elves had spies of their own. They seemed to know things they could not otherwise know, and he was certain that sabotage had plagued the Scro Forces since that ill-fated fleet amassed on Adonia. He could not imagine that they would have managed to get elves on Dukagsh – as far as he knew, the closest remaining elf was on Spiral, provided there were any still alive (and he sincerely hoped not) – but perhaps they had the loyalty

of some of the so-called human “mercenaries.” It was possible (though unlikely, he had to admit) that they might even have won the loyalty (or purchased the services) of a half-orc or two.

He also had to admit, however reluctantly, that the hands-on experience of the elven admirals probably also had something to do with it. Narok was no wet-behind-the-ears recruit by any means – certainly he and most of his generals and leaders had seen much battle when the Empire conquered the neighbouring systems and the lesser races – but they were not, and could never be, as seasoned as eight hundred year old military commanders who had personally fought their ancestors face-to-face.

Narok figured that the only way to deal with the first problem was to replace the leaders of the combined fleets with clan nobles to oversee them and Warpriests to assure their loyalty. This, however, would involve a major reconfiguration of the military, and he was reluctant to do it because of the simple logistical challenge of it. He kept hoping they would finally eliminate the obstacles in at least one of the major spheres and then the Elven Defense would fall apart like a house of cards, but with each passing month it was becoming clearer to him that their window for a quick and bloody war was closing, and they would have to resign themselves to a prolonged slugfest instead. He was grateful that provisions had been made for this and supply sources, mining operations, and manufacturing technology, were in good order to support it. He imagined that with more hands-on involvement from the

Tribal Leaders and the Warpriests, there would be less insubordination from the lesser races as well.

As to the possibility of spies . . . well, he supposed some of that was inevitable. Certainly the Scro had been able to employ many of those insectare, because they looked elven enough to pass in a pinch; and the occasional bionoid had also been useful; though less so, because someone might recognize them. Humans were easily bought and therefore, incredibly handy for low-security information; though of course, no elf would trust them enough to give them a position of genuine authority or tell them anything important.

And as far as dealing with more experienced commanders was concerned . . . well, the admirals and generals were learning more with every skirmish, battle and manoeuvre; and he did not think that the *spirra* were anywhere near as resourceful, inventive, and organized as the Scro were.

Well, at least the *gurtek* on Spiral had served a functional purpose; the offerings had been accepted, and the Tarantula Fleet's Warpriests had successfully performed the necessary and painstaking rituals to open a portal to their gods. The Orcish Pantheon now had the full use of Their powers in Vorrspace; as did their clergy. And the research of the Warpriests was progressing well, especially now that they had those starfly cuttings.

It was regrettable that the degenerate orcs of Armistice had turned out to be so disappointing. He remembered how excited he had been when Vorr announced that the Tarantula Fleet had found them at last, and how he'd hoped to learn the lost secrets of their ancestors from the descendants of the Combined Goblin Fleet. Ah, but it was not to be. They were more reduced than Narok could have dreamed; tough as iron, yes, but mere savages, barely worthy of their sentience. They were a good argument for why the elves needed to be defeated, and why no elf could ever be trusted. Vorr's loss was quite a setback as well; and the disaster that followed was only bearable because the elves suffered just as badly for it. But the elves had made a fatal miscalculation; one he hoped that the Warpriests would be able to use to their advantage. They had abandoned Winterspace after the Witchlight Marauder was released on Armistice.

He would have discussed all of this with Garik, whose mind was as crafty and clever as any scro he'd ever known; but now Garik was dead, through some stupid, unlucky accident, and there was no one else he considered worthy enough to confide in. It was so unfortunate that Narok found himself doubting that it could be a coincidence. Besides, he had genuine affection for his cousin and somebody's head deserved to be served up on a plate, if only so that he would feel better about the affair.

And then, as if to add insult to injury, the Bloodfist clan had almost made a sweep of the Equinox Games! And it disturbed him to learn how popular a mercenary could be, just because he was a mercenary before he was a clansman.

He knew that support of the Upraised Hand would likely evaporate once the hated, liberal-minded Bloodfists were out of the picture. He just hoped that would happen before the end of the War, or the Scro Empire might very well come apart at the seams.

Narok considered his next move. He would have to seek the council and aid of some of his compatriots. The Darkhands, the Grimcleaves and the Wrackbloods had always been intelligent and right-minded, and the Hellguards at least accepted what had to be done. He hoped that the Baneblood alliance would limit the effectiveness of the Bloodfists, and that the young bride would be more successful at keeping them informed than Targ had been. At the very least, she should be able to prevent the birth of any Bloodfist heirs aside from the ones they chose.

With that thought to console him, the Overlord of the scro strode past his concubines and sought out Garlnaghk Hellguard for a progress report on their research.

The men of the Bloodfist clan were pensive as they took leave of the Temple of the War Bringer in Dukagsh City. “To the manor house first?” Dorin asked of the gathering. “Have a couple of drinks, discuss strategy?”

“Lunch,” Olaf argued. “Lunch and drinks. Graak will cook for us; won’t you, Graak?”

“It would be my honour, my lord,” Graak replied gravely. In the past few months of winter, Shaundar had learned that his position was a rather prestigious one. The right to feed the Clan was held in high esteem. “I hope you have more than dried goods available or it won’t be up to my usual standards.”

“You might have to send people to the Bazaar,” Olaf considered. “I don’t really know; we haven’t been there since the Games.”

“May we go through there, then, on our way back, my lords?” the goblin requested. “The harvest just started and our bondfolk won’t have shipped their tribute yet.”

“Why not?” Dorin shrugged. “Perhaps we can pick up a few gifts for the ladies, hey? And Conception Gifts for Nakyra.” He nudged Corin with an elbow and Corin smiled with delight.

Shaundar knew that although she was trying not to show it, Ynga was a little disappointed and nonplussed that even with such a head start, she had not conceived first. Fertility was the greatest socio-political power of scro women. He would have thought that being a Priestess of Luthic would have assured fertility at her whim, but apparently it was a lot more complicated than that. He had not dared to ask deeper questions, not because he was afraid, in this case, of giving himself away – such women’s matters appeared to mystify all scro men – but because it was so obviously such a sore subject.

The Dukagsh Bazaar was busy and crowded. Fishmongers and silk merchants peddled their wares alongside perfumers, spicers, and weapons merchants. It was quite a cosmopolitan place, considering the conservative nature of the scro. Corin asked Shaundar uncertainly, “What do you think she’d like? What do you think Ynga would like?”

Ha. Like Shaundar had any better idea! He found himself trying to remember what Yathar might have done to charm his never-ending parade of girlfriends. “Jewelry, chocolate and flowers seem to be the old stand-bys,” he offered.

“Jewelry,” he ruminated. “Good idea. Let’s see what we can find.” They descended into the maelstrom. Shaundar gawked openly at the variety of wares available, including such unique luxuries as *hin* tobacco and other pipeweeds, dwarven ales, and the Gnomish *Kama Sutra*. Discreetly he acquired a copy of that for himself, thinking a field manual might be handy . . . then he wondered how they were getting this stuff. Enterprising free traders? Looters? Mercenaries? Elven Intelligence would love to know.

He bit back the bile that rose in his throat when he found a merchant trading solely in elven items. There were statues, jewelry, rugs, painting, books, tapestries and furniture. There were all sorts of spacefaring items; celestial compasses, sextants, even brass fittings. Notably missing were star charts and astrolabes; Shaundar could guess why. The goblinoids seemed to regard these items the way that tourists did souvenirs. They seemed to value them as status symbols.

When a curious orcish woman picked up a handmade china doll with delicately pointed ears, Shaundar looked away. “Do you ever wonder where that stuff comes from?” he asked Corin at last, his mouth suddenly dry.

Corin shrugged. “Mostly I believe it was taken from captured ships or some of the conquered worlds. Why, do you want some?”

“Gods forbid; no,” he spat. Corin was studying him with a curious look, so he dared to ask, “Doesn’t it *bother* you that a little girl’s *doll* is available for sale as a war souvenir? What happened to the little girl who owned it?”

Corin set his mouth in a thin line. “*Gul*, it does bother me, Bolvi. It bothers me a great deal. But don’t say that too loudly; you don’t want to be branded as an elven sympathizer.” He bit his lip between those tusks and his eyes darkened. “Father was captured in the Battle of Leira,” he explained slowly, “and he told us that some young elven soldiers – all mages, I guess – held him prisoner, but they treated him with dignity and respect. Until then, he had no qualms about the War. But after . . . well, maybe you should talk to him.”

Shaundar pretended to be fascinated with the elven jewelry on display in order to avoid saying anything. It was all he could do to carefully school his face into a mask of neutrality.

“I don’t mean he doesn’t want to fight,” Corin added hastily. “He’s not disloyal and he’s not a dandelion-licker or anything. He thinks it’s a tragedy, to be sure. He just believes it’s necessary.”

Shaundar cleared his throat. “Dandelion-licker?” he repeated with an arched eyebrow.

“Oh, you haven’t heard that one yet? It’s someone who loves elves. Usually implies that they’re . . . you know.” He shrugged.

Well, that was interesting, that there actually was a *term* for such a thing. He wondered what his compatriots would call the elven equivalent, like himself and Captain Wintervale. His eyes caught on one of the books on display and he picked it up, feeling a wave of homesickness wash over him. *Jarsali and the Treant and Other Romantic Poems*, was the promising title. “Do Ynga and Y’Anid read in Elvish?” he asked his orcish blood brother.

“Hmm, I don’t know. I’ve never seen them read an elf book. But then again, all we have at home are log books and military manuals. Do you think they’d have any interest in elven poetry?”

“I’m not sure,” Shaundar said, “but nothing ventured . . . how much?” he asked the merchant.

The library of the Winter Estate was also possessed of those fabulous stuffed chairs that Shaundar had enjoyed in the Summer Estate. Dorin lit a pipe as he sank into one of them and Shaundar took that as permission to do the same. He was becoming rather fond of the spicy Bloodfist tobacco, imported from a plantation in Orishspace and usually flavoured with just a dash of cinnamon and clove, or brandy, or entirely unflavoured. His favourite was the clove because it sparked a little as it burned, and the smell and the tingle on his tongue were delicious.

“Ah, that’s the stuff,” Dorin observed, content. “So, what’s on your mind, lad?”

Shaundar wasn’t sure how to start. He considered it. “In the market with Corin today,” he said at last, “I saw an elven doll for sale as a war trophy. And I found myself wondering what had happened to the child who owned it.”

Dorin looked at him with a very strange smile on his face. “A mercenary who still has his soul,” he observed. “Bless you, Bolvi; I’m glad you’re what I thought you were.” At Shaundar’s puzzled expression, he added, “It surprises me that you care. So few do.”

“So why do you, sir?” seized Shaundar.

Dorin puffed at his pipe as he considered Shaundar’s question. “I suppose the better question would be; why other scro *don’t*?”

Dorin seemed to expect him to say something, so he tried cautiously, “They’re *elves*,” investing that word with all of the hostility and intent he felt towards orcs.

Dorin frowned a little and studied him with an intensity that made him uncomfortable. “Are they born evil?” he inquired. It was a rhetorical question; and as Shaundar adjusted to the shock of hearing elves being referred to in a casual breath as “evil,” the powerful scro continued. “I don’t think they are. I think we teach our children to hate each other, Bolvi. How much more we could all be if we did not!”

Shaundar had to shake his head to get his bearings. What was Dorin trying to say here? “But what about the One-Eye?” he demanded. “Doesn’t He command us to destroy the elves?”

Dorin rumbled appreciation. “No, that’s the War Maker,” he argued. “To my knowledge, the All-father never once directs us to destroy elves specifically. Though the Warpriests certainly spin it that way, don’t they? I personally think that we tell the legend in such a way that it justifies our hatred. Though there is some truth to it.”

Shaundar was breathless with this revelation. Were the tales of the gods told in order to justify beliefs that already existed? What did that mean for the gods, and for faith, exactly?

“Mercenaries are usually superstitious rather than religious,” Dorin was saying. “Has anyone ever told you the story of the One-Eye and the Divine Council?”

“No, sir,” Shaundar replied.

Dorin smiled tightly around his tusks. “When the gods were young, they all made mortal peoples in their own images to live and worship them in the world. They met at a Grand Council to divide up territory. Lots were drawn and the Creators spoke in the order they’d drawn. The gods of the Dwarves chose the mountains. The gods of the Elves chose the forests. The gods of the Halflings chose the dales and valleys, and the gods of the Gnomes chose the foothills. The gods of the Goblins chose caves, and the gods of the Humans chose fields to grow crops on. And so on, and so on. And the Father of the Orcs, Who had drawn the last lot – some say because He’d been tricked out of it by the Creator of the Gnomes, not that I think it really matters – realized when it came to His turn that there was no land left for His people to live on. And He was angry, and so He took His spear in His hand and He said, ‘Since you have left nowhere for My people to dwell in peace, My people will dwell *here!*’ And He thrust His spear into the forest. ‘And here!’ And He stabbed it into the mountains. ‘And here!’ And He pierced the fields, and the dales, and the valleys, and the foothills, and even the caves. ‘If we must fight to have places to call our own,’ he told the Divine Council, ‘then that is what we shall do.’”

Shaundar listened intently to this speech. He had never heard this tale before.

“That’s sort of how I see it,” Dorin said, “and I see why we tell this legend to each other. You’ve met orcs of other cultures Bolvi, haven’t you? In your travels you must have known many.” Shaundar didn’t confirm or argue, but the Chieftain continued anyway. “And most of them are savages. They are illiterate barbarians without even the technology to forge their own steel for the most part, and they know nothing but war and bloodshed. Our ancestors,” and here his voice raised, as embers of anger that Shaundar had not known the formidable scro possessed simmered to the surface, “tried to leave the worlds they came from, to find new worlds and establish themselves; to become something more than savages. They co-operated with other goblinoid races for the first time in history, also looking to better themselves. But the elves feared them so much that they hunted them to the ends of the Universe, simply for being orcs! And they tell the other races they are allied with how evil and horrible we are; and they are *elves*, they seem so beautiful and wise . . . who wouldn’t believe it? It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We are a violent race and our circumstances make us more violent still. What other choice do they give us, Bolvi?”

“Look around you, at our great Empire,” he observed, swinging his arm around them as if they could see out across the vastness of the occupied Spheres from their armchairs. “The only reason that any of this exists at all – this library, this nation, and this *tobacco* even – is because our progenitors went far enough away from the *Tel’Quessir* that we could

build ourselves up away from their hostile eye. But we can't stay confined to these small worlds forever. If our people are ever to be something more than barbarians, more than mere animals who know nothing but murder and theft, we must be sure that the elves know to fear our steel and our cannons; especially the ones who fancy themselves as part of their Imperial Navy, since they take it upon themselves to police the stars against the 'Orcish scourge.'

"And gods help me, I wish it weren't so, Bolvi," he lamented. "But we teach our children to hate them before they can walk, and I'm sure they teach their children the same thing. And so we send our sons to kill one another, and we tell them they are righteous. I see no righteousness in war. Duty, necessity, and courage, yes; and if you're lucky, honour and glory also . . . but there are no heroes amongst our leaders, Bolvi. Only villains and pragmatists."

He fell silent, and Shaundar was stunned into speechlessness. This was what the scro believed; that they had no choice but to destroy the Navy to defend their civilization? And gods help him, were they *right*?

But did that excuse the horror of Raven Talon? "I have seen some of the villains," he said in a hollow voice that seemed to come from somewhere outside of himself.

"So have I," Dorin agreed, for the first time looking away; and he rubbed at his mutilated ear.

“Sir,” Shaundar began hesitantly; and stopped. Dorin looked at him with commanding eyes and he burst out before he could lose his nerve, “Sir, what happened there? To your ear?”

Dorin sucked at his tusks uncomfortably, but he didn’t look away again. “There was an elven Captain who did not believe my statements about what I knew or didn’t know,” he said simply. “But I suppose I should be grateful; they did actually ransom me back, after all. Most of the men under my command were less fortunate.”

Shaundar winced. Had Captain Durothil conducted the interrogation himself, he wondered? Or worse yet, was it *Madrimlian* who had caused that horrible scar?

Dorin saw his expression and gave him a brave, *I’m-okay* smile. “Don’t lament for me, Bolvi. I don’t hold it against them. We have also tortured enemy officers for information. Sometimes it’s necessary. But you’ve been trying to tell me something, haven’t you? And I keep sidetracking you. Why don’t you tell me? I’m listening.”

Shaundar was nonplussed. *Was* he trying to tell the elder scro something? “I don’t think so . . .” he ruminated. “But . . . I think I am trying to ask you something.” This question had been burning on his lips for years, now. Suddenly they were dry as sand and he ran his tongue over them uncomfortably. “I . . . once saw an elven child,” he began, and his voice froze in his throat and his heart started pounding and his pores oozed sweat.

“Go on, son,” urged the paternal Bloodfist in a gentle tone. “It’s all right; I won’t judge you.”

It infuriated Shaundar that he could look a cannon or an accelerator in the muzzle without breaking stride, but he was so cowardly when it came to speaking about this! “I once saw an elven child,” he burst out through the cork in his vocal chords, gunning it down with the force of his fury, “separated from her father, shot down like a dog. Like a *dog!*” All the helpless rage of that moment exploded. Though he was unaware of it, he was on his feet, and shouting now, and gnashing his teeth and clenching his fists so that his claws dug bloody gashes into his palms. “And they took her body and they threw it in a great pit that was piled high with more bodies – men, women, children – they threw her on the pile to burn and there were so many bodies, and it took so long, that her eyes were eaten by the fucking *crows* before it was cremated!” He realized that he was shaking and he ran his hands through his hair and took a deep breath to get himself under control.

Dorin was staring at him with wide eyes. Then the door clicked open and Elka stuck her head in. “Is everything all right?” she demanded. “Bolvi, what’s wrong?”

He shut himself down and retreated into the chair, still shaking. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you, *karra*,” he said in a tone that sounded cold.

“We’re all right, Elka,” Dorin assured her softly. “Bolvi is sharing a difficult memory. There may be some more shouting. But don’t worry.”

To his surprise, a smile touched her mouth and sparkled in her eyes. “Thank the Den Mother,” she sighed. “Don’t let me stop you then. Bolvi, you just keep right on talking. You need this so much.” She came in, patted him on the shoulder to offer maternal comfort, and took her leave immediately. He wanted to weep from that simple act of compassion, but he didn’t dare and so he swallowed it along with the rage.

Silence fell. After a moment, Dorin cleared his throat. “Do you want a drink, son? It sure sounds like you could use one.” Without waiting for him to answer, the scro poured him a spiced and potent brandy from a fine decanter.

Shaundar downed it with a shaking hand and once the fire in his throat had faded, he instantly felt better. “My gratitude,” he said with a nod.

Dorin observed him with those sharp blue eyes, so much like his son’s and his niece’s. “Where did you see that, Bolvi?” he asked in a low voice. His basso rumble was barely audible.

“Vorrspace,” Shaundar told him. “A world called Spiral. Have . . . have you heard of it?”

The Clan Leader put a hand to his chin and scratched thoughtfully at the black bristled beard. “I was one of the commanders at the Battle of Minial’s Arch. Yes, I’ve heard of it.”

“Do you . . .” He gulped, and Dorin poured him some more of the brandy, and he took a swallow and cleared his throat and then asked the question he had wanted to ask since he’d escaped Raven Talon: “Sir, what do you know about what happened there?”

Dorin regarded him for a long moment, as though pondering what to say. A wisp of smoke still trailed from his pipe but it was abandoned and forgotten on its stand. “The Tarantula Fleet, under General Vorr, occupied the planet,” he said. “The populace rebelled and established a resistance force. A pogrom ensued. I understand it was extremely bloody,” he said apologetically.

“And that’s all right with you?” Shaundar seethed with barely controlled fury.

“No, it’s not,” Dorin replied without dropping his gaze. He did not elaborate.

Shaundar opened his mouth to unleash a retort or merely vitriol, but he snapped it shut again. His thoughts lingered on the Clan Leader’s mutilated ear. Was he all right with *that*? And yet he had known that something awful would result from the dignified scro falling into Captain Durothil’s “tender” hands when he turned his prisoner over, hadn’t he?

Were they so different, then; both of them soldiers driven by the awful necessities of war? “I’m sorry,” he burst out. Dorin’s expression turned quizzical, and Shaundar temporized, “I’m sorry, for what happened to you.” Was there anything he could have, or should have, done instead?

Dorin waved a hand dismissively. “It’s done. Mostly I don’t even think about it. It’s an honourable scar. I didn’t break.” His smile was grim. “No matter what people say, you never know if you will until you are tested.”

Shaundar nodded his agreement and his understanding. They shared a knowing, if humourless, smile.

Dorin reached over and placed a large, comforting hand on his shoulder. “Bolvi, I am sorry for the horrors you have seen. It’s easy to objectify the enemy, and then you don’t have to be responsible for treating him with dignity. No one should be murdering children. I can’t imagine an excuse for it.”

“It was more than that,” Shaundar tried to explain. But how to describe the complete depersonalization, the utter disregard, the torments that served no purpose other than to inflict suffering because they could? At Dorin’s questioning expression he simply shook his head. “I don’t know how to describe it,” he confessed. “Objectifying the enemy doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

The big scro squeezed Shaundar's shoulder with a gentleness that belied his strength. "I am listening if you wish to tell me."

Shaundar licked his lips. When it came out, it flooded like a torrent. "They reduced the inmates to numbers. They gave them clothes that didn't fit and beat them for not wearing them. They made them stand for the morning for roll call, and gave them random tasks that served no purpose but torture for torture's sake. They worked them literally to death and fed them nothing but acorn coffee and blood gruel. Some even raped them." His voice choked off to nearly a whisper as he confessed the last. How strange it was to be saying all of this as if it had happened to someone else; and yet, it made it easier. Sharing it was such a painful relief, like squeezing pus from a wound.

"They did *what?*" Dorin whispered. His face was pale with rage. He shook his head as if to clear it. "They worked them and they *starved* them?"

"*Gul, karr,*" Shaundar murmured.

For a long moment Dorin just looked at him. "That was under Garik Bloodaxe, wasn't it?" he asked at last. At Shaundar's nod he chewed at his lip. "I have always known the Bloodaxes to be cut of a different sort of cloth than we," he growled. "I have made efforts to put aside petty clan rivalry, but there is much in their ideology that I do not agree with. They have no regard for any race that is not scro, not even our orcish forbearers, and they will not stop until they expunge the elves

from the Universe.” He met Shaundar’s eyes. “I don’t believe that is necessary, or even possible. I just believe that we must deal from a position of strength if we are to have a hope of making them listen. Working them and not feeding them goes against everything the Empire stands for. And I don’t believe that abject humiliation of an enemy is ever a good idea. The survivors become implacable, as the *Tel’Quessir* are learning to their great cost.”

Shaundar chuckled despite himself, remembering the words of his father the day he joined the Imperial Navy. “A wise man I respect very much once said something just like that.” He wondered how his father was faring in the War. As the Vice Admiral of RealmSpace, he would be right in the thick of RealmSpace’s defense. How was his poor mother handling all of this?

Dorin offered him a strained smile. “I have considered, often, challenging Narok for his position. But I haven’t done so because I believe we are too small to hold the Empire, and we lack the necessary political support. And I am also not as capable as I was before my stay with the elves.” Shaundar did not want to know what sort of injuries had sparked that observation. “Do you think I have done the wrong thing? Should I face him down?” He genuinely seemed to wish Shaundar’s opinion on this; and perhaps his judgment also.

“I don’t know enough about the politics to know,” he said carefully. Perhaps the Navy would support the Bloodfist bid for power in return for a ceasefire. But would the Scro Empire agree to such a thing?

He didn't think so. The hatred for elves was far too strong, and morale was high.

Dorin's smile was rueful. "I hope that Corin – or you, Bolvi! – will be in a better position when you assume the clan leadership." He scowled. "But there are those who will want to know what you've told me, Bolvi, and I'll tell them. Maybe it will sway support in our favour."

"That would make me happier than you realize, sir," Shaundar said with a strange smile. If it did . . . perhaps all orcs were not monsters after all. Certainly it was clear now that Dorin, at least, was as decent and honourable as any soldier could be. Shaundar's soul was no less tainted; his hands no less stained.

Dorin opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it with a firm click of his teeth that didn't quite snap because of the tusks. "You have a family here, Bolvi," he said at last. "We will help you bear your burdens, if you allow us to."

Shaundar's throat locked. Suddenly he wanted to weep again but he made his face into a careful mask. Dorin saw his struggle and he patted him on the shoulder with a massive orange hand. "Go on, boy. Go and speak to a priestess. Or be alone with your thoughts, if you must."

Shaundar smiled, nodded gratefully, and escaped. He fled to the outdoors, and gazed for an hour or more into the stars of Dukagshspace,

which were almost as clear at this height as they were out in the Void. Tarrak Gar streaked like a bright comma between the constellation called the Champion, which was shaped loosely like a humanoid figure bearing an axe, and the one called the Feyship, which strongly resembled a lopsided elven Man-o-War. Was that an omen of some kind, he wondered? Many cultures gave such significance to a comet's appearance . . .

He decided then that, whatever his mission parameters, he would no longer share information with Elven Intelligence that would compromise the Bloodfists. Perhaps most orcs were monsters, but these orcs were good people, and he would not directly bring harm to them.

Y'Anid had no idea what it was that had set Targ off, but she knew better than to get in his way. He was stomping around his suites and he was furious. She had come with *graf* for himself and his friend Ronkor, but she lingered in the passageway instead and seriously considered fleeing when she heard his raised voice:

“And now he’s demanding a fucking *inquest!*” the Champion roared. He was pacing; Y'Anid could hear his enormous boots tromping up and down the suite. She shrank even further into the alcove by the doorway, her heart pounding in her chest.

“The *Zabu’Karr* can’t just leave well enough alone, can he?” Ronkor growled. “Who cares what happened to a bunch of *spirra*? I’m sure the Overlord won’t thank him for opening the belly of this corpse.”

“To Arvador with that mercenary anyway,” Targ snarled, “stirring up trouble because his puling childish *sensibilities* traumatized him on Spiral! I’ve had about enough of him I think. I think it’s more than past time he met with an unfortunate accident, don’t you?”

“Terrible luck he’s about to have, my lord,” agreed Ronkor gravely.

There was no mistaking that threat. Y’Anid shrank away from the door and sought out Bolvi to warn him.

Y’Anid found him in the library. Bolvi looked up at her and the way he brightened at her approach lightened her heart, though she did not miss the deep shadows under his eyes. Ynga told her that he had not slept at all last night. Their mother had told her why. And now, with Targ’s commentary, a lot of things which had not made sense before suddenly came together.

As he always did, Bolvi touched his fist to his forehead in salute. Ponderously with her swollen belly before her, Y’Anid sat in the chair next to him, once she’d lain the *graf* service on the table. One of the babies kicked with perfectly awful timing in the process. Bless him, Bolvi got to

his feet and helped her ease herself down. She cast him a grateful smile. “What are you reading?” she asked him.

Bolvi held up the book to display its cover in reply. It was Dukagsh’s *Ethics*. “I’m learning a great deal about philosophy,” he smiled.

“Such as?”

His smile broadened, as though he were chuckling at some secret joke. “Perhaps people aren’t as different from each other as they want to believe,” he answered.

Now that was an insightful thing to say. She wondered what he meant by it. “I’ve come to warn you,” she said quietly.

His sharp eyes, already attentive, blazed even more brightly. “Against what?”

“My husband,” she sighed. “And he may use Ronkor to get to you.”

Bolvi smiled without humour. “I’ve known he hated me since I arrived, *karra*. What makes you think the situation is more dangerous now than it was before?”

She sighed. “Uncle is on a rampage. He’s demanded an inquest into the events on Spiral, based on what you told him. He says that he’s never heard of something so vile.”

Bolvi shook his head, and the strangest smile continued to twist the corners of his mouth into odd angles. “Did he really? That’s pretty great, actually.” He swallowed, and for a moment his eyes were so dark and so sad that she wanted to reach out and hold him. But he recovered his composure so quickly that Y’Anid doubted what she’d seen. “How does this affect Targ at all?”

“He’s furious. Did you meet him on Spiral? I understand he did part of his youth tour there.”

“Can’t say I ever did,” Bolvi grumbled. “Must have just missed each other.” His brow was furrowed now in an expression of exquisite irritation. “I should have guessed he’d flourish in that environment though.” The disgust Bolvi obviously felt for him for this reason radiated from his body like heat.

Y’Anid wondered if perhaps she’d done more harm than good. “I just wanted to caution you to be on your guard, that’s all.” She decided that now would be a good time to leave, before Targ realized what she was doing. She started to get up. Immediately Bolvi rose to his feet and helped her. “I’m in your debt for this warning,” Bolvi said to her. “*Nor lakaar*. I’ll be careful.” Then he smiled. “Oh yes, I almost forgot. I’ve been waiting for an opportunity.” He hunted around himself, and eventually laid his hand on a leather-bound book, which he presented to her. The gold leaf title was in Elvish, but she read it well enough that she was able to puzzle out the title: *Jarsali and the Treant and Other Romantic Poems*.

So much was said in that choice of gift that Y'Anid had to struggle against rising tears. She met his eyes and saw something in there that she thought she would never see from anyone. With it came the same pain that she knew must be radiating from her own. As he placed the book in her hands, he took them in his rough but gentle ones; so small for a warrior and a starfarer but which nevertheless carried the scars and calluses of that calling; hands that made her marvel and seeded her with sadness and longing.

“My . . . appreciation,” she stammered. “I can’t wait to read it.”

The corner of his mouth twitched upward in a half-smile. “I hope you’ll share your opinion when you’ve finished, *karra*,” he invited. Y'Anid noted how careful he was not to phrase that in any way that could possibly be interpreted as a command.

“You’ve read this?” she asked him instead.

“Of course.”

“Of course,” she echoed; and her heart ached bitterly for a man who would read Elvish poetry, and yet fight with ferocity and courage.

It was with great effort that she broke their gaze. “I should go before I’m missed.” She set the *graf* service over the book so that it was less likely to be noticed.

“Gul, you should,” Bolvi agreed with a strange hybrid of a half-smile and hard anger on his face. Y’Anid had no doubt as to whom the fury was directed towards.

She took her leave then, as the former mercenary watched her go with a small smile, and touched his fist to his forehead. Her heart was light and her stomach was filled with small fluttering things. Was this what love felt like? She thought maybe it was. Despite everything, a smile crept around the corners of her mouth.

Targ was waiting for her.

A disadvantage to stone walls, Shaundar pondered later, was how well they absorbed noise. He had time to leave the library, find a snack, and smoke a pipe with the Bloodfist men in the den while they discussed what they knew about the situation in Realspace (and worry about his family there) before Ynga, her face streaked with tears, caught up to them.

“What is it?” demanded Corin as he rose to his feet.

“It’s Y’Anid,” she began. Then she glanced to Dorin and stopped.

“Go on,” Dorin urged. “What’s happened to Y’Anid? Is it the babies?”

“Yes, but . . . no,” she admitted; and Shaundar knew what had happened right away. His heart started trip-hammering in a sinking delirium of terror. He was on his feet and his axe was in his hand before the conscious decision to do this had finished crossing his mind. Corin followed suit.

Dorin narrowed his eyes and rose to his feet. “You all know something that I don’t,” he said. It was not a question.

“I’m sorry, *durkarr*,” Shaundar burst out. “Targ has been hitting Y’Anid off and on for some time. She made me swear not to tell you because she was afraid that the feud would start up again if you knew. When I first arrived, I didn’t know what else to do except protect her as best I could. I shouldn’t have agreed.”

He looked at Shaundar for a long moment, and Shaundar felt his face flush with shame. It was exactly like the expression he had seen many times in his own father’s eyes; the damnation of deep disappointment. Shaundar knew then that he had completely failed this good and kind scro who had taken him into his family as one of his own.

“Captain Gurtok,” Dorin said through a throat so tight he sounded as though he were being choked, “Gather a contingent of the house guard. Ynga, did Targ see you? Does he know that you know?”

“No, my lord,” she whispered. “It was Y’Anid I saw.”

“Then gather them quietly, Captain; we don’t want to alert the bastard that we’re on to him. Until I say otherwise, any Bloodaxe agent is to be detained for questioning. Lock down the estate and don’t allow anyone to enter or leave.”

“*Gul, karr,*” Gurtok nodded, hefting his weapon. He bared his tusks unconsciously.

Tears ran down Ynga’s face but she didn’t make a sound. Dorin turned to her. “Daughter, Targ is anathema to the House Bloodfist. Does he also blaspheme against the Cave Mother?”

“*Gul, karr,*” she responded without hesitation.

“Then take Corin and protect your sister with everything at your disposal.” His eyes were blazing now with fury. “Is your mother with her?”

“Yes, *durkarr,*” Ynga nodded.

“Tell her what I have told you.”

The men of the house all nodded grimly. Shaundar knew something of what a powerful priestess could do and he wondered what divine retribution would be delivered upon Targ’s head.

Corin saluted his father and fell in step with his wife. “Come on, love,” he said. He spared Shaundar a quick glance and a nod. Shaundar

knew that that the next time that Targ saw Corin, one of them was going to die.

“Fight well, warriors,” Ynga blessed them with a ritual gesture; but it was Shaundar’s eyes she met, and they were fierce and glad. They saluted her with fists to forehead and then marched together into the passageway. Ynga took Corin’s hand and led him towards the Salon.

“Bastard,” Olaf swore. His single eye was radiating a father’s rage and the knuckles clutching the haft of his axe were white.

“I’m off to the barracks, my lords,” Gurtok announced. “Good hunting. I’ll catch up with you as soon as I’ve delivered your orders, sir.” He thumped his chest in salute as he split off.

They marched in grim silence. “Is she right, *durkarr*?” Shaundar broke it to ask. “Will this start the feud again?”

“Likely,” Dorin agreed.

“It depends if the Overlord uses Targ’s death as an excuse,” Olaf growled.

“Do you think he will?”

“Does it matter?” snapped Dorin. “You’re not suggesting we let him go unpunished, are you, Bolvi?”

“No,” Shaundar responded instantly. His rage against Targ’s abuse rose in his throat like bile and he tightened his hands around the axe handle. “No, I am with you one hundred percent, sir. I only regret that it will likely be a quicker death than he deserves.”

Dorin cast a glance back in his direction and his snarl softened momentarily into a smile. “Good lad,” he nodded with approval.

They reached Targ’s quarters and Dorin hammered on the door. Shaundar noticed liquid puddling on the floor and he realized that it was spilled *graf*. His eyes followed the pool and saw what was left of the silver *graf* service wedged into an alcove. It resembled a used slug of accelerator shot. *Jarsali and the Treant* was lying on its face on the floor with pages folded the wrong way and the *graf* was wicking up one corner. “Targ, get out here immediately!” Dorin roared; but there was no response.

Olaf tried the door and found it locked; so the two Bloodfist men kicked at the lock with their heavy war boots until the door splintered and burst open. The room looked as though it had been ransacked. “What in the Nine Hells . . . ?” Sarga muttered; but Shaundar knew.

“He knows you’re coming for him,” he told the scro. “He’s probably gone to his ship!”

“Quickly men, to the hanger!” Dorin commanded; and the contingent burst into a run through the corridors, upward to the covered hanger where the fleet was docked.

A great block of stone came through the hanger doors when they arrived, hitting Olaf in the face and knocking him backwards end over end. Shaundar recognized the war maul of an ogre and skittered to his knees to dodge as he brought his axe blade around and into an oversized knee. It shattered with a loud crack like ice breaking, spraying less blood than expected, and the ogre collapsed on top of him with a roar.

Shaundar fought to disentangle himself from the thrashing ogre, who reached over and bit him in the right shoulder with those oversized tusks. There was surprisingly little pain but the whole arm went dead. Shaundar slapped the creature’s face aside with his remaining arm, still somehow clutching the axe. He only managed to connect with the flat of the blade but it was still enough to jar him free. Now the pain came as tusk pulled out of the puncture and air was exposed to the gaping wound. Blood poured freely, as if from a spigot. With no other means to get leverage Shaundar returned the favour by sinking his orcish tusks into the ogre’s exposed jugular. Deliberately he pulled tendon and flesh free. Blood splashed him in the face and mouth and the ogre started convulsing. It could have been seconds or hours later, but eventually he lay still.

Shaundar writhed until he managed to get himself out from under the creature's heavy body, and staggered with difficulty to his feet. Olaf was still nowhere to be seen; Sarga was engaged in a desperate struggle to push past Ronkor, who was grinning as he manhandled the smaller Warpriest. In the meantime, Dorin and Targ were dueling at the gangway of the *Elfrender*, whose crew was casting off. The ship was hovering as whichever spelljammer Targ had managed to subvert prepared to make sail. A crossbow quarrel zipped past his ear as one of Targ's crew shot at him. Out of nowhere leaped Bahgtru, who scrambled up the side of the ship and wrenched the would-be marksman from the rail with his powerful jaws.

Faced with the choice, Shaundar figured that freeing up the spellcaster was probably a more intelligent move, and when his right arm continued to refuse to respond, he dropped the axe, drew his left short sword, and went to Sarga's aid. He charged Ronkor and lowered his numb shoulder and already smaller frame. The overhead doors clattered back and light flooded the hanger as Shaundar hit him at about waist level and the former Second Mate of the *Sword of Courage* hit the dirt hard on his rump. Once again it was the difference in elven and orcish vision, and his opponent's ignorance that gave him the advantage. Ronkor squeezed his eyes shut against the sudden brightness as Shaundar's sword skipped past his feeble parry and right into the scro's exposed jaw. Momentum carried the blade, a spray of blood, and fragments of bone and beard through and away from the shattered jawbone, and Ronkor could only make a gurgling moan as Shaundar's

sword came back around and thrust into his sternum. Not taking any chances, he braced his heavy boot against Ronkor's stomach before attempting to pull his blade free.

A fireball crackled over his head. Sarga's eyes must have adjusted. Shaundar followed its trajectory and it hit the mainsail of the Mantis, setting it alight. Meanwhile, Bahgtru savaged his prey into bloody giblets. Dorin and Targ continued to battle grimly at the gangway, but Dorin was favouring one leg and panting heavily. A crossbow quarrel hit Shaundar in the upper thigh as he made his way towards them. The leg gave out and he managed to save himself from a face-plant by leaning to the left a little and throwing his good arm out to brace himself. Its hilt already slick with blood, the shock jarred the sword from his grip and it clanged along the ground.

The flash of a lightning bolt followed the fireball, leaving traces of black spots and ozone. Three scro on the upper deck danced a vigorous jig as electricity arced through the railing and into their bodies, out through their eyes and along their teeth, tusks and hair. A noxious scent like burnt pork permeated the air.

At that same moment, Dorin grunted and heaved a mighty blow with his axe. It hooked the blade of Targ's weapon and drew it from his grasp to clang off of the Mantis' iron hull. As the Clan Leader pressed in for the killing blow, the Clan Champion scrambled backwards and found one of his electrocuted crew's crossbows falling upon him. Targ seized it and fired at point blank range. The quarrel hit Dorin Bloodfist in the

center of his unarmoured torso and his face contorted into an expression of exquisite agony. He let out a sound that was something between a moan and a cry and collapsed to his knees, then fell flat on his face and the bolt in his chest.

Shaundar heard someone screaming as he yanked his other sword free of its hilt and charged Targ. Only when his leg gave out again and he tripped and fell did he realize that it was him. Targ was being helped up onto the deck by his crew and the *Elfrender* was lifting away from the ground. Another lightning bolt sparkled over Shaundar's head, but it dissipated without apparent harm against the port bow. "Stop them!" Shaundar cried, and there was one last fireball from Sarga, which, he was gratified to note, set the rigging and Targ's boots on fire before the Mantis disappeared into the white sky.

Seeing there was no hope of catching the Mantis, Shaundar instead limped to Dorin's side. It took both Sarga and himself to turn the big scro over on his back. Protruding from the clan chief's chest was one of those black, necromantic orc-slaying crossbow quarrels the Blacktusk Pirates had acquired from Skullport. He was staring blankly at the pitiless sky with empty eyes. Bahgrtru sniffed at him and let out a long, low howl. Dorin Bloodfist, Almighty Leader of Clan Bloodfist, was dead.

Black shrouds draped the *Warrior's Honour* as the greater nobles, except for Y'Anid, of Clan Bloodfist watched the priest of Yurtrus

close Dorin's eyes with his white skin gloves. Shaundar was glad; the flies had already begun to gather. A tiny corpse was folded under each of his powerful arms. Bahgtru whimpered and nosed them both gently. The priest had done his best, but something about the way Dorin's dead grandchildren lay was just wrong somehow. There was some cold comfort in knowing that they would be together.

For the first time in years, Shaundar knelt in prayer. But it was not to elven gods that he prayed. *Den Mother, Orc-Father*, he appealed silently, *if you will hear my prayer; please take care of them. They did not deserve this death. And they will be avenged.* He clutched the haft of his axe until his palm ached.

The priest brought Dorin's axe and laid it in Elka's hands. The few survivors of the family huddled together in their grief. Her tears fell soundlessly to the deck. Olaf, still in a neck brace and now and forever missing a tusk, laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently; but his single eye was just as wet.

Corin, rigidly at parade rest, took the smoking torch handed to him, and for a long moment he just stood with it clutched in his fist, polluting the air envelope. Then, all in one jerky movement he tossed it into the thicket of camphor wood that held the body of his father, and he turned towards the gangway, rubbing at his eyes. "Spelljammer, stand down!" he bellowed; and the thrum of the helm wound down and the ship was set adrift.

In formation, the family and crew departed the *Warrior's Honour*. The Mantis ship drifted past the gathered Bloodfist fleet and the Tomb of Dukagsh. Shaundar watched from the deck of the *Sword of Courage* as the air envelope filled up with billowing white smoke, and the flames devoured one of the greatest men he had ever known and the hope of the Clan Bloodfist with him.

“Yeoman, give the signal!” Corin coughed out. “All hands; salute!”

The weapons crews fired all of their armaments into the Void, as every ship of the Bloodfist fleet present in Dukagshspace did the same. Every scro and goblinoid not assigned to artillery pounded their chests and extended their raised fists.

Shaundar lowered his arm. He was surprised by Elka Bloodfist's hand on his bicep. “He would be honoured by your tears, Bolvi,” she said. It was only then that Shaundar realized that he, like the rest of the Bloodfist family, was weeping.

“It's as we feared, my lord,” Yarkar, the Warpriest who had served on the *Warrior's Honour*, announced to the gathered War Council. “The Bloodaxes are amassing their forces.”

“Where do we stand?” Corin asked, looking around the table. Shaundar thought he looked terrible. He wondered by Corin’s bloodshot eyes how much he had slept since the murder.

“I can’t be entirely sure,” Olaf admitted. “But in general, we outnumber them in infantry. Our worg cavalry is comparable. But they have a larger fleet, and most of our best are out of the sphere.”

“I don’t doubt,” Sarga said, shaking his head, “that this was exactly what the curs had planned all along.” Bahgtru snorted disgustedly, as if he were offended at the insult to curs. He rested his head on Corin’s war boots.

“Some of the clan will likely follow him, too,” Gurtok pointed out. “There are many who fear him.”

“The goblins are with you, my lords,” Graak informed them all. “So are the kobolds.”

“And the orcs,” added Thorgir.

“And the common scro,” piped up Gurtok. “We know we won’t prosper under Bloodaxe rule.”

“Good to know,” nodded Corin. “That means a great deal to me. *Nor lakaar.*” His eyes were genuinely glad and his manner was almost regal. Shaundar saw the glimmers of his father in him at that moment. He turned to Elka, who had been invited to the conference. This was, of

course, completely against tradition. It had been Shaundar's suggestion. He hoped it was a sign of things to come. "Den Mother, where do the priestesses stand?"

Elka laughed. "Never fear my nephew; the Bloodaxe Clan is no friend to the priestesses! And so we are not their friends either." Shaundar smiled smugly, wondering if they had any idea what kind of enemies they had made.

"Targ still has the Clan Axe," Sarga reminded them. "Not to cast a pall on things, but that still makes him the Clan Champion."

The gathering nodded grimly. Shaundar said, "Forgive my ignorance, but how does that effect the politics exactly?"

"It gives him a claim to become Almighty Leader," Corin explained, "and I guess Clan Bloodaxe intends to back his claim."

"So that's why the Bloodaxes are amassing against us? He's not claiming some personal insult then?" An idea exploded in Shaundar's mind like one of his "orcish surprises." Could it really be so simple, or was he misunderstanding the political elements involved?

"What could he claim, my lord?" Thorgir demanded. "He's the kinslayer and the blasphemer!"

Shaundar nodded and chewed at his lip. “Okay, so what if I were to challenge Targ for the Championship? He would have to honour the challenge, wouldn’t he?”

The gathering turned and stared at him for a long moment. Shaundar felt extremely awkward, as though he had been asked to recite a history essay before the classroom. Olaf’s jaw fell open and his single eye gleamed. His single nod told Shaundar all he needed to know.

“*Gul*,” Corin said at last, with the ghost of a smile creeping around his tusks. “Yes he would.”

It took Y’Anid a week to sit up, even with the prayers of the Priestesses and the Warpriests at work. Shaundar was in an agony of fear until he saw her. Hatred rose again in his throat when he saw how careful Targ had been not to damage anything visible. Though on one level he was grateful that her beautiful features remained unmarred, he was in a seething fury over the cold calculated cruelty required to assure that.

She clutched her blankets to her breasts and stared at them all with bleak eyes. Olaf wept. “Oh my girl,” he cried, “I’m so sorry! I didn’t think anyone could commit such a blasphemy. I never . . .” He gulped and took her hands in his. “I never would have asked you to marry him if I’d known.” He buried his face in the blankets next to her.

Y'Anid touched her father's hair, but her voice was toneless as she replied, "I can wed no one now. They tell me I am barren." Elka, who must have known this, wiped at her eyes when it was so baldly stated. Shaundar considered the damage that must have been done to her body to make that happen and his hands curled unconsciously into fists. Corin and Gathka looked shocked and horrified.

Olaf lifted his head from the blankets and assumed the rigid pole-in-spine posture of a man doing a duty abhorrent to him. "The Temple of the Cave Mother will be blessed by your wisdom," he coughed out.

Shaundar spoke, and again he did not know what he would say until it had been said. It was as though some possessing spirit spoke through him. "Why can't she marry again?" he demanded. "Why must she be sent away? I have no wife. Y'Anid, don't leave for the Temple. Marry me instead." He blinked in surprise at his own words and the bottom dropped out of his stomach. Y'Anid stared openly at him. Was this truly how he felt about it? What in the Nine Hells was he *doing*? And yet he took Y'Anid's hands in his and met her eyes.

Life bled back into Y'Anid's eyes. They were filled with wonder and puzzlement, and a deep, abiding grief that hurt Shaundar to see. "Really?" she exclaimed. "You would wed a barren wife, Bolvi?"

"I would," he agreed. His voice sounded far away. His heartbeat rushed through his ears like a river.

The room fell silent as the rest of the family once again stared at him, stunned. “I will not accept your pity!” snapped Y’Anid, snatching her hands away.

“Pity?” exclaimed Shaundar, astounded. “There’s no pity here, Y’Anid!” He seized her hand in both of his, hardly conscious that he had done so, and the words spilled from him in a desperate, whispered flood. “Your sacrifice is as great as that of any soldier who marches to hold the line when he knows the odds are hopeless. Your strength is the same as any sailor who has withstood torture to protect his ship. Dukagsh would want your hand himself I’m sure.” His heart was pounding. This was crazy, and he knew it; but he couldn’t help himself. He couldn’t bear it if Y’Anid were sent away. “How could I pity you? You are strong and courageous and beautiful.” He was trembling now, with rage and hurt and remembered pain about which he could never speak. Yes, Y’Anid and Sylria were cut of the same cloth. He closed his eyes. Gods be damned, how had this happened? How had he fallen in love with a *scro*?

A hand on his hand made him open them again. Y’Anid was its owner and he marvelled at its gentle grace. Jade green fingers tipped with lacquered claws curled over his scarred olivine knuckles. “If Corin and my father will permit it,” she murmured, “then my answer is yes.”

Shaundar’s heart literally skipped a beat. He looked around the room, and all eyes were brimming with approval and pride; though he wondered, was the hint of guilt there as well? Shaundar supposed that his own motivations weren’t entirely pure either. Would Y’Anid’s fate

have been different if he had not failed at his charge? Would it have been different if he had actually given a damn about these scro when he'd come to stay with them? The bitter bile of self-loathing filled his throat. Yes, two innocent and one needless death, and Y'Anid's suffering, lay heavy on his conscience. But his feelings were real nonetheless.

"Permit?" exclaimed Corin in disbelief. "I'm a fool for not having thought of it myself. I approve wholeheartedly." He clapped Shaundar on the shoulder and looked to Olaf.

Olaf was wiping tears from his face with a disgusted expression. "Crying like a small child," he muttered. "Ridiculous. Take care of her, Bolvi. I know that you will."

"Perhaps Y'Anid will also take care of *him*," Elka pointed out dryly.

That's what marriages were supposed to be about, weren't they? Blood pounded thickly in his ears. Was he completely out of his mind? What kind of life could he offer her? What about his duty? Hells, what about *reason*? He wasn't even the age of majority yet . . .

Ynga smiled, though her eyes were sad. "Y'Anid deserves you, Bolvi. May the Cave Mother see and bless you."

"When can this take place?" Shaundar demanded.

Y'Anid's eyes blazed. "As soon as Targ is dead."

“Then let’s get on with it,” Shaundar growled. “Y’Anid, I will bring you the traitor’s tusks as a wedding present.”

“And his balls,” Y’Anid snarled. Her eyes were crystals of ice, as opposed to her sister’s blue suns.

Shaundar smiled and touched fist to forehead. “*Gul, karra*. As you wish.”

Narok Bloodaxe grinned as the yeoman left his office, after having announced that the Tomb of Dukagsh was aglow. That was the first good news he’d received in some time. The radiant sigil was that of the Clan Bloodfist. He imagined that they were about to beg for their lives. Which showed that Dorin’s boy was no fool. Perhaps something good was going to come from Targ’s colossal screw-up after all. “See that my ship is prepared,” he commanded the Bloodfist Champion, who saluted him and went to carry out his orders.

It was inconvenient that the Bloodfists would seek a Parliament before they had a chance to see Corin Bloodfist eliminated in battle, but no matter. He expected that a vote as to whether or not Targ had acted wrongfully would be expediently deadlocked; and his Council supporters had assured him that this was the case. Once Dorin’s son was out of the way and Targ was their Almighty Leader, he would swear his allegiance to the Bloodaxes and that hated liberal clan would be neutralized at last.

With the Baneblood girl poisoning the water in the Women's Quarters, there would be no more inconvenient Bloodfist heirs, until Targ had sired his offspring upon the surviving noblewomen, with or without their cooperation. There would be no more Bloodfists who were not also Bloodaxes; at least, not of the noble line.

The Overlord of the Scro went to his ship with a smirk on his face, eager to witness the triumphant destruction of his lifelong rivals.

The long-awaited knock on the antechamber door finally came. Gurtok poked his head in. "They're here, my lords," he announced.

"Right," grumbled Corin, instantly awake. They set about cleaning up and shaving. Shaundar stretched and limbered up after he had scraped the stubble from his face. Strangely, he was calm. No butterflies danced in his belly and his heartbeat sailed along at a steady and regular pace, rather than racing like a ship full-rigged. Perhaps, he thought, it was merely that at long last, his mind had made decisions that were in accord with what his heart wanted to do. He flexed his fingers, eager for his body to join them.

"I'll be in the head," he announced.

"Gurtok, go with him," Corin commanded.

“*Gul, karr,*” the Captain of the House Guard replied, snapping a salute, and he fell in step.

“Are you sure about this, my lord?” Gurtok murmured to him as they made their way to the head, nodding occasionally at the other nobles they passed with the recognition of one warrior to another. Some nods were friendlier than others. Shaundar was pleased to see the young One-Eye from the Equinox Games and a genuine smile touched his mouth; which the One-Eye returned.

“Do we have a choice?” Shaundar answered with a shrug. “Besides, I want his head on a pike; don’t you?”

“Targ is dangerous,” Gurtok reminded him. “Just don’t forget that, all right?”

“I appreciate your concern, my friend,” Shaundar smiled; and he genuinely did. He stepped inside the head and bolted the door.

Too much of my life is spent in toilets, ruminated Shaundar as he dug through his pouches for his collapsing spellbook and spell components. The oak leaf he’d carefully wrapped was still present. He evoked the arcane formula and it vanished, flooding his body with strength. Then he pulled an eagle’s feather, a tuft of cat fur and a bear claw from his secret spell component pouch and recited the appropriate incantations. They too vanished, bestowing the qualities of those animals

upon the mage who had invoked them. He was careful not to do anything else for fear that it would be noticed.

With that, he used the head for its intended purpose and marched back to the Bloodfist antechamber with a nod to Gurtok.

They met the court yeoman at their door. “The Grand Council is ready to see you now,” he announced.

“Corin!” Shaundar called through the door. “Time to go!”

Corin, just as angry and tense as his *na’kor*, led a processional of the Clan Bloodfist into the amphitheatre with ponderous solemnity as the drums sounded their approach. The Council stood at their arrival, and dead silence fell as the Bloodfists made their way to the podium.

“Sacrilege!” cried Lord Hellguard, and he spat.

Shaundar smiled. Y’Anid was with them in the processional, making her stately way with the aid of a cane. The lads had volunteered to carry her on a litter, which she had refused.

“Who *dares* to accuse us of sacrilege?” roared Corin, meeting the Hellguard’s glare with one of his own. Y’Anid turned her own blue eyes upon him as well. Under the force of their withering stares, he slumped.

“There are no rules forbidding a lady’s presence here, Lord Hellguard,” Lord One-Eye pointed out. Shaundar’s smile widened a little. He had hardly dared to hope for any signs of support, things being what they were.

“We are in the presence of a Lady and a Priestess,” Lord Rageclaw pointed out, and he touched fist to forehead. Awkwardly, every other male in the place followed suit. As the blood brothers scanned the room, they saw, as anticipated, that Targ was at the Overlord’s side, and they grinned. Targ’s face was marred with an enormous, festering burn that was sure to scar, along with several slashing rake marks that had missed his eyes by the narrowest of margins. Y’Anid had made him pay in pain for her blood, it seemed. A bitter, metallic joy filled their mouths with saliva.

Y’Anid drew herself to her full height, despite the pain they knew this must cause her injured back. Icy eyes found Targ’s. She looked her tormenter right in the face. His eyes widened as he took note of her now-flattened belly, and he looked away.

Shaundar extended a courteous hand to aid her in seating herself. Only the vibration, like a plucked lute string, gave any indication of her fear and her rage. Discretely he squeezed it and they exchanged a glance. The fury in Y’Anid’s eyes won Shaundar’s heart completely. Just a little, they both smiled.

The Overlord was flustered. He cast Targ a poisonous glare out of the corner of his yellow eyes and cleared his throat. “Why has the Clan Bloodfist called us here again, Corin Bloodfist?”

Corin’s eyes narrowed at the calculated, and insulting, refusal to address him as “Lord.” But he saluted with respect and his carefully-controlled voice was deadpan. “Hail Overlord! As I’m sure you’ve heard my father is dead. I am now Lord Bloodfist.”

“I challenge that,” piped up Targ with a seeping grin that was reflected by the Overlord. “I am the Clan Champion of the House and such is my right.”

Shaundar’s eyes gleamed as he stood up. He had taken the bait. “I have a personal matter to resolve with the Clan Champion first,” the disguised elf growled.

They were gratified by the synchronized turning of heads and eyes in his direction. Targ and the Overlord were both completely nonplussed. “What are you talking about?” demanded the Clan Champion.

A slow smile spread across Shaundar’s face. “You have something that belongs to your wife, Lady Y’Anid. I am here to collect.”

Targ gaped at him in bewilderment. “And what would that be?”

Shaundar grinned. “Your *balls*, you baby-killing, cowardly son of a kobold. She has demanded them in payment for the death of her children, whom you killed in her womb.”

The Council rose to their feet and a cacophony of raised voices ensued. Cries of outrage and condemnation both roared through the amphitheatre. “Are you just going to *take* that?” demanded the Wrackblood chieftain incredulously, and Narok Bloodaxe cast him a daggered gaze. The blood brothers knew that Targ had no choice; there was only one possible answer.

Targ’s face turned violet in his rage. “I’ll rip your head off and use it for *cannon* shot, mercenary!” roared the Champion. He was so angry that he was gnashing his teeth. “I’ll eat your liver in my *ryll*!” He stalked toward Shaundar with murderous intent.

“If this is to be a fight to the death, then I challenge for the Clan Championship,” Shaundar announced serenely.

Targ blinked, and Corin figured that he must have realized at that point how he had been set up. But the insult and the declaration still stood. “So be it!” he snapped. “Make yourself ready; I’ll see you on my ship in ten minutes.”

“You’ll see him on *my* ship in ten minutes,” Corin barked, “when you choose your weapons.”

Targ sneered; but with the gathered audience, he offered a cursory salute and headed towards the Bloodfist stardock.

Within a few minutes, the deck of the *Sword of Courage* was cleared and the warships of the other clan leaders were in orbit around it so that their leaders could watch the combat. The *Sword's* crew were invited aboard the *Darkstar*, the warship of the One-Eyes, until the contest was resolved. As per tradition, a Warpriest from another clan was requested to adjudicate. They agreed upon a Rageclaw Warpriest known to neither one of them.

A drum sounded to call the two of them to the mainmast. As the rules dictated, they were naked to the waist, with no jewelry and no armour; not even a *toregkh*.

There was a limited selection of traditional weapons, which Corin revealed by opening a ceremonial star-chest with a brass key taken from Olaf's neck. Orcish clans, he had explained to his *na'kor*, resolved their traditional challenges with the traditional weapons associated with their clans. Among the Bloodfists, naturally all weapons had to be variants on the use of the fists; brass knuckles, tiger claws, cesti, and the like. No protrusion could extend from the knuckles at any length greater than the fingers.

Shaundar examined the available weapons. Targ selected heavy brass knuckles. He nodded; Targ knew his own strength and intended to make the best use of it. Every hit from those fists that connected with

Shaundar's comparatively slight frame would be like being hit with a mace. Dodging, and hoping that his opponent tired first, was his best strategy.

Shaundar already knew the weapons he would select. From the chest he removed the most time-honoured of the available options, aside from bare fists; a jar of tar and a bag of obsidian fragments.

Targ laughed aloud. The Rageclaw Warpriest set about wrapping Shaundar's hands in ship rope and heating the tar. He wrapped only to the knuckles, leaving the tips of his fingers free, and he dipped the rope into the heated tar, then the obsidian. Little shards formed spikes as they protruded from the solidifying mass. Shaundar flexed his hands and found that they were a little stiff, but still capable of forming both fists and claws. All to the good.

"As is ancient tradition," intoned the Warpriest, "I shall explain the rules. This is a duel to the death. Neither of you may leave until one of you no longer breathes. Any visible point on this warship is within bounds, but any place below is not. Leaving the ship forfeits the match and will result in your execution. Do you understand?"

Curtly, both of the duelists nodded. "*Gul, karr,*" Shaundar said.

"Are there any rules specific to the Bloodfists that I should be aware of?"

Olaf responded. “You may only strike each other with your hands. Kicking and biting are prohibited except that one may bite the other’s throat in the tradition of the *toregkh* as the death blow. You may gouge one eye but not both. Strikes to the groin are also prohibited.” Olaf grinned. “If you want his balls, son, you’ll have to tear them off after you’ve killed him.”

“Eat dung, old man,” Targ growled.

Olaf’s baleful eye glittered with hate and Corin reached out to put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re lucky that politics forbid me from doing what I’d like to do to you, boy. The Cave Mother Herself will have no mercy for you.”

“Come on, uncle,” Corin urged. “Let Bolvi handle him.”

“Do you understand the rules of the Bloodfist?” the Rageclaw interrupted.

“*Gul, karr,*” they chorused.

“Very well. We’ll leave the ship now. When the war drums sound, you may begin.” The Warpriest scaled the mast to the crow’s nest, while the Bloodfists leaped over to the *Darkstar*, moored to the starboard of the *Sword of Courage*, and Targ’s crew headed for the *Elfrender*, which was moored to the port. Olaf’s one-eyed gaze was homicidal and his hands were clenched tightly enough to whiten his knuckles. Shaundar allowed himself a quick glance at Y’Anid, seated in a

chair on the deck of the *Darkstar* like a visiting queen. She nodded to him and his veins were injected with purpose and determination. He saluted her.

Corin gripped the rail of the *Darkstar*. He would no more have denied Bolvi this chance to avenge Y'Anid than he would have allowed anyone to deny him a chance to avenge Ynga; there was no mistaking the smouldering righteous anger in his *na'kor's* eyes. And they all knew that should Targ face Corin on the battlefield with Bloodaxe troops behind him, he would likely meet with a dagger in the kidneys from one of his own suborned men. At the very least, Bolvi's gamble had granted them each a fair shot against the traitor, before witnesses where betrayal simply was not an available option, and if they had to die to defend the clan, they would both die fighting. But he knew just how dangerous this was and he prayed that Bolvi's mercenary training would defeat Targ's raw power.

Targ towered over Shaundar, blocking out his view of Gruumsh's Eye. "You're a dead man," he muttered under his breath.

Shaundar blinked away a clear vision of ripping Targ's throat out with his tusks. "It will be my distinct pleasure," he spat, "to expunge you from the Universe. I will piss on your corpse and bury you in an unmarked grave."

The war drums thundered out their ceremonial tattoo.

Targ lunged for him. Shaundar, anticipating this, stepped to the side, slapping his hand into Targ's extended elbow, and then he knife-handed the huge orc under his jawline, where his head disappeared into his shoulder. Obsidian fragments sliced into capillaries and blood started flowing. Shaundar was disappointed to note that the thick muscle of the Champion's neck had guarded against a good blow to the jugular.

Targ's arm came around in a massive haymaker. Shaundar jerked his head out of the way and had to resist his training, which urged him to stomp on the back of Targ's knee. The Champion's brass-knuckled fist connected instead with one of the belaying pins surrounding the mainmast, which splintered. Shaundar realized then that he was not the only one who had used magic to improve his odds. His heart sank. The advantage he thought he had, due to strengths Targ didn't know about, was voided.

Shaundar rabbit-punched Targ in the ribs twice and accepted a grazing shot in the shoulder in exchange. Targ's grunt told him that he might have cracked a rib, but the jarring blow made Shaundar's still-healing arm go numb for a few seconds, and then pins and needles set in. He was lucky the cartilage in the joint hadn't been crushed. Blood now ran freely from Targ's side and Shaundar was happy to see that a few of the smaller obsidian fragments were lodged in the wound. Targ lowered himself into a broad stance and started raining blows at Shaundar's midsection. Shaundar covered up and jerked back, narrowly averting disaster by fingernails with every move. With the magical odds evened out, everything depended on allowing the massive scro to wear himself

down, and causing as much blood loss as possible in the meantime. If he was hit once with those massive fists and their brass armour, he was indeed a dead man, as Targ had promised.

Y'Anid watched with bated breath. Lightning-quick the combatants ducked and weaved. Bolvi kept moving around the deck with Targ furiously chasing him, but it seemed to her that more wounds opened up on her husband's body with every passing second. In the meanwhile, Bolvi remained untouched. A smile spread across her face as she admired Bolvi's grace and skill and raw courage. *Den Mother protect him*, she silently prayed, and wondered whether or not her goddess would approve of her praying for the victory of her would-be husband over her present one.

Targ built up momentum and Shaundar took advantage of any offered opening to land quick jabs, intended more to open wounds than to do any genuine damage. It seemed to last forever. He managed a few good blows in the belly and the inside of Targ's thigh, and a raking blow to the brow line that opened up enough capillaries to run a steady trickle of blood into Targ's eyes. But he couldn't keep this up forever he knew it; black spots began to appear at the edge of his vision in his struggle to draw breath.

He clambered up the stays in a desperate attempt to get enough breathing room to rest just a moment; Targ didn't waste any time chasing him as a less experienced opponent might have done, but instead started swinging those huge fists at Shaundar's knees. Shaundar had to scabble

up the ropes, fighting the urge to stomp down at the Clan Champion. Noticing the mainsheet at the edge of his peripheral vision, the trained starhand yanked on it with the tips of his fingers as hard as he could. The mainsail swung around and tossed him over the side and into the gravity plane.

Narok stood to the rail of his warship and swore. *He's just playing with the boy, he realized. Dancing around, won't even treat him like a warrior!*

Shaundar's momentum carried him around the aft of the ship in a wide orbit and he used the opportunity to gasp in three or four deep breaths so that the black spots in his vision would go away. Targ whirled on his heels, trying to follow him, but the blood dripping from his inner thigh was pooling in the arch of his foot, and he slipped on the deck. Shaundar felt the stay go taut as the mainsail reached the limit of its turning circle, and he let it go. He made sure to form his arms up in front of him so that the sides of his fists would connect first, and he crashed into Targ like a living cannonball. Targ's feet came right out from under him, slick on the bloody deck, but he slapped his massive arms hard on the wood to break his fall. Shaundar hit the deck and somersaulted, narrowly avoiding the hatchway and one of the cannons.

He fumbled up to his feet with the aid of the side rail, and already Targ was coming at him, a fearsome sight with his massive bulk and eyes brimming with such fury that the whites were rouged. In a blind panic Shaundar ducked the enormous fist driving for him and the cannon

served as a rampart. Sparks flew as the brass knuckles skidded along the top of the barrel. Knowing that would slow momentum for just a split second, Shaundar drove a knife-hand into the bottom of Targ's suddenly exposed chin. Blood ran freely as claws pierced the flesh beneath the maxillary bone and the obsidian fragments dragged along the underside of his jaw as Shaundar brought his hand back. Targ gulped. Had he actually hit something vital? Shaundar drove the other hand into Targ's suddenly exposed flank with all the force he could muster.

Targ's left came around the other way. Too late, Shaundar flinched to the side, and the blow grazed his ribs. Something crunched and an excruciating pain stabbed him in the side. A female voice cried out. *Broken*, he realized with a sick, sinking feeling. He skittered back around the cannon, trying to blink the pain-stars out of his eyes, and Targ came around behind him, now in a full-out berserk rage.

Fleeing for his life, Shaundar scrambled up the brass monkey while Targ pursued him. When the knives of agony stabbing him in the sides with each breath began to blind him Shaundar knew in that moment that he would not survive this fight. With bravery born of desperation he summoned all of his mental fortitude and silently called upon the arcane forces to grant him momentary insight. He would only get one shot; he needed to make it count.

Shaundar's vision narrowed and it was as though time had slowed down. Arcane forces and Shaundar's training drew his gaze to Targ's throbbing temple vein, exposed on his right side as he reached

forward with the full force of a right cross. Shaundar shifted his face to the side and the wind from Targ's blow tickled his nose. He perched perilously on the edge of the brass monkey like a bird posed for flight, while at the same time, instead of putting the Champion in a forbidden arm bar, he slammed the heels of his hands into Targ's wrist and elbow. Something cracked. As the monkey slid out from under him and cannonballs began spilling over the deck, Shaundar slammed the back of his fist into that throbbing vein on his way down. A cannonball rolled over his foot and snapped the same toe he'd broken in the Equinox Games. He didn't have the breath to swear.

Targ made a slurring, inarticulate gurgle. Shaundar looked up and saw that he was staggering; punch-drunk and wheezing. He was slick with blood, but beneath it his face was purple, his eyes were bugging out, and blood was trickling from the corner of his mouth. Somehow the rolling cannon-shot knocked him down again, and he reached for the cannon – perhaps to right himself – with one hand while the other clawed at his throat.

I must have crushed his windpipe, Shaundar realized. Hope crept back into his heart.

He didn't waste another second. Shaundar bashed Targ in the face, fracturing a tusk, and blood flew in spatters as he hammered with unrelenting viciousness at the suffocating orc's head, torso and belly over and over, though every blow brought a gasp of pain from Shaundar's side that spiked directly into his brain and eyes. Eventually Targ's fingers

stopped grasping at the stars, but still Shaundar kept pounding. Later he would rationalize that he was aware that it takes a long time to kill someone with only your fists, but in his nightmares, he would again and again relive his terror and his purely savage and visceral rage.

He stopped only when he found himself on his knees; and not remembering the fall, he dimly comprehended that he must have swooned. His training took over. *Stay conscious, stay conscious*, an internal mantra chanted, and he braced against the cannon and panted and wheezed for several minutes while Targ bled out on the ironclad deck. The former Clan Champion's face was soaked with blood. The flesh was the black and purple of exposed viscera, and grotesquely swollen, and his eyes were glassy bulbs bugging out of his head. But when Shaundar dragged himself over to the body and put his trembling fingers to the scro's neck, there was still a weak pulse. So for the third time in his life, Shaundar tore open a living creature's throat with orcish tusks.

It was the last act within his physical powers. Shaundar fell over top of Targ's body and lay there gasping, without the breath even to moan. Sweat and blood, his or Targ's, poured into his eyes. He retched with exhaustion and it was a good thing that his torso was raised off of the deck by Targ's corpse, because he lacked the strength to turn his head.

Then Corin and Gurtok were lifting him from the deck and up to his knees. He yelped as they pulled on his injured arm and his vision swam through red and black for a moment. But then Y'Anid's gentle

hands found his face and her gentle lips murmured an entreaty to her goddess, and the pain in his ribs, guts, shoulder and lungs began to ease, though the exhaustion did not. Gurtok drew his knife from his boot and cut the ropes on Shaundar's hands free. They were completely soaked in gore.

"Gods damn, you did it, Bolvi," Corin said in the wonder of disbelief. "Praise Dukagsh, Targ is dead!" And as soon as the words had escaped his mouth, Y'Anid burst into tears and her shoulders shuddered in relief.

"Gurtok," Shaundar whispered, "may I have your knife . . . for a moment?" He flexed his fists to be sure he could still move them.

The Guard Captain gave it over. "Sure! What do you need it for, my lord?"

"I made Y'Anid a promise," he said, and he crawled back to Targ's body.

From far and wide the Clan Bloodfist gathered on the day after the Spring Equinox on Dukagsh, which fell on the first day of Fifth-Month, 5048 O.C. They cheered when Bolvi, formerly of the Blacktusk Pirates, made the traditional challenge; and they cheered again when he and his *na'kor* fell laughing to the ground in the ring of spears with the Lord of the Clan's arm folded up in a chicken wing. Shaundar was grinning as he

clasped Y'Anid in his arms and carried her up to her own bedchamber rather than his. He, of course, had been given the quarters of the Clan Champion, and he wanted no spectres to mar their happiness.

Once they were inside and the door bolted behind him, he shifted her in his arms and laid her gingerly on the bed, where he looked at her for a long moment. "I love you, Y'Anid," he confessed aloud for the first time.

"I love you too, Bolvi," she murmured, and all the stars of Wildspace were in her eyes. "But . . . I'm afraid." Her posture was uncertain and she was slightly curled up, with her arms folded before her.

"So am I," he admitted, sitting on the edge of her bed and running his fingers through her hair. He remembered touching Narissa's hair like that, but it seemed so very long ago. That was another person. Another life.

"Targ hurt me," she began, and stopped as the words stuck in her mouth and she struggled with how to say them.

But Bolvi understood. "We don't have to do this now," he murmured. "If you lie with me, do it because you want to, and only for your pleasure. Never feel that you have to. I'll lie and say you did if society demands it."

Y'Anid studied his face for a long time. "It's not about you," she explained.

Bolvi smiled a little. “I know that.” His eyes were sad and brimming with understanding and acceptance.

“Don’t you want me?” Y’Anid asked, uncertain. Her voice was uncharacteristically small and quiet.

“More than anything,” the Clan Champion breathed. To Y’Anid, his eyes were oceans of desire – and compassion, also. “I want you like I want . . . air,” he said at last; then he laughed at himself. How wonderful that he could do that! “But . . .” he took her hand in his and ran his lithe and callused fingers over her knuckles with a feather’s touch, “only if you want me, Y’Anid. Otherwise . . . otherwise . . . I have no words for how much that would sicken me. There is nothing as vile in this Universe, and I won’t be a party to it. By your will, because you want to . . . or not at all.” He continued to hold her hand with a tender grasp she could break at any time, and he didn’t stop stroking her hair, but he touched nothing else. Targ had never touched her hair except to pull on it. Ynga had convinced her to wear it down for the wedding and obviously it fascinated Bolvi. Perhaps it was the sunlight that touched a match to the auburn to release its inner fire, like the rekindling of her ashen heart.

She seized her new husband’s hands. “I love you,” she said. “I want to. But be gentle.”

He ran his hand down the side of her face and kissed her, and it was as though he were tasting air after asphyxiation, or water after drought. “*Gul, karra,*” he whispered.

Part Four: Casualties of War

Chapter Sixteen

It was certainly unusual for any clan to beg for the intervention of any other. And for such a request to come when politics were so tense, and the clan scion so vulnerable, was downright unheard-of. But when Captain Gunnald One-Eye, who had just recovered enough to walk around thanks to his subordinate Warpriest that very day, heard who it was that was asking and why, he snarled at his underlings to help him with his armour *immediately* so that he could go to his friend's aid.

Lord Corin received him with a hearty clap on the shoulder and a grateful, if tense, smile. "Captain," he beamed. "I'm honoured you would come."

"Didn't realize how ill he was or I'd have come earlier," he grunted, stumping along the deck on his splinted leg. The swelling was manageable now; the healers no longer thought he would lose it. "Where is he?"

"In our cabin," Lord Bloodfist said.

"You'll have to help me through the passage," the One-Eye Captain explained, unconsciously raising his foot.

With Thorgir's assistance they guided the Captain through the hatchway and across the gravity plane without injury. He studied the

waxen face of Bolvi Bloodfist with a grave slate eye. “Two weeks in a *lifejammer*?” he demanded incredulously. He’d known the Bloodfist was honourable when he’d only taken one of Gunnald’s medallions years ago in the Equinox Games; he’d known the Bloodfist was tough when he watched him slaughter that Bloodaxe interloper for their Clan Championship before the Grand Council. But, the One-Eye mused as he rubbed at his burnt face, which had now healed enough that he was certain the itch would drive him mad, he hadn’t realized just how brave, or how crazy, the Bloodfist was.

“Can you help him?” the Lord of Clan Bloodfist queried in a low voice.

Captain Gunnald shrugged. “The Death-Bringer seems to have a good clutch on him. Seems to me Lord Bolvi chose to make the trade and it was accepted. I’m afraid to ask. But wait!” he reassured Corin’s stricken face, “I have potions!” He fished around in a belt pouch until he found a small ceramic vial with the symbol of Luthic painted on it in green. “There, feed him that,” he suggested.

Corin did not hesitate. He uncapped the vial and poured it into Bolvi’s slack, wheezing jaw, then clamped it shut and tilted his head back to force him to swallow. Bolvi gulped and coughed with such a thunderous resonance that they heard it on the deck of the docked One-Eye ship. The Goddess was merciful. Colour was restored to the Clan Champion’s olivine cheekbones and even the flush of fever vanished. With one great and final heave, he hacked forth a glob of phlegm the size

of an orcish hand, coating the wool blanket drawn over him in waxy greenish slime. And his bright blue eyes flew open.

Corin and Thorgir laughed aloud. Bahgtru barked joyfully and slobbered all over the Clan Champion's face. He seemed bewildered at first, but then he started scrubbing at the worg's head with genuine enthusiasm, even though his hand still trembled. The great canine whined and practically knocked the Clan Champion off of the bunk with his antics.

"Welcome back, Bloodfist," Gunnald grinned. "You had everyone pretty worried. Better make some offerings to the White-Handed One in gratitude for passing you by. And make 'em good ones too!"

The day of the wedding was here at last! Narissa Alastrarra sat before her vanity glass while Selena and Tyelatae combed out and braided her flaxen hair, contemplating her reflection. Try as she might, she could not get the tinge of sadness to leave her sea-green eyes, though the golden sparkles shone merrily. And yet, she was happier than she had been in a long time. Still, she could not help but think of Shaundar as she ran her fingers over the filigreed goldheart charm he had given her . . . how long ago, now? Seven years ago? Was that right? She thought maybe it was.

“He would want you to be happy,” Selena Sunfall, home for the first time in years, reassured her. Her friend had grown into a fine elven maiden, Narissa thought; though she was certain the girl would be the death her father. Vice Admiral Lord Sunfall was pleased that his daughter had chosen not to join the Imperial Elven Navy, after it had devoured his son, but he had not been able to keep Wildspace out of her blood, and she was working for various “merchant traders” with morals as questionable as their cargo. Still, Narissa sighed, it kept her out of the War.

Laeroth was not a spacefarer, thank Sehanine. Even though the Oakheart family had a long tradition of Navy service, he had chosen to turn his bladesinger’s craft to home defense. She imagined that his view of the Navy had, like hers, been soured by the deaths of so many people he loved. Like his older brother Garan, and his father. And like Shaundar and Yathar, who had been childhood rivals but who had become his friends.

“You look great,” Tyelatae Dahast reassured her. She was the picture of a prim gold elven officer, with her fiery hair pulled back into a neat braid and her red-and-silver dress uniform spotless. Her rapier was polished and it swayed from her slim hip at a jaunty angle. You would never know by the way she walked that one leg was a mithril prosthetic, except that she had forgone the enchantment that prevented it from clumping on a deck when she took a step. She liked the sound, she said. It made people nervous. And certainly when Tyelatae trod into a room with her ever-present cob pipe champed between her teeth and a scowl

on her brow, she commanded authority. Her youthful face seemed to give the lie to the row of medals at her breast, but Narissa knew how real they were. She was already the Second Mate aboard the Swanship *Asterinian*, and the word was that she was on the fast track to advancement and the Mithril of the Navy were considering her for a Captaincy.

“Thanks,” Narissa smiled at her friend. The traditional golden dress, intended to honour Hanali Celanil, goddess of love, probably did flatter her golden complexion and the specks in her eyes, she secretly concurred. But that wasn’t what concerned her. “Has anyone heard from Sylria yet?”

Tyelatae harrumphed. “She wasn’t able to get leave. Things have been heating up in Greyspace, I hear. Lots of orcish activity and those Mantis ships have been sighted in numbers in the sphere.”

“Who told you that?” Selena demanded.

“Your father,” she grinned. “But I’ll confess, it was in an officer’s briefing.”

Narissa was disappointed, but she understood. The War was everywhere these days. Nedethil was on rations and had been for a couple of years now. Most families were starting little hobby farms or exercising the hunting rights their titles gave them, even if they never had before. She and Laeroth had organized a community garden and a

commons for livestock, and even she had been practicing her long-neglected archery skills to take down the occasional coney for the stew-pot.

“I’ll get the flowers,” Selena volunteered. Not being a Navy officer, she was wearing a silver dress to match Narissa’s gold one, which flattered the silver glitter in her moon-elven blue eyes, and her fair, not-quite moon elven complexion. She was starting to look a lot like her mother, Lady Selene Sunfall; who was still like a mother to Narissa, and who kept her sane in those horrible days following Shaundar’s capture. Narissa pursed her lips in a grimace. It was too bad that Narissa had not been able to be as firm a rock to the Lady Sunfall as the Lady had been to her.

There was a tap at the door. Before the serving girl had a chance to get there, it creaked open and a head of tousled black hair poked into the crack. “Is this little party for girls only?” he asked. “If so, I’ll go harass Laeroth instead but I’m not really here for him . . .”

Narissa grinned. “Come on in, Blackjack!” he called, and Fislyn Durothil, known to everyone except his snobbish elder brother by his call-sign “Blackjack,” strode into the room in a slightly dishevelled pilot’s uniform. Selena leaped up and hugged him. He laughed aloud and embraced her in return, and his green-furred hamster familiar Sidewheeler, perched on the elven pilot’s shoulder in his customary spot, chattered and nibbled at her hair. “Careful, I’m dirty, I’ll mess that pretty

dress up!" he chuckled. Then he caught sight of Tyelatae, grinned wider and saluted. "*Ary'Ruan*," he said with grave formality.

Perhaps it was an indicator of how things had changed that rather than snapping some blue epithet at him for being so proper, Tyelatae acknowledged his salute before cracking a wide smile. "Good to see you Blackjack," she greeted him, and her lack of formality was a signal for him to relax. "How's tricks?"

"Hmm, orcs are keeping me busy," he admitted, slouching into a chair and putting his boots up on Narissa's father's antique coffee table. She tried not to wince. "You?"

She laughed. "Working like a horse! Glad I'm stationed in Realmospace or I wouldn't have been able to get leave."

"Av, I was afraid I was going to be stuck near H'Catha for the wedding," Blackjack agreed, "but I managed to squeak out of there in the lull. Sorry I'm a little worse for wear, though. Do I have time for a shower?"

"I'm glad you made it, however you came," Narissa said happily. "But I think you could squeeze one in."

"That bad, eh? Good then, I will." He stood up. "By the way, I was given these to give to you." He handed two letters to Narissa. She cracked the seal to find Sylria's regretful decline of the invitation, as

expected. There was more but Narissa stuffed it in her bodice for later. “Sorry it took so long to get here. I was held up a little.”

“I understand,” she smiled, “but thanks for bringing it.”

He grinned. “I brought Admiral Sunfall though! He’ll be along as soon as he’s dealt with the bureaucrats.” His dismissive and slightly smug tone communicated his view of bureaucracy quite clearly.

Narissa had hardly been expecting that! She clasped her hands before her excitedly. “That’s great! I’m so pleased!”

Selena smiled nervously. “Do you think he’ll want to see me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous; of course your dad wants to see you,” Tyelatae reassured her.

“Oh!” Blackjack exclaimed on the way out, slapping his forehead. “Sylria sent a package too! I assume it’s a wedding gift. I left it on the *Starsinger*; I’ll get it once I’ve cleaned up.”

Selena shook her head. “Same old Blackjack,” she chuckled.

“Sit your butt down here and I’ll braid your hair now,” Tyelatae offered.

“Oh! The flowers!” Selena exclaimed. “I’ll get them first!” She hopped up to fetch them. Tyelatae braided her long blue-black hair and then wove starflowers in. The wonderful thing about starflowers, Narissa

observed, was that they went well with both sun and moon elven complexions. The elven officer finished off the decoration by weaving white roses into the thickest parts of their braids at the nape of the neck. "There!" she murmured, satisfied at last.

"It looks great!" Selena smiled, admiring her work by twisting in the mirror. "Now sit down and I'll do yours."

Tyelatae laughed aloud. "Do I look like the kind of person who wears *flowers*?"

"How else are you going to match the bridal party?" Narissa countered. "At least I didn't make you wear a dress."

"A good point, *etriel*," Tyelatae acquiesced. She sat.

Lady Sunfall glided into the room. She was the plate from which her daughter was stamped, but she was as ethereal as Selena was earthy. A full-blooded moon elf, and not of mixed race like her children, somehow she seemed to float through the Universe like a phantom; more so since her son was killed. The gauzy gown of a Sehanine priestess flowed around her like mist. "Are you almost ready, Narissa?" she asked. "Your guests have begun to arrive."

"You tell me, Lady Sunfall," Tyelatae invited, indicating the bride with an exaggerated sweep of her hand.

The Lady smiled. It was bittersweet. “You are absolutely beautiful, dear. I hope Laeroth knows how lucky he is.”

“He treats her right, Mom,” Selena piped up defensively.

“I know he does.” She reached out to embrace Narissa and folded the elf maid into her arms. “You deserve to be happy; you’ve had so much grief. And my son left you without a fare-thee-well, so he can hardly expect you to wait forever.” She sighed and released her. “I just wish things were different, is all.” Her smile was more encouraging now.

“Me too,” she agreed. “But I love Laeroth.”

“Of course you do,” the Lady agreed. “The heart is not finite, you know.”

Tyelatae cleared her throat uncomfortably. Lady Sunfall insisted that Shaundar and Yathar yet lived, and Yathar had been Tyelatae’s lover. Tyelatae didn’t really believe it, of course. Most of Theraspar figured that Lady Sunfall was in denial, and maybe even a little crazy; and after what happened to her son, who could blame her? And yet, Tyelatae’s relationships since Yathar were nothing but a windswept trail of one-night stands and broken hearts.

Someone cleared his throat. The gathering turned to see Narissa’s father, Captain Lord Alastrarra, standing awkwardly in the doorway. His eyes sought out his daughter and lit upon her with joy. “How do I look, *avar*?” she asked in a quiet voice.

He coughed. “Radiant. Absolutely radiant.”

She smiled, relieved. She knew her father did not approve of her marrying a moon elf and she was afraid that he would say something to ruin this beautiful day. But whatever else he might have thought, he held his tongue. Since Shaundar and Yathar disappeared into the night, he had been notably silent about such things. When she finally announced that she and Laeroth were seeing each other, Narissa expected shouting, recriminations, perhaps banishment. Instead, Lord Alastrarra had swallowed sharply and choked out in a strangled tone, “As long as you’re happy.” She suspected that he felt guilty about the boys’ deaths, as if he had somehow caused them by his opposition to Shaundar and Narissa’s relationship, and that made her sad.

Why was she so melancholy on her wedding day? She shook it off. “Thank you, *avar*,” she smiled shyly.

“Your mother would be proud,” he sighed in return. “I only wish she were here to see this day.”

“She’ll be watching from Arvador, *quessir*,” Tyelatae offered with the solemnity of a church bell.

Lady Durothil, Yathar’s mother, came over to greet her friend Lady Sunfall. “Congratulations, dear,” she said to Narissa. “I wish you both much happiness together.”

"Thank you for coming, Faelyn," Lord Alastrarra smiled back, taking her hands courteously.

Narissa smiled too. "Avavaen, thank you." She was glad to see Lady Durothil, who, though shy and introverted, was a fixture in her life and a source of quiet comfort. But if she was here . . .? "What's *he* doing here?" Narissa hissed in her father's ear as she spotted Lady Durothil's husband the Rear Admiral taking tea with an elf she did not recognize.

"Bad etiquette to not invite the Mithril to my daughter's wedding, my dear," Lord Alastrarra explained.

"You didn't have to invite *him*," she spat; and as she did so, Lord Durothil looked up and his eyes took note of her.

"Ah, the blushing bride!" Admiral Durothil exclaimed as he stood to offer a bow that was the picture of gold elven propriety. Narissa offered a very stiff and formal bow in return. She doubted very much that she was blushing, but perhaps the angry flush of her cheeks mimicked that well. "May I present Captain Andar Lotharvalis of the Dragonspace Fleet."

"Charmed," the Captain smiled with a formal bow. He was a handsome redheaded gold elf with interesting hazel eyes and a rapier at his hip. He carried himself with that grace and fluidity of motion that Narissa associated with bladesingers.

Not wanting to be impolite, Narissa returned it. "What business brings you here to Realmspace, Captain?"

"My Admiral sent me with a message for Admiral Durothil," he explained. "But I'm sure it would be very rude for me to drag him away from your wedding, so I have come here to discuss it. Your father extended me an invitation as a courtesy. I hope that's all right."

"Of course," she said brightly; then added in a hopeful tone, "but if Navy business requires your attention, I of course understand that duty must come first."

Neither one took the bait. Her smile evaporated. Why couldn't they just have a nice quiet wedding? She regretted not taking Laeroth up on his offer to run away and declare their vows naked under the full moon, which would have been a perfectly legitimate wedding by moon elven tradition. Of course, you could probably consider any one of the other small worlds in Garden's roots to be a "moon" of Nedethil, so which one would be appropriate, was the question . . . ? Seeing that the Captain seemed to expect her to say something else, she added through gritted teeth, "Please make yourself welcome. If you'll excuse me . . . ?" And she bowed to them both and rejoined her friends.

"Who's the new face?" Tyelatae inquired with a tilted eyebrow.

Narissa snorted. "Some friend of Lord Durothil's."

"Well, that doesn't do much to recommend him, does it?" she chortled as she tapped the ashes and dottle out of her pipe.

"So what's the message from Belryn then?" Lord Durothil asked the Captain under his breath.

"His House needs three Men-O-War and two corvettes, my lord," replied Lotharvalis.

Durothil gaped. "I can't give him that many ships in the heat of the War! They're needed for the defense of Realmspace!"

"The Masked Lord is interested in defending Realmspace too, sir," the bladesinger pointed out. "And the IEN will not help his chosen, I'm sure."

Durothil scowled. "I can't do it, Captain. There's no way that won't be noticed."

"That's really not my problem, sir," the Captain shrugged.

"It will be when the whole operation is shut down!" hissed the Admiral.

Captain Lotharvalis smiled at the lovely young redhead with the bottle-green eyes across the courtyard and winked. She winked back. "Perhaps you'd rather have an audit of the Realmspace Commissariat, Admiral," he suggested blandly.

"Damn you and Belryn to the Nine Hells!"

Unconcerned, Lotharvalis tamped tobacco into his pipe, carved into the shape of a rose. "It may well be that we are, *quessir*," he admitted, "but you'll be our next door neighbour."

Durothil clamped his mouth shut on his retort. Vice Admiral Lord Ruavel Sunfall was standing under the trellis.

Although Narissa was not close enough to hear the conversation, she scowled at the irritated expression on Lord Durothil's face. When he looked up, she followed his gaze. For just a moment Narissa saw Shaundar; but that was hardly surprising, he'd borne a distinct resemblance to his sun elven father, though his eyes had been blue where the Admiral's were amber, and his complexion had been a moonstone shade right between the lunar pale of his mother's and the Admiral's solar gilt.

Lord Sunfall squinted into the sunlight with a fierce gaze more accustomed to the stark sun and soft gloaming of the Void than the haze of atmosphere. "I hope I'm not too late?" he muttered.

"Admiral on deck!" Tyelatae grinned, and all military personnel present saluted him.

The Admiral nodded, but then he saw his wife and daughter and smiled. It was not a face accustomed to smiling so the expression was illuminating. "Selena, I'm glad you came," he said.

Selena, relieved, threw herself on him as if she were a small child of forty again, and the Admiral laughed and swung her around, displaying some degree of the physical strength his son had inherited.

He clasped her hand and came to his lady's side. Narissa privately thought that their son would have been surprised by such an open display of affection as their passionate kiss. One thing Yathar and Shaundar's death had taught them all, she brooded, was to appreciate the time they had with the people they loved, because they just might be gone tomorrow.

"I've missed you," he told his wife. "I've missed you both."

Well, that was what she was here for, wasn't it? She had loved Shaundar, and now she loved Laeroth, and he just might be gone tomorrow too. They needed to celebrate their love *now*, not *someday*. She wished that she'd carried Shaundar's baby to term, because then he would have had a legacy. But Selena was young yet. And so was she, and she looked forward to the babies that she and Laeroth would bring into the Universe. She intended to have a bunch of them.

"I assume that's the groom there?" Captain Lotharvalis indicated with his pipe stem.

Narissa's heart danced as Laeroth Oakheart appeared at the harbour, draped in the traditional golden robes and flowered headdress of a wedding. "Sorry, am I late?" he asked nervously. He was tall (but not

quite as tall as Lord Sunfall) and handsome, all bright forest green eyes and night-black hair and glowing moon elven smile. Blackjack, his hair still wet, was at his heels, shaking his head at some private joke. His eyes fixed briefly on his elder brother, Lord Durothil, and glazed over in annoyance.

Narissa went to her betrothed to take his hand. “You’re just in time,” she beamed.

Rear Admiral Lord Durothil scowled. Another race traitor, polluting the pure gold elven blood! But Belryn, Lotharvalis and their darker friends shared his interest in preventing that, and when they were running the Navy, things would be very different indeed. No more of this interference from their lessers! Perhaps then they could use the Navy for what it should have been doing in the first place; reinforcing elven supremacy in the spheres.

As Laeroth and Narissa, holding hands, came to the priestess of Hanali in their golden robes to speak their vows, Lord Durothil schooled his expression into a mask of careful neutrality, and he even managed polite applause when they kissed to seal their bond.

After the wedding, Admiral Durothil took his not-entirely-welcome guest through the hidden tunnels under the Navy office in Theraspar. Deep within the crystalline core of Nedethil was the

Realmspace Navy's best-kept secret. Natural crystal formations funneled and enhanced the local sunlight and starlight, and so the hollow world sheltered a healthy starfly mother-tree.

It was ancient and strong, firmly rooted in Nedethil's icy core. No one could remember how it had come to be there; perhaps the ancient Hall of Records in the depths of Lionheart could tell, but perhaps those had been destroyed in the many deaths and rebirths of the great Elven Navy command structure. The prevailing theory of elven naturalists was that once Nedethil had been a comet, which was seeded by a wild starfly seed, but then it was captured by Garden's roots, and the small planet that was now Nedethil had grown around it. The Navy had maintained it for several elven generations. Magically they imitated the natural cycles of the starfly mother-tree, increasing and decreasing the amount of sunlight it received in cycles so that when the time was right and the latest crop of seeds were ripe enough to shape into elven ships, they were released by the mother-tree without harm. Currently she was brooding over seven maturing seeds and all magic that was safe to use to enhance and increase their growth and development had been employed.

Captain Lotharvalis surveyed them appraisingly. He was, like most elves, quietly in awe of the stunning semi-crystalline plant structure, permeated with enough of the natural quartz minerals of Wildspace that it grew in a hexagonal grid, but shimmering with the greens, blues and violets of healthy photosynthesis. And the slow process of gently grooming the starfly seeds until they were ready to harvest and finally

shape with High Magic into the most beautiful, and most effective, spelljamming ships in known space was fascinating to him. He probably knew as much about it as any non-druid could. His own ship, the *Blind Justice*, was a marvel of such arcanology, carefully trimmed and sculpted to be as manoeuvrable as a fighter craft, even though it was a Man-O-War. “These will do nicely, sir,” he nodded.

Durothil grimaced. “I told you, Belryn can’t have them all. We need them for the Fleet. If he takes them, Lionheart *will* investigate, and the whole plan is undone.”

“So I guess we’ll have to come up a cover story, *quessir*. Crop failure or something.” Lotharvalis was not particularly concerned about the fate of Lord Durothil. He was in danger of outliving his usefulness anyway, in the Captain’s opinion.

“It’s not that simple,” Durothil sputtered.

Genuine anger flashed in Lotharvalis’ eyes for the first time. An observant person might wonder if the flicker of red was real or just a trick of the light before it vanished. “You seem to misunderstand the situation, sir,” he snapped. “Admiral Belryn will not take no for an answer.”

The Admiral pondered the dilemma. “I can probably do a little dance with the paperwork,” he reluctantly confessed at last. “Let me see what I can come up with.”

“I’m sure you’ll find something, *quessir*,” the Captain nodded, sheathing his claws. “You’ve proven your abilities in that area before.”

Lord Durothil winced. Yes, that was why he was dealing with these people in the first place, wasn’t it? “But Belryn may have to be satisfied with maybe half of them if we’re going to maintain discretion. Or they may not all be available at once.”

Captain Lotharvalis nodded in satisfaction. “Acquiring them gradually may be sufficient. I’ll get out of your hair now, sir. If I might be dismissed?” Admiral Durothil nodded and Lotharvalis strode smartly from the base with a smile on his face, knowing how pleased Admiral Belryn would be.

He ran into Admiral Sunfall on his way out. This was unexpected and it took him off guard. “What are you doing here, Captain?” the Vice Admiral of the Realmspace Fleet demanded suspiciously. His golden eyes flashed.

“Forgive me, *quessir*,” the Captain apologized with a sharp salute. “I told Admiral Lord Durothil of my obsession with starfly craft, and he offered to show me the base. I hope I have not intruded.” At the Vice Admiral’s pursed lips he added, “I’m with Intelligence. I am cleared for the information, sir.”

At this, Lord Sunfall’s posture eased. “Ah, good then. Carry on, Captain.”

Lotharvalis saluted and did exactly that. He tried to make his face into a neutral mask as he swallowed his frustration at having to grovel to that race-traitor Sunfall. Yet his expression morphed into a less than pleasant smile as he considered the new order that was rising to replace him and those like him.

The Admirals nodded respectfully to one another. Technically, Lord Sunfall was the commanding officer because he was the Admiral of the combat fleet, while Lord Durothil commanded the reserve forces, but their ranks were equal, and as much as Durothil might hate to admit it, they were also of the same social class. Their sons had grown up together and their wives were best friends; but their politics and philosophies on child rearing were such that they loathed one another.

Yet, duty commanded that they should work together for the common good of the *Tel'Quessir* of Realmspace; and so they did, each after his own fashion.

Lord Sunfall lit his simple briar pipe and offered his tobacco to Lord Durothil, who refused it. As he always did, he thought of his son when he did so, and how they had shared a pipe together on the last night that he and Shaundar had really spoken. Shaundar and Yathar had lied about their age and joined the Navy in order to fight the War, and by elven law, once their Oath had been sworn, their right to serve could not be denied them. He remembered the broken shell of a boy who had returned from imprisonment and, he was certain, torture by the orcs, and how his desperation to draw Shaundar out of the destructive cycle that

followed had only driven him back into the War and then to his death. A wave of guilt and sorrow washed over him. He wished he could quit smoking.

“They look as though they’re almost ready,” he observed to his fellow Admiral.

Lord Durothil harrumphed noncommittally.

“The Evermeet Fleet seems to be in good order now,” the Vice Admiral added. “I imagine that means we can probably put these new ships right to work and drive the orcs out of the sphere once and for all.”

“I wish you had not given so much autonomy to Evermeet,” Durothil growled.

Lord Sunfall shrugged. “Admiral Icarus made his opinions clear on the matter. And Serin Ghar is solid.”

“Yes, but they have no real loyalty to Lionheart.”

“No,” Lord Sunfall agreed. “No, their loyalty is to Queen Amlaruil. As is mine. Are you telling me that yours is not, Lord Durothil? I find that difficult to believe.”

Numilor Durothil shook his head. “I’m not saying that I’m not loyal to Evermeet, Ruavel. But it bothers me that they are so divorced from Lionheart. I don’t trust them to do what’s in the best interests of

the *Tel'Quessir*. I trust them to do what's in the best interests of the Elves of Realmspace."

Lord Sunfall chewed thoughtfully on the stem of his pipe. "Perhaps that's true. But I feel better knowing that Evermeet is equipped to protect itself."

Rear Admiral Durothil fell silent. He did not. It would make it that much more difficult to depose those damnable silver elven Moonflowers and restore the gold elves to their rightful place as rulers of the realm. "So what now?" he asked instead.

"I have orders from the Admiral to hold position for the moment," answered Lord Sunfall. "That's why I was able to make the wedding."

Lord Durothil raised his eyebrows. "Highly unusual. So the scro aren't currently pressing the attack then?"

"Not here," he confirmed, turning his gaze back to the gleaming starfly mother-tree, "and it makes me nervous."

On this point, Lord Durothil agreed. "What are they up to?" he mused aloud. Fighting in Realmspace had been relentless for five or six years. It seemed out of character for them to be backing off now. Had they finally exhausted the scro resources and supply lines to Realmspace? Or was there something else going on that they weren't aware of?

There was no honeymoon for Bolvi and Y'Anid Bloodfist. Shaundar was awakened the following morning by a knock at their door. Once again he was disoriented by the strange surroundings, and it was a few long moments before he remembered where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. "Just a moment," he temporized, hauling some trousers on, and he staggered to the door to peer drowsily (and somewhat crabbily) into Captain Gurtok's solemn face. "My pardon, my lord," he began with a crisp salute and a genuinely contrite expression, "but the Clan Champions have been summoned to convene High War Council."

Feeling that it would not be at all out of character to give vent to his true feelings, Shaundar swore an oath that might have blistered his tongue worse than his first purple pepper had. "They have to know I just got married!" he snapped, reaching for his heavy war boots.

"*Gul, karr,*" Gurtok agreed with a sour downturn to his mouth. "I have no doubt that they do."

Y'Anid appeared at his side like the sun gleaming over the horizon. She'd pulled on a shift that moved fetchingly around her curves, though Shaundar was certain it had not been chosen for this reason. Her hair draped itself around her like a fiery veil. "I'd better help you clean up then, husband," she sighed. She almost moved with the flexibility she had enjoyed prior to Targ's assault now, though her once-shattered lower

back was still a little stiff. She was exercising to limber it up, Shaundar knew, but he suspected that it always would be.

Gurtok was transfixed for a moment, but he shook his head to clear it. “I’ll leave you to it then, my lady.” He cast Shaundar an apologetic look and took his leave with a salute to Y’Anid. The corner of Shaundar’s mouth twitched up around his tusk. Yes, his new wife really was a beautiful woman, wasn’t she?

Not that any of his childhood friends would think so. He shook his head, for just a moment stunned by the enormity of what he had done. What would happen when he was relieved from his post? *If* he was ever relieved from his post, Shaundar amended silently. There were still a thousand ways in which his true identity could be discovered and his survival was far from assured. And speaking of which, what would happen to Y’Anid if that was how he ended, and his true identity was discovered after all? He needed to find a way to learn a spell that would evoke a true shapechange, he decided. Of course, since men were not supposed to be spellcasters, this could prove tricky at best . . .

Ah, but back to the present. Y’Anid had rounded up some clean clothing – from where, Shaundar did not know – and she was pressing them into his hands. “You need a bath,” she observed, “and so do I. Do you think we have time for the servants to draw the water or should we just go to the lake?”

Shaundar was not going to permit duty – and assumed duty at that! – interrupt happiness so completely. He seized Y’Anid in his free arm and drew her close to him for a kiss. She stiffened at first, and he relaxed his grip immediately, chastened and with cheeks reddening; but then she leaned in and kissed him full on the mouth, and softly rubbed her tusks against his. The sensation seemed to go from jaw to groin in an electric current. “Let’s let the servants draw a bath,” he murmured. “I need some time to wake up after all.”

“Do you?” she teased, as a tentative hand reached for his groin.

“Exercise is a great way to wake up,” he insisted.

Shaundar allowed Y’Anid to assist him with his armour before he left, but he insisted upon brushing out her long and lovely auburn tresses himself, much to the chagrin of the orcish and goblin ladies in her retinue. They were mollified only when he passed over the brush and her clips, just before he kissed her goodbye. Then he made his way out to the docks and the *Sword of Courage*.

Corin was waiting for him, and he showed not the least sign of impatience. If anything, he was the picture of serenity, standing at the rail with his arms folded over the Clan Lord’s tastefully tooled and gilded armour. It revealed its newness by squeaking a little in its straps and by its sparkling, untarnished buckles. “Got everything?” he asked; and when

Shaundar nodded, he bellowed, “Cast off!” The *Sword* got underway. Shaundar was uncertain as to the specifics of their destination – where was the High War Council held, anyway? – but no one else seemed to have questions so he didn’t ask. This one he figured he would learn soon enough.

“You don’t think it actually was urgent, do you?” fretted Shaundar in retrospect of his dawdling.

Corin snorted. “Not the right coding. There were no bells or drum signals. Just a messenger. There might be a real matter that requires our attention, but no, this was petty harassment.”

Shaundar’s brows folded together.

“I hope you both had a good evening, anyway,” Corin said with a slight scowl.

He was rewarded with a creeping sunny smile that won the battle for Shaundar’s clouded face with its persistence. “We really did,” he sighed. When was the last time he’d been this happy, actually? He couldn’t even remember, it was so long ago. Perhaps his instructors at Aces High had been right; he was certifiably crazy. He should probably apply for a medical discharge.

Corin smiled to see the joy in his *na’kor’s* face. “I’m happy for you, Bolvi. I’m happy for Y’Anid too. I hope she can put Targ behind her now.”

The smile faded. “It’s not that easy, Corin. She’s afraid of my touch until she consciously lets down her guard. On some level she’s still frightened that I’m going to hurt her.” *And she’s still angry at her family,* he realized; *who put her in a vulnerable position, even though they didn’t really understand the situation and even if they had, would have had no choice.* Dear gods, was this part of why he was so angry *himself* when he returned home from Spiral? He rather thought it was.

As he came to that realization, the ship lifted into the atmosphere, and back, Shaundar saw, to the edifice that was Dukagsh’s Tomb. But instead of going into the Council chambers from the docking bay, they headed down one of the hallways and emerged in the room that contained Dukagsh’s ashes and its surrounding shrine. Bay doors in front of it had been propped open, and before Shaundar lay a spectacular display of brass system-models; like those of Gamaro Base, only much larger, and there were many more of them. Scro in the armour of clan nobles moved through the models, talking to one another. Shaundar saw Narok Bloodaxe seated in a stark marble throne across the room. The Eyes of Dukagsh were engraved in the back and the armrests. Following Corin’s lead, he stopped and saluted to bellow, “Hail, Overlord!” with volume enough to draw everyone’s attention.

“Bloodfist,” growled the Overlord, curling his claws over the lids of Dukagsh’s Eyes, “nice of you to finally join us.”

“Forgive us our tardiness, Overlord,” returned Corin with a rumbling smoothness obviously studied from his late father. “We were a little distracted by my *na’kor’s* nuptials.”

“Congratulations,” sneered a smaller, sinister scro with Bloodaxe runes at his besagues who came to stand by the throne. Shaundar did not recognize him. “I was surprised to hear it however, Champion Bloodfist. I’d heard the bride was barren.”

Yes, and I wonder where you heard that? Shaundar fumed silently. That was the problem with aristocracies, he ruminated. No one ever paid any attention to the servants. He wondered who was actually a Bloodaxe agent and how he would find out. “The priestesses are uncertain, Champion Bloodaxe,” he replied smoothly. “And for a lady with the cut of her jib, I’ll take my chances.” He smiled in a predatory fashion.

“Now that we’re all here,” grumbled Lord Wrackblood, an elder scro who was greying at the temples, “I would be pleased if we could get to the business at hand. With your leave, Overlord.” He saluted and waited politely at parade rest.

Shaundar’s mouth twitched again into an actively resisted smile. He wondered if the Wrackblood knew how off-course he had just blown the Overlord’s attempt to embarrass the Bloodfists. He rather thought not by the elder Lord’s blasé expression and the Overlord’s purpling

complexion. Or maybe he was just weary of the posturing of the younger folk.

The Overlord grumbled, “Very well. It has become abundantly clear that our ‘lightning-war’ against the hated *spirra* has failed. We need a new strategy, something that considers a long-term war with all of its inherent difficulties, such as maintaining supply lines and ship and ammunition production. I am eager to hear your thoughts, gentlemen.”

So, Narok had decided to put clan differences behind him – at least, apparently; at least for the moment. That was good for the Bloodfists, but bad for the elven war effort.

“Well, where are our fronts currently?” a grey-bearded scro demanded. His runes formed a blocky double-headed hammer at the end of a handle, indicating that he must be of Clan Ironmaul.

“Moragspace and Vorrspace, mostly,” said a stern, square-jawed and red-skinned scro with a twisted black beard that suggested all the devilish stereotypes that elves associated with the scro. He bore a rune that suggested a flail on his besagues, which marked him as a member of the Hellguard clan. Shaundar found himself looking for horns and sniffing the air for sulphur. Then Shaundar noticed that he bore the strangest weapon on his back. It resembled a poleaxe, with a hammer opposite the intimidating axe blade, and a wicked spear point mounted on top between the two; except that it was short-handled, so that a strong scro could probably use it one handed. It was the sinister black of solid iron

and closer scrutiny revealed that it was hammered, and not formed from a mold. *Cold iron?* Shaundar wondered. And wouldn't that be just like the scro, he mused. The better to crush faeries with!

"We've been pushing into Dragonspace and Realspace as well, Iron Champion," the Champion of the Starstrike clan observed.

Shaundar smiled. At last! The Iron Champion was a significant military authority, the Navy knew. How did he fit into the command structure exactly? Nothing was quite as simple as it seemed when it came to the scro, after all. Especially not in matters of religion or politics.

The Iron Champion nodded just once. "Maintaining and defending solid system fronts will be necessary for a prolonged conflict. Dragonspace is the next logical target, I think," he mused, heading to the system model in question. "Destroy that damnable base on the flatworld –" he tapped Permafrost with a claw in a way that made Shaundar distinctly nervous – "and push into the sphere in force."

"What about the allyri?" inquired one of the Doomspears. Shaundar realized with a start that he strongly resembled the Doomspear captain he'd killed on the liveworld Adonia several years ago. He'd been about to light his pipe; but prudently he pocketed it before it could be noticed.

"What about them?" shrugged the Hellguard with the strange iron weapon. "They don't give a damn if we kill each other or not."

“But don’t they have a treaty with the elves of that big nation there . . . what’s it called? Alasia?”

The Iron Champion shrugged again. “So I heard. So leave the planet alone. Take out the Navy ships. Then the pointy-eared bastards have no excuse to call their buddies in to fight their battles for them.”

The scro chuckled. Yes, Shaundar supposed that the self-sufficient and resilient scro might just view mutual defense pacts as cowardice. And the problem was, it *was* Alasia and their treaty with the allyri that would give the Imperial Navy a reason for themselves and their powerful dragon allies to intervene. If they left the planet out of it, the allyri probably would wash their hands of the whole mess. “What about allyri access to the sphere?” he found himself saying. “Won’t they want to assure they can resupply on Permafrost?”

“So let them,” grunted the Iron Champion disdainfully. “Let’s not even occupy the place. Let’s sack it completely and wipe that *gurt* base right off the map, then be ‘conveniently busy’ long enough to give them a chance to establish a port of their own. Or a freeport, even. They’ll thank us for the assistance.” The scro laughed and cheered.

Shaundar pursed his lips around his tusks. The Hellguard was probably right. They just might. He doubted he would be able to derail them without completely blowing his cover, either. Damn . . .

“Sounds good,” Narok Bloodaxe nodded. “So what kind of forces do we have to commit to this assault?”

“We could pull some of our forces out of Realmspace,” the Voidlord clan leader opined.

“We can push forward with the forces guarding Orishspace too,” the Reaver Champion suggested.

The Overlord was nodding. “*Gul*, I think that we can safely say that Orishspace is secure enough to press the attack. Make it happen.”

“I’ll take personal command of the fleet myself,” the Iron Champion volunteered.

“Very good, sir,” observed the Doomspear, offering a salute. The other Clan Champions did the same and Shaundar belatedly followed suit; but, he noted, the Almighty Leaders did not. What did that mean? The Iron Champion outranked the military commanders of the clans, but not the Chieftains? He found himself itching for one of his “orcish surprises”. That would solve the whole problem, provided he could find a way to get Corin out of harm’s way . . .

He’d have to find a way to get a warning to Madrimlian of course, especially if Permafrost was a primary target. The problem was that he couldn’t see any way to do that until they came into Dragonspace, and only if he somehow managed to get invited along. Unless . . . “Do

you need someone to carry a message to the troops in Orishspace, sir?" he asked, his expression bland. "Our clan has troops and holdings there."

But the Iron Champion shook his head. "We'll let the Warpriests handle that. But if you want to rally some of the Bloodfist fleet from here . . ."

He glanced at Corin, who offered him an almost imperceptible nod. "*Gul, karr,*" he agreed. Well, it wasn't as good as sending a warning from another sphere before the attack started, but he could give them a few days once he got to Dragonspace, anyway. At least they should have a chance to evacuate Permafrost, if not to muster a defense. "How much time do we have before we leave, sir?"

"Two weeks," decided the Iron Champion with a glance at the Overlord. Narok Bloodaxe confirmed his order with a decisive nod.

Well, that wasn't much space to work with. But it was high time he started weaving a better web of espionage, if he was going to be here for a while. Suborning servants could work both ways, after all . . . "Bloodfist will be ready, sir," he assured them.

"We can commit three men-o-war if we're leaving from Dukagsh," Corin volunteered. "I'll let my Fleet Admirals make their own decisions. Right now they have a better idea of their local situations than I do."

The Hellguard nodded. "Very good. And the rest of you?"

Before long a mixed fleet of thirty-two ships were promised to the effort; with an estimate of about twenty more from the Orishspace and Dragonspace fleets. Shaundar shook his head. There was no way that the Navy could withstand that without some major juggling – which they wouldn't have time to do, unless there was someone else in a better position to warn them. And he doubted that. Who else would have a way of listening in on the High Command? Scrying into this sphere failed as badly for the elves as planar contact did.

The conclave broke up and the leaders of the clans went their separate ways. Shaundar once again allowed his eyes to light upon the reliquary of Dukagsh and consider what level of explosive he would need to plant in the thing to destroy the High Command in entirety – and how he would manage to get the supplies smuggled in here.

But there were other things he could do, and perhaps they could be judiciously effective if handled with discretion. He resolved to apply himself to a much more thorough study of Dukagsh's native flora and fauna.

The city of Tornn rivaled Waterdeep in both size and political complexity, Madrimlian reflected as he quietly ordered a drink at the Grey Mist Inn, an understated, out-of-the-way place that the Navy often used for skullduggery when they had business on Caer'Thun. The construction was of dark hardwoods and the windows were few. The

drink could be strong or pleasant as need. The owner, Kalvarian, a half-elven friend of his through some mutual business acquaintances, was holding court with the local thieves' guild so that he and the Black Arrows could meet quietly and without attracting much notice. He considered how Tornn had become quite a cosmopolitan place when the human empire that had established it fell, and since Caer'Thun was used to flying ships, it was probably one of maybe four places that he knew of in the Universe where spacefaring elves and orcs could both be found at once without weapons between them.

Marina and Marafel only bothered to disguise themselves here inasmuch as they wore unassuming cloaks, which seemed to be the uniform of most of the Grey Mist's patrons. This was their regular rendezvous with their commanding officer, which they tried to arrange once every six months at a minimum. Madrimlian imagined most believed them to be half-elves by the shape of their shoulders; or perhaps small human women, if they didn't look too closely. Madrimlian himself would be recognized by some of the regulars here, but he knew that they would studiously ignore him in an effort to not be involved in his business. "How are things?" Madrimlian asked them casually as he took the opposite seat, blinking at them through a flickering centerpiece candle. He set a bottle of Saerloonian glowfire on the table and lit his pipe.

Marina smiled and poured herself a glass. "Well enough," she nodded; perhaps in answer to Madrimlian's question, perhaps in compliance to the wine. The ladies were attached to a scro smuggler; a

bastard of the Hellguards named Torgar, Captain of the Squidship *Krakenspawn*. Marafel/Targa was the ship's cook and Marina/Lana was the healer. Both served double-duty as the Captain's concubines. It was an unpleasant and dangerous assignment, but the girls knew what they'd been getting into when they signed up for the program. Madrimlian knew that Marina had killed no less than six scro officers with judicious use of pillow talk and poison; Marafel had murdered a minor scion of the Voidlord clan in his bed, and out of necessity had once smothered a lieutenant of the Tarantula Fleet with a wool blanket.

In their roles as smugglers, they were in a position to be of some use. Crates of food and weapons would occasionally vanish from one stockpile or another and Lana and Targa would once again become Marafel and Marina and bring them to cells of freedom fighters in occupied territories such as Spiralspace. There were not many elves left among the survivors; but every action against the oppressors of Spiral was a victory in their eyes. Despite the risks and the reeking, lusty orcish soldiers, there was no place that they would rather be.

Madrimlian sipped at his wine and folded his hands before him in a characteristic steeple that his operatives knew all too well. "Listen, ladies; I need you to make contact with our agents in Dukagshspace. The scro have ceased pressing into Realmospace. We need to know why."

Marafel raised her eyebrows. "With Winterspace under their thumb? Very odd indeed. Disturbing."

Madrimlian nodded. That was quite the blow to the Navy. It was still classified information, since the Mithril knew what it would do to morale if that piece of information got out.

“Where do you want us to go?” Marafel demanded, sipping lightly at the wine herself; then making a face.

“Right into the den of the beast,” Madrimlian said. “Dukagsh.”

Marina nodded back and downed the rest of her wine. “We can do that,” she smiled. “What do you need? Troop movements? Ship numbers? Political assessments?”

“Av,” he nodded, and he fixed them both with a discerning gaze. “I don’t know what you will think of this, but we want to see if one of you can infiltrate the Lunar Temple. The other one is to return on the *Krakenspawn*.”

Marafel hitched in her breath, and Marina just nodded. “Very dangerous,” Marafel said, “but I imagine it’s worth the risk, sir.”

“You don’t approve of this mission, do you, *quessir*?” Marafel observed.

Madrimlian shook his head. “I think it’s risky. But I have my orders, and so do you.” As a matter of fact, he thought the whole business exceptionally brazen. It bespoke overconfidence, or perhaps just a lack of concern for his operatives. But Belryn’s orders had begun to

take on a reek of hubris, and Lionheart didn't seem to see it. "If you don't think it's viable, don't do it," he added. "You know I'll back up my agents on the scene."

But the elf maids were troopers, and they were nodding. "Understood, sir," Marina agreed grimly.

"Make contact with Durok and Captain Tharr at the blockade," he said. "You'll have to get their attention; they don't know you're coming."

"Av, *quessir*," Marafel affirmed. Marina just nodded. "Is there anything else, sir?" Marafel asked.

Madrimlian shook his head, so the girls offered a perfunctory salute and made their way out.

Kalvarian of Tornn watched them leave without comment. Madrimlian set about working slowly at the wine over a book on military history.

When the court had departed, Kalvarian made his way over to the table and sat down. "You had an inquiry," he informed the Navy Captain.

Madrimlian looked up from his glass sharply. "Oh?"

Kalvarian rubbed at his chin, scratching at dark hair that might be generously called a beard. “He was disguised, but he had a drow accent.”

Madrimlian looked up sharply. “Drow. Interesting. What did he want?”

“He didn’t say,” Kalvarian said dryly. “I told him I don’t serve his kind here. He left rather suddenly.”

Madrimlian sighed. “I would be most curious to find out what he was after.”

“I’ll let you know if I do.”

The elven spymaster nodded just once. “I don’t suppose you have any information to sell me on the goings-on of the local orcs?” he inquired.

Kalvarian shrugged. “Nothing worth charging you for because it’s nebulous. The high orcs have begun manufacturing a lot of weaponry and the shipyards have been busy. If I were you, I’d get ready for them to step up the offensive.”

“We’ve taken some pretty heavy losses already,” Madrimlian groaned. “If that wasn’t the top of their game, we could be in some serious trouble.” He pursed his lips and met the half-elven rogue’s gaze. “I don’t suppose Veladin or Velmai’lain have reconsidered their

isolationist policies, have they? Some experienced ground troops would be pretty welcome right about now.”

Kalvarian shook his head. “They’ve crawled up their own navels since the Tyrannan Invasion. They’re still pissed at the gold elves about it; so by extension that includes the Navy. Just like every other elf that’s ever lived on this planet they can’t see the forest for the trees.”

“More’s the pity,” Madrimlian sighed. “Well, you can put this bottle back under the bar; I’ve had enough for one night. I’ve got to report back.” He stood up with reluctance. Trading Kalvarian’s company for Belryn’s seemed a poor exchange.

“You need to take some time off,” Kalvarian recommended. “Maybe do some good old-fashioned treasure hunting again.”

“When this war is over,” Madrimlian sighed, “*then* I can take some time off.”

“I might be too old to join you by then,” the rogue jested. But his eyes held no jest at all. They clasped hands and Kalvarian set about closing down for the night.

Shaundar grimaced into the mirror at the new gilded rune carved into his other tusk. It seemed to hurt a lot less than the first one had, but the throbbing pain was more than a little distracting. Y’Anid

smiled and laid a hand on his shoulder. “I have some poppy juice in storage,” she offered softly.

He smiled back, although his smile was tense. “I’d rather not. I don’t like the dreams. But I appreciate the thought.” Screaming at phantoms, as he had done in training after a dose of opium for a broken wrist, would hardly be conducive to establishing a good relationship. He turned around to slide his arms around her. She slid her own arms in under his and leaned her head against his shoulder.

“What now, Bolvi?” she sighed.

He rubbed the top of her arm as he held her against him. “What do you mean?”

“I would have given you sons and daughters,” she sighed. “What future is there for us, and for me, with no children to care for?”

Shaundar could see how that might be a problem, in a culture where there were so many firmly established gender roles. Perhaps that was why they sent the barren women to the Temple. “If you could do anything,” he said, “what would you do?”

“Anything?”

“I mean that,” he insisted. “Anything. No barriers. No rules. Anything at all.”

Y'Anid pondered that. What would she do, if she could do anything? "I think," she sighed, "I would be a pilot. I would be a spelljammer." A nervous smile flashed across her face.

His lips twitched. "Really?"

She sighed. "Yes, really. I know it's stupid." She cast her gaze downward.

Shaundar smirked. "Not at all," he murmured; and then he stopped. His expression soured. How could he tell her that spelljamming was his first love too? And how could he make such a thing happen for her in misogynistic scro culture?

"What's wrong?" Y'Anid asked him. "Have I said something wrong?"

You idiot, he chastised himself. "You would have to try very hard to do that," he smiled instead. "I would give you the stars if I could." She studied him incredulously and his smile broadened. "But since I can't, I will do the next best thing. I can teach you about astronomy and navigation, and planetology too, I suppose."

"Those are arts normally reserved to the Warpriests," Y'Anid observed with a curious expression.

Shaundar chuckled. “Not among mercenaries.” Then he told her the lie that was becoming rote, “And remember, I was training to be a Warpriest at one time.”

Her lovely blue eyes widened in curiosity. “Why didn’t you finish?”

The elven soldier in orcish guise felt his mouth twist in its effort to convey all the necessary mixed emotions. By Y’Anid’s puzzled expression he guessed it was not entirely successful. “I lack the faith,” he confessed.

“My lord?” came Gurtok’s voice again at the door with the sound of his knock.

“I’m starting not to like you, Gurtok,” Shaundar growled about half-seriously.

He shrugged in apology. “I’m sorry, *Tath’Darrak*. Lunch is served. Lord Corin thought you might want to eat in the courtyard instead of the dining hall today.”

Y’Anid brightened. “Oh, what a good idea! You don’t mind, do you Bolvi?”

Shaundar, who approved of eating in general, and under whatever conditions, shook his head with a small smile.

Spicy skewers were set out on trays on wicker tables, and a cauldron of *graf* brewed over the central fire pit. There were also large brass bowls of hot and sour soup and a dish that the scro just called “shipwreck,” which was, in effect, a stew of whatever was close to hand; in this case, rice, leftover *hargol*, pickled peppers and some sort of egg. Ceramic bottles lay chilling in bowls of rapidly-melting conjured ice. The Bloodfist family, and only the family, sat or sprawled on various wicker chairs or a carpet and pillows. The sun had just finished setting and the gloaming of twilight settled in. Luthic was just beginning to peer over the horizon and the Lady’s Tears wafted sweet perfume over the gathering, as moths flocked to the torchlight. The blistering heat of the day had somewhat diminished, which was probably what had prompted this evening garden party. Corin saw them and waved them over. Smiling, Captain Gurtok sealed the double doors behind them.

“We haven’t done this since that Bloodaxe bastard came to stay with us,” Elka lamented. Her eyes were drawn to their clasped hands and a smile touched her lips. “Come sit down.” She patted the carpet beside her. Y’Anid, much cheered, took her up on her invitation and Shaundar followed in her wake. Elka scooped her up a small bowl of soup and she drank it with enthusiasm. She then dished one out for Shaundar.

“Are you going to be able to drink that with that fresh rune, *na’kor*?” Corin asked.

Shaundar shrugged. “Everything hurts. Might as well.” He guzzled the soup eagerly, but quickly realized his mistake. The heat of the

liquid and its accompanying spices started a throbbing pain that radiated through his maxillary nerve. He hissed and clasped a hand to his jaw.

Corin laughed at him. “More balls than brains; that’s you all over, *na’kor!*”

Shaundar couldn’t help but laugh through his tearing eyes. “Funny, I always thought I was the sensible one.”

Y’Anid took up a cloth and wrapped some of the ice in it, then kindly placed it on his jaw beneath his tusk. Immediately the pain began to subside. He smiled his thanks at her. “Maybe I’ll stick to the shipwreck,” he opined.

“It’s pretty good,” recommended Sarga, who was shovelling it into his face by the scoop.

Corin seized his soup and drank it instead. The casual manner in which he did this told Shaundar that at informal meals this was not uncommon. Shaundar tried not to gape at him. “Well, to Arvador with the blasted War!” he grinned. It took Shaundar a moment to realize that this was an oath of damnation, not a blessing. “A wedding is a time of celebration! What kind of entertainment shall we provide tonight? Dancers? Drumming? Games? A trip to the opera?”

“I have never been to the Dukagsh Opera,” Y’Anid pointed out wistfully. “Have you, Bolvi?”

The orcs had *opera*? “No, can’t say that I have.”

“Sounds like a good way to spend an evening, then,” Olaf agreed. He belched loudly and Elka’s mouth twitched into a smug smirk. “My pleasure,” she nodded. So, she had cooked the meal then, and Olaf’s “rude noise” was some obscure form of compliment?

“Are we sure about the security risks?” sensible Ynga inquired. “Right into the boar’s den, after all.”

“The Bloodaxes have been keeping their heads down since the Challenge,” Sarga pointed out.

“*Gul*, that’s what worries me,” Ynga snapped back.

Y’Anid sighed. “You’re right, sister. It might just be the opportunity that they’re looking for. Perhaps I shouldn’t have suggested it.”

Shaundar, noting Y’Anid’s disappointment, said, “Do you really think they’ll try anything quite so public? I would think that politics alone would make that untenable. But then,” he admitted, “maybe I’m not sufficiently briefed on the situation.”

Corin grunted past the skewer he was chewing on. “We have to fix that. You’re our military leader. If you don’t understand the politics, you can’t do your job.”

Shaundar realized with a start that his position now made him, in effect, a Fleet Admiral. Dear gods, what had he gotten himself into? He wasn't qualified for this! He'd never even held a captaincy! "Is there anything I can read to bring myself up to speed?" he asked. "Who are our allies? And I'll need better military information as well. How many ships do we have at our command? Where are they located? Which operations are we actively involved with? Who's in charge of our intelligence division?" He'd always assumed that the scro ran a unified military force. They'd always seemed so much more organized than the Elven Navy in many ways, whose Fleet Admirals ran things almost independently and with a great deal of personal autonomy. But he realized that intertribal politics would require each clan to maintain separate intelligence branches to spy on each other, as well as the *Tel'Quessir*.

"That lieutenant of Targ's was our intelligence commander," Olaf growled. "Never should have let that happen. I've taken command since. I can fill you in as to what I know currently, lad, but I'm sure there are people out there who answer to us that we don't even know about." His expression was smoldering and murderous.

"After lunch please, my lords," Nakyra pleaded. "We're here to relax and enjoy ourselves, are we not?"

Corin scowled. "I'm not going to be able to relax until I know my clan is safe," he retorted. "The reason I asked for an informal lunch is so that we can speak what's really on our minds. The fact is, we're in the

most serious trouble our clan has been in since our founding. We have to martial our resources to defend ourselves and we have to still somehow contribute to the war effort – which isn't going according to plan, that's plain." He looked at Shaundar. "I don't expect you to solve the problem, *na'kor*; you've already won half the battle for us by removing an enemy from our midst. Politics won't force us into that situation again; no one would expect us to take a Bloodaxe in now, not after *that* fiasco. But we have no idea what our strengths are or how many people Targ and his cronies have suborned."

An idea occurred to Shaundar suddenly. Had he hit upon a way to aid the Clan Bloodfist and still serve his mission? "I've been thinking about that," he said. "Someone in our household is passing on information. They're imbedded deeply enough that they know that Y'Anid is barren. We've hardly made that public. Who's close enough to get that information? That's where we need to start. Find that person and we can maybe flush out the other spies."

Elka's lips thinned. "The servants. The ladies-in-waiting. Perhaps the house pages. But I don't want a pogrom, Bolvi. We *need* these people."

"Who do we believe we can trust for sure?"

"My crew," Corin decided. "The only one I had doubts about is no longer with us."

Shaundar nodded thoughtfully. “*Gul*, I agree. I’ll start there then.” He sipped at one of the ceramic bottles. It turned out to be cold mango nectar; delicious.

Was it his imagination, or did Nakyra look a bit uncomfortable? She seemed too innocent to be any real threat; and yet, she was certainly well-placed enough to have the right information. And weren’t the Banebloods aligned with Clan Bloodaxe? She rubbed the swell of her abdomen awkwardly. Perhaps the sensitive belly of motherhood was merely giving her trouble. But then again, both Y’Anid and Ynga were carefully not looking at her.

“I think,” he said slowly, “I’ll have to get to know my immediate subordinates too.” He glanced over at Y’Anid out of the corner of his eye. “It might involve a fair bit of travelling.”

But she was nodding. “I’ll help you,” she offered. “If my lords will permit me, I can at least compile all the fleet records. I don’t know if they’re kept in the Library, the War Room, or the Temple however.” She looked to Olaf, Corin and him with a questioning gaze.

“I found them in the War Room,” Olaf said. “But I can handle that, my dear. It’s not proper for a lady to soil her hands with the taint of war.”

“It’s just logistics, *durkarr*,” Y’Anid argued. “I wouldn’t actually be engaging in warcraft.”

Olaf shrugged. “You’re the Clan Champion, Bolvi. What do you think?”

So now he was to be the judge of scro religious taboos? “Is the prohibition of the Temple against warfare or combat?”

“Warfare,” Elka smirked. “Otherwise my daughter would not have captured you.”

Corin chortled. “Aunt Elka has you there, *na’kor!*” he laughed.

Shaundar smiled too. “I acknowledge my capture; in more ways than one, I think.” This produced a surprising sunny smile from Y’Anid that was unlike any he had seen. It was spectacular, how beautiful she really was.

But they were waiting for an answer. “I can’t imagine how having someone else to keep track of the numbers could be a bad thing,” he ruminated, “and if it doesn’t violate any oaths or break any rules, then I know that Y’Anid would certainly be an asset.”

Now her smile became truly radiant, and Olaf jerked his head in a single solemn nod. “Sure, girl’s got a good head on her shoulders,” he mumbled.

Shaundar smiled a little. “I know it.”

Y’Anid took his hand. “I won’t let you down,” she swore.

“I know that too,” he said.

The opera house turned out to be almost as big as the amphitheatre. The usher who met them at the door – an impeccably dressed orc – waved them to a private box with much fanfare and carrying-on. Shaundar narrowed his eyes. No one who wanted to know could miss the fact that they were here, he thought to himself.

Shaundar had once seen an opera in Leuthilspar, the fabled elven capital of the island refuge Evermeet on the world of Toril, where his ancestors had hailed from. He was very young and barely remembered it, but details came flooding back as he observed from their vantage point the great curtained stage and the orchestra tuning their instruments below, including a great many drums, a whole *nardek* section, a great gong, and several instruments that he didn't even recognize. He also observed the well-dressed lords and ladies of most of the clans watching them and each other from their private boxes while the commoners were divided according to caste in the seats below; the best ones being reserved for scro, and the farthest away for what limited kobolds and goblins could afford the cost of the performance. The opera was called *The Flight of Dukagsh*. Shaundar expected that it would be quite educational.

The usher seated them, carefully assisting Ynga, Y'Anid, and Elka with their flowing veils, and served them a good pepper stout; not,

Shaundar noted, the flowery vintages an elven performance event would be graced with. They were offered a meal, which Corin refused. It was not two minutes after he had bowed himself out, promising light refreshments and fruits, that a tap at the outside curtain silenced the ladies' excited speculative chatter regarding famous thespians about which Shaundar knew nothing.

“Who comes?” demanded Olaf.

“Gunnald One-Eye, Lords and Ladies of the Bloodfist,” the visitor responded.

“The One-Eyes have always been friendly,” whispered Elka in Shaundar's ear, “or at least, allied.” They waited; and he realized that whether or not their visitor could enter was his decision.

Shaundar went to the curtain and looked over their guest. He recognized the young One-Eye he'd encountered at the Equinox Games. The One-Eye smiled. “Champion Bloodfist; it's good to see you. If I might, I'd like to offer my congratulations on your promotion.” His eyes glittered. Shaundar got the distinct impression that he was referring to more than the change in title. “It was a well-fought battle,” he added with a chuckle. “And I've got to say, with those conditions, I'm glad I'm not a Bloodfist!”

Shaundar bowed to acknowledge the compliment. “What can I do for you, Gunnald One-Eye?”

The young warrior laughed. "I've come to ask if I can join you! I'm here alone this evening and I want to take in the opera with good company." His grin was disarming.

A subtle nod from Elka convinced him that there was likely more happening than met the eye. "Come on in, Lord of the One-Eye," he invited. "I'll trust you to leave your weapons peace-knotted. I'm sure you won't be offended," he smiled wryly, "things being what they are."

"Not at all," he responded, coming in and taking a seat. He made proper obeisance to the ladies, who watched him with wary raven eyes. "Relax," he urged. "I haven't come to start a clan war."

"Why have you come?" demanded Ynga, baring her suspicion like a blade.

"A matter I'd rather discuss once the overture has started," he replied cheerfully. "But you needn't worry about it, Lady Bloodfist. I want to chat with your Clan Champion here. And possibly the Lord Bloodfist as well. I'd be honoured," he added respectfully, nodding to Olaf, "if Lord Olaf would join us as well."

"Surely you have no objection if our ladies overhear," Olaf grumbled in return. "We can hardly send them from the box when the opera begins."

He shook his head. "My tribe would retire to discuss things quietly, or at least the ladies would pretend not to overhear; but I

recognize things are not done in the same ways among the Bloodfists, sir. I am in your sovereign territory; I respect your ways.”

Loud, thunderous music began. It was full of powerful horns and authoritative drums. Shaundar smiled. It all struck him as being particularly scro.

The tan-skinned scro sighed and relaxed into his chair as the lights were dimmed, save the lanterns of the stage, and audience members sought out their seats. “It’s a simple enough matter, Lords of the Bloodfist,” he said in a low voice they had to strain to hear. “I’ve been sent on behalf of my clan to offer our support if your Clan Champion challenges the Overlord.”

Y’Anid let out a surprised little gasp, which she quickly covered with a hand. Everyone seemed completely taken aback; not the least of whom was Shaundar. “What makes you think I’m going to do that?” he asked sharply. This was far more scrutiny than he’d hoped to draw.

He shrugged again. “I’m sure you have no immediate designs on it,” Gunnald said, “but I see the potential, and my grandfather agrees. You’d have our support if you decided that ruling the Empire was something you wanted, *Tath’Darrak* Bloodfist.”

Shaundar turned to study him. “What about these rumours that I hear about Narok Bloodaxe being the spawn of the War Maker?” he demanded incredulously.

“Hey, I’m not saying you should,” the One-Eye protested, “and if you do, you should probably wait until you’ve got the political clout to hold it. But I’ve seen you fight and I think you might have a shot. And people are already talking about you. Play your hand right, and the Empire could be yours. That’s what the Patriarchs say, anyway.” He shrugged again. “I guess they’ve interpreted some omens that suggest that a confrontation is coming.”

Shaundar laughed. He couldn’t help it. “I don’t doubt that,” he chortled, “but ruling the Scro Empire is probably the last thing in the Universe that I would want to do.”

“Okay, fair enough,” the One-Eye answered, looking a little disappointed. “Can’t say I blame you. I don’t want the job myself either.”

“We appreciate the support, though,” Corin broke in suddenly. “I’d be pleased to call you friend, Gunnald One-Eye.” He extended his hand. The One-Eye clasped his wrist and grinned.

“My *na’kor* and I both,” Shaundar put in, and extended his own hand.

“Pleased to hear it,” Gunnald replied, and he clasped Shaundar’s wrist also.

The curtain rose, and the opera began.