

The Twisted Path

Without a Home

Before she met Mouseknife.

Before she ever left her clan lands.

Before there was anything resembling direction.

Shardra wandered. The smoke from her destroyed village in the distance, the giantess forced herself to forge a new path, one for her and seemingly her alone, with the strange ax of the father, Rimeheart, and her trusted hunting spear, along with the meager supplies salvaged from her raided village. She entered the world alone, for the second time in her life. And she was very afraid.

Not lost, never lost. Her mountains, her birthplace, the paths of her youth, were etched into her bones. Their broken spines and knife-edged passes were as familiar as her own scars. But she walked without destination, without intent beyond the next ridge, the next hunt, the next place to sleep that would not collapse under snow or stone. Life was something endured, not shaped. Her clan was gone; there was nothing she could do to change that. She had to steel herself from the world and live. So began a long, grinding series of days bound together by hunger and cold.

She lived hard in the cruel mountains, eking out a meager existence among ice-bitten pines and wind-scoured stone. The sky was often the color of old iron, low and heavy, pressing down on her shoulders. Food came from blood and patience. Shelter came from knowing where not to be when storms rolled down the peaks like living things. Joy did not visit her. Hope never lingered long enough to matter. Purpose, most strikingly, had abandoned her entirely.

She practiced the skills she had not used since her early youth. Setting deadfall traps, catching fish in the shallow, small mountain pools, and most notably stalking and ambushing bigger game.

The days were the same. Wake. Hunt. Eat. Move. The most basic needs, attended not with relish, just the grim reality of life in the Kadathe' mountains.

Conflict shadowed her always. Other clans of her own kind crossed her path now and then, bands hardened by the same unforgiving land. Meetings were never friendly, but neither were they always fatal, either.

Challenges were ritualized, wrestling and grappling in packed snow or bare stone, hands locking on arms thick as tree trunks, boots grinding for leverage. Fights bent her foes, slammed breath from lungs, left them sprawled and humbled but alive. Always an excellent student of her clan's traditional wrestling, she honed her skills and techniques during these years. She became very adept. cracked ribs, dislocated shoulders, and broken jaws, these contests showed her ability and earned respect, and spite in equal measure.

She walked away, leaving them to curse her name and remember her. Mercy, in her eye, was letting them rise again and letting them limp home and letting them see their kin.

She would not.

Beasts fared worse. The mountains were full of things that hunted as fiercely as she did. Ice wolves stalked in silence, pale shapes against the snow, their eyes reflecting moonlight like shards of glass. Here she was at home, gripping her old hunting spear, poised to strike. It was a rare time she felt alive.

She killed them when she needed to. Skinned and butchered them with practiced efficiency learned by necessity and practice, using every scrap. But it was the ice bear that marked her most deeply. A towering brute, half again her height when it reared up. Its breath was like steam and claws that could split stone. The fight was brutal and required all her cunning and skill, her axe ringing against bone and frozen hide, her body

battered and half-numb before it finally fell. Exhausted, she wrapped her wounds and slept beside its corpse for warmth, hands still shaking. The great skin she salvaged what she could and stitched from it the massive cloak she would wear for many years afterward. The thick fur-lined boots she struggled to make, and eventually wrapped her old boots in the insulating fur. This helped turn the biting cold tolerable even for one as accustomed to it as she was. The bear fed her for a week, maybe more, as she healed and tried her hand at drying the meat. It helped clothe and protect her.

Men were no better than beasts, often worse. Ruffians haunted the lower passes in warmer months, deserters, outcasts, fools who thought size could be overcome with numbers. They learned otherwise. She rarely needed to kill; often, the intimidation of her size and savage look was enough. Other times, she could slam one or two into the earth, breaking bones and stealing breath to end the encounter. She left them broken in the dirt, hands trembling too badly to lift weapons, eyes wide with the realization that mercy had found them instead of death, if they relented. They would heal. They would remember. They would warn their fellows. That was enough. If lives were lost, she did so with no joy but with brutal efficiency.

During the fiercest winters, even the army of Kadarthe' turned her away.

She approached their outposts several times when winter starved the land, when even a giant's strength could not conjure food from frozen earth. They regarded her as a threat, not a citizen. A weapon without a banner. A reminder of clan violence they preferred to forget. Spears were leveled. Orders barked. Gates closed. She stood in the falling snow, breath slow and controlled, and then turned away without a word. Pride was useless here. They were not her kin; they owed her no succor. She learned to eke out enough to survive the worst Kadarthe' had to give. So, she lived alone. Avoiding the people of the land she called home, but who refused to accept her. Most were frightened of her size and strength, the coiled danger lurking in her massive frame.

Years blurred together. Seasons came and went with brutal indifference. Spring meant mud and rot and meltwater that stole heat from the bones. Summer brought biting insects and short nights that never fully darkened. Autumn sharpened the air and stripped the land bare. Winter, always winter, pressed in with endless white silence, storms that erased tracks and made the world feel small and hostile and empty. Throughout, she adapted, learning from harsh reality and experience, often with scars to remember. Perseverance and practicality governed her.

The sameness, the sameness hollowed her out. Every day requires the same vigilance, the same labor, the same violence. When she was able to kill prey of considerable size, it gave her a small respite before the next hunt, but it never felt right. There was no one to speak to. No one remembers her face except those she had broken. At night, she dreamed rarely, and when she did, the dreams were thin things, fire without warmth, voices without words, the sense of standing at the edge of something vast and unseen.

Then came the dream that caused a change.

It was simple. No gods. No visions of glory. Just movement.

She dreamed of walking, not north, not deeper into the mountains, but away. South. The land expanded rather than contracting. The air grew softer. The weight on her chest eased just enough to notice it. Here, life was easier, not easy, not without hardship, but easier. She woke with the feeling still clinging to her ribs, quiet but insistent. South felt right. Not hopeful. Not promising. Just... right.

She did not question it. She had nothing left to lose by listening.

That spring, after a winter that had nearly broken her, she turned her back on the mountains. She trekked half the length of Kadarthe', crossing passes she had sworn she would never leave behind, stepping into the trackless plains of Wyrllish where the horizon felt too wide and the sky too exposed. The land frightened her

in a new way, not with confinement, but with openness. Still, she walked on. Into places spoken of only in half-remembered stories. Toward the northern reaches of near-mythical Mithrin.

She did not know what she was seeking.

The Rite of Stone and Breath

As recorded by the elders of the Greerson Vale

The ring was called **the Stone of Breath**, an ancient place where giants had tested one another since before clans had names. It was a wide circle of packed earth and exposed rock, bordered by standing stones incised with the marks of past champions. Every gouge in the ground marked a fall. Every dark stain remembered blood.

Sixteen giants stood assembled beneath the open sky.

She stood alone.

She bore no clan sigil, no war paint, no banner stitched to her shoulders. She came as a **Way-Giant**, one without hearth or hall, seeking passage south through lands not her own. The law was clear: to cross the vale in spring, one must submit to **Krag-Thuun**, the Trial of Bodies. Win, and passage was granted. Place second or third, and mercy was extended. Fail utterly, and the land itself rejected you.

Shardra intended to win.

Before entering the ring, she set aside her arms as custom demanded. **Rimeheart**, her great axe, was leaned carefully against a basalt pillar at the ring's edge. It looked dull there, wrapped in old bindings, its frostbitten edge hidden, inert as cold iron. Far more attention was drawn instead to what she lay beside it.

Her icebear cloak

The hide was immense, thick as layered shields, the fur pale and coarse, still bearing the faint blue-white sheen of the beast that had once worn it. Scars marred the hide where claws and steel had torn at it over the years, yet the stitching was immaculate, heavy sinew pulled tight, reinforced again and again by patient, practiced hands.

There were murmurs then. Low. Respectful.

Icebear hunts were no small thing. To slay one alone, and to *work the hide oneself*, spoke of endurance few possessed.

When Shardra stripped away the cloak, her girdle, and finally her great boots, the murmurs changed.

She hated fighting barefoot.

It was not her custom. Among her people, the **Stompers**, heavy boots meant for crushing strikes and anchoring one's stance, were considered part of the body in ritual combat. But here, the law was different, harsher, bare feet upon stone. No protection. No excuses.

As she stepped into the ring, bare soles pressing into cold earth, she removed the final layer, and the crowd saw her fully.

Her back was a map of survival.

Scars layered upon scars, deep, ugly, unmistakably lethal wounds. Great raking marks where something had tried to disembowel her. A ruinous gouge across one shoulder blade that had nearly severed muscle from bone. And high along the spine, a cluster of pale, twisted scars that told of a blow meant to kill outright.

Many there recognized the pattern.

Those wounds matched the stories from the north years ago, where no giant should have lived.

The tone of the crowd shifted immediately. This and the Glittering Blue Dragonscale Eyepatch marked her; she was the one from the stories, and those stories were true.

This was no reckless wanderer. This was no soft exile. Whatever had taken her eye had meant to take her life as well, and failed.

She was hard-borne mountain granite.

First Contest, The Measuring of Weight

The opening bout was declared under **Hrag-Kel**, the Measuring of Weight: a contest meant to test balance, leverage, and restraint. Her opponent was young, broad-shouldered, and eager. He circled her carefully, hands raised, feet light, testing distance and reaction.

Shardra did not rush him.

She grounded herself, sinking into **Stone Root Stance**, letting the ring feel her weight. When the young giant committed, just once, she stepped inside his reach and flowed into **Karn-Vesh**, the Binding of Limbs. Her grip locked his arm at the joint, twisting with practiced precision until pain and breath failed him together.

He struck the stone in submission.

The bout ended cleanly. No blood spilled. The elders nodded.

Shardra returned to her corner without celebration.

Second Contest, The Breaking of Breath

The second match was declared **Thuun-Rag**, the Trial of Breath, a brawler's contest. No finesse was expected, only endurance.

Her opponent came on like a storm.

Elbows hammered into her guard. Fists crashed against her brow. A headbutt split skin along her hairline. Pain blossomed, sharp and immediate, and a strike broke in her nose with a wet sound.

Shardra laughed.

This was familiar.

She endured, letting him spend himself, feeling the rhythm of his rage. When his guard rose too high, she slipped beneath it, surged forward, and executed **Urr-Tal**, the Falling Mountain. The slam shook dust from the standing stones. She followed him down with **Krag-Hammers**, short, brutal strikes meant to end contests quickly.

The referee hauled her back.

Shardra rose bloodied now, forehead split, nose broken, knuckles swelling, but unbowed. The crowd roared, divided between admiration and unease.

Third Contest, The Trial of Stone

The third bout was **Gor-Thuun**, the Trial of Stone, reserved for mismatched strength.

Her opponent was enormous, even for a giant. Thick with muscle, heavy as a collapsed cliff face. When he stepped into the ring, his shadow swallowed her.

Shardra fought his legs, kicking with sharp brutal, punishing strikes to the calves and thighs.

She struck low with **Stone-Cuts**, targeting knees and tendons, forcing him to guard downward. Each blow cost her dearly. Crushing counterstrikes drove the breath from her lungs, bruised ribs protesting with every inhale. She was battered, bleeding, and winded by the time she found her opening.

One strike.

Perfectly placed.

The giant collapsed like an avalanche.

Shardra stood over him, chest heaving, vision narrowing, blood running freely. She had won.

Now the crowd *changed*.

Bets flew openly. Voices rose. Their champion had won his bout untouched and stood waiting. Shardra had secured passage already. Second place was guaranteed.

Some urged her to withdraw.

She did not.

She had been taught only one law: **you fight until the fight is over**.

Final Contest, The Crown of Stone

The final bout was **Krag-Vael**, the Crown of Stone.

Her ribs were wrapped. Blood stemmed. Knuckles bound tight. She stepped barefoot once more into the ring, her boots and icebear cloak resting beside Rimeheart. More eyes lingered on the cloak than the axe now, the weight of it, the craftsmanship, the story it told without words.

Her opponent entered.

Krelik Greerson.

Young. Fit. Barely touched by the day's violence. Half a head taller than Shardra, carrying himself with the quiet assurance of a reigning champion. He acknowledged her with a brief nod, not deep, but honest.

She returned it.

The fight was vicious.

She was losing.

Heavy blows drove her back. She barely escaped **Urr-Tal** when he attempted to slam her. Her breath rasped. Her vision swam. Then Krelik slipped behind her, arms locking, body positioning perfect for **Stone-Breaker Descent**.

Shardra countered by instinct.

She hooked his leg in **Root-Hold**, braced, and let him take her weight for a heartbeat.

Then her bare heel came down.

The stomp shattered bone.

Her head snapped back into his face, nose breaking instantly. As he released, she flowed, hooking his arm, trapping his leg, and executing **Vesh-Tal**, the Turning Fall.

He struck the ground hard on the back of his head and shoulders.

When he tried to rise, she pinned him with **Grave-Seal**, ending the contest.

The ring erupted.

The Breaking of Law

As she turned toward her gear, the law was broken.

Belrick Greerson burst from the crowd and struck her hard in the side, driving her to the earth. Rage surged, hot, immediate, and with it, something answered.

Shardra reversed him in moments and rained elbows and punches down with **Krag-Hammers**, each blow deliberate, merciless. The crowd surged, elders and wardens tearing them apart, but not before damage was done.

Broken jaw. Shattered teeth. One eye ruined.

As Shardra forced her rage down, eyes stared at her in stunned silence.

Rimeheart flared.

Cold light burned along its runes, bright and hungry, as if the axe itself had tasted her fury and wanted more. She seized it and turned, ready.

No one advanced.

The Ancient Word

The elder came with Krelik at his side, limping but upright. Apologies were offered. Shame acknowledged.

“Well fought,” Krelik said at last. “Should you pass this way again, you and yours have fair passage.”

Shardra nodded.

Then she spoke.

“Greskalum.”

The word thundered through the ring, echoing in bone and stone alike.

The clan froze.

The elder nearly fell to his knees. “Forgive us,” he said hastily. “We did not know your line was of the Ancients.”

Shardra frowned. “I wished you farewell in the old ritual way. Is that not custom here?”

“Not for many generations,” the elder whispered. “The true words... they terrify.”

They offered her food, drink, shelter, and even marriage.

She refused.

Her path led south.

And the Greerson Vale would remember the day a clanless giant walked into the Stone of Breath and left speaking words older than their fear.

The Words That Should Not Have Been Lost

The northern steppes of Wyrllish stretched wide beneath a cold and patient sky, grass flattened by endless wind, stone rising in lonely spines where the land remembered older bones. Shardra arrived at dusk, her greatcloak pulled tight, Rimeheart resting across her back like a familiar weight. Here, winter was not an

inconvenience but a remembered enemy, and the giants who lived upon the steppe carried that truth in their posture and their eyes.

She was brought before **Wnel Dnargson**, elder of the steppe-clan whose bloodlines were said to run deeper than most dared trace. Age had bowed him, but not diminished him. His braids were threaded with bone and stone rather than metal, and his hands bore the thickened calluses of a man who had shaped both land and law. They spoke first of ordinary matters, weather patterns, migrating herds, the state of the southern passes, until the fires burned low and silence grew comfortable.

Only then did Shardra speak of what had weighed on her since Greerson Vale.

“I used the old tongue,” she said. “A farewell. It caused fear.”

Wnel’s hands stilled, fingers tightening around the edge of his cup. He stared into the fire for a long while, flame reflecting in his eyes like distant stars, before he answered.

“The old tongue,” he said at last, voice rough with something near grief. “Aye. That would do it.”

He looked at her fully then, not with suspicion or challenge, but with a heavy recognition. “It has been many generations since it was spoken true. We keep fragments, shapes of sound, ritual phrases whose meaning is guessed at more than known. But to hear it whole again...” He shook his head slowly. “That would strike like thunder. Some would think it a curse. Others claim.”

“It was only a farewell,” Shardra said, frowning.

“I know,” Wnel replied gently. “But most do not.”

She sat in silence for a time, then said, “There is another song. Older still. The **Song of Binding**. The one that makes a tribe one.”

The elder inhaled sharply, the sound catching in his chest.

“That song,” he said, barely above a whisper, “is said to have been sung when clans were first forged from wandering blood. We were told it was lost.”

“It is not,” Shardra said.

She sang.

Not loudly, and not for display. Her voice was deep and steady, carrying a resonance that pressed against the chest rather than the ears. The song spoke of shared fire and shared hunger, of standing shoulder to shoulder against cold, storm, and extinction. It was not joyful. It was not mournful. It was enduring.

The effect was immediate.

Those nearest the fire straightened without knowing why. Conversations faltered. A deep emotion, something between grief and resolve, rolled through the camp like a slow tide. Giants felt it in their chests, a subtle vibration that set the bones humming, as though the earth itself had leaned closer to listen. Some pressed hands to their sternum, breath catching, hearts suddenly aligned.

When she finished, no one spoke.

Wnel’s eyes were wet. “We thought it was gone,” he said hoarsely. “We thought ourselves diminished without ever knowing what we had lost.”

Shardra told him then of another song, the **Song of Banishment**, the one that cast a name from memory and blood alike. “I was too young to learn it,” she said. “It was last sung in my youth. My elders said, no child should carry those words unless the world had truly failed.”

Wnel nodded slowly. “May it never be needed again.”

He asked her to teach him the Binding Song.

The first attempt failed. The cadence slipped, the weight of the words uneven. The second faltered sooner still. Frustration tightened his jaw, but Shardra did not correct him harshly. She stayed. The night deepened, the fires burned low and were fed again. Wind swept the grass, carrying fragments of the melody outward.

When Wnel finally struck the cord, something changed.

This time, the song held.

As his voice found its true shape, the ground beneath the camp *rumbled*. Stones vibrated. The nearby trees shuddered, shedding frost from their branches. Giants across the steppe felt it and rose from their tents, drawn toward the elder’s fire without knowing why, only that what they were hearing was important, that it must be acknowledged, must be witnessed.

The youngest came first, eyes wide. Some of them began to hum along, not because they had been taught, but because the song seemed to live in them already. The vibration in the chest grew stronger, invigorating, unifying, like the echo of a great heartbeat shared by all present.

This was not magic as it was now understood. It was older. The **Word of the Ancients**, from a time when the earth was new, and giants and dragons shaped the world side by side. It stirred purpose, sharpened resolve, and left no one untouched.

When Wnel finished, dawn was breaking.

He bowed his head, not to Shardra, but to the past. “You come from the eastern mountains,” he said quietly.

Shardra nodded.

“Then it seems your clan was the last keepers of the old word,” he said. “While the rest of us forgot.”

Hospitality followed, as was custom: food, drink, offers of hearth and place. Wnel urged her to stay, to teach more, to help mend what time had thinned and scattered.

Shardra declined, politely but firmly.

Her road still led south.

As she departed, the weight of it settled upon her shoulders, heavier than her cloak. She had spoken words that shook clans. She had sung songs thought dead. And now she understood what that meant.

The old words were not merely language. They were **forces**, capable of binding or sundering those who heard them.

She would be more careful.

And she would choose, with great care, when the world was ready to listen again.

A Cautionary Tale

One incident known throughout the borderlands.

Shardra walked stoically along a faint, ill-used path southward, and hushed voices drifted to her ears. She looked around, gauging the situation as they stepped out of the brush like actors entering a stage, clubs loose in their hands, knives catching the light in thin, hopeful glints. Six of them, too thin, too young, cheeks hollow from bad winters and worse choices. They spread slightly, unconsciously, the way men do when they believe numbers will do the work for them.

“Drop the axe,” the largest said, trying for easy confidence, his grin stretched too wide on his narrow face. “We won’t hurt ya. Much.”

Shardra laughed.

It was not mocking at first. It burst out of her chest, a deep, booming sound that rolled across the clearing like distant thunder. She laughed again, louder, shoulders shaking, eye creasing with genuine amusement.

“Really,” she managed between breaths, wiping at her eye. “You,” another bark of laughter “, you lot think,”

The sound died abruptly as she straightened.

Their confidence bled away in that silence.

“All right,” she said, still smiling as she reached back. She set the axe gently against a tree, careful, almost reverent, and draped her heavy cloak over it like a promise. “Tell you what. Come on then. Let me teach you a lesson.”

She turned back to them and shifted her stance.

It wasn’t a brawler’s crouch or a soldier’s guard. Her feet planted wide, knees bent, weight low and forward. One hand open, the other loose but ready. Her shoulders rolled once, spine settling, breath deep and slow, clan-fighting, ritualized, brutal, efficient. Every motion is economical.

They hesitated.

The biggest one snarled, embarrassed by the pause, and charged with a shout.

Shardra stepped into him.

Her boot came up like a siege ram. The sole of it covered his chest entirely as it struck, a single explosive impact that drove the air out of him in a wet, cracking sound. He left the ground. Flew. Hit hard, tumbled, and did not rise. Ribs shattered like dry kindling.

Two more were already swinging.

She caught one by the wrist mid-arc, turned with the motion, and lifted him clean off his feet. The ground met him spine-first with a sound like dropped meat. He gasped once, a thin, useless noise, and went slack.

A knife bit into her arm as the third slashed wildly, carving a red furrow through skin.

Shardra looked at it.

Then she smiled.

Her fist drove forward, not fast but impossibly heavy, catching him square in the face. Teeth exploded. Bone crumpled. He folded where he stood and dropped like a sack.

The last three broke.

They didn’t shout. They didn’t threaten. They turned and ran, panic unraveling them as if something ancient had reached up and reminded them what prey felt like.

Shardra didn’t pursue.

She walked instead, slow and unhurried, to the fallen. She nudged the first man with her boot, listened to the wet rattle of breath. Alive. She rolled the broken-mouthed one onto his side so he wouldn’t choke on blood, more out of habit than mercy.

Then she retrieved her axe, swung the cloak back over her shoulders, and adjusted the strap where the knife had cut her arm.

Still smiling, she walked on as if nothing at all had happened.

By dusk, the story had reached the hamlet, carried on breathless feet and cracked voices.

It arrived first as noise, shouting at the edge of the fields, dogs barking, a bell rung hard and wrong. Farmers left half-stacked wood, a cooper abandoned his hoops, and someone's stew burned black while its owner leaned out a doorway to listen.

They came running down the road, the three who'd fled. One without a knife anymore, one missing a shoe, all of them pale as churned milk. One was crying. Another wouldn't stop swearing.

"Gi, giant," the tallest of them gasped, bending over with his hands on his knees. "A giant woman."

That word alone drew a crowd.

Old Jarn from the tannery snorted. "Aye? And did she stomp the moon flat while she was at it?"

"No!" the boy snapped, near hysterical. "She laughed. Gods, she laughed like, like thunder in a cave."

That earned a few exchanged looks.

They talked over one another, the tale tumbling out in pieces, how they'd had her, how she'd *set the axe down*, how she'd *waited*, how Tarl had flown, actually flown, through the air, how Breck's back bent the wrong way. How Hesse's face... they stopped there, several of them gagging.

"She didn't even chase us," one said, voice small. "Just looked at us. Like we were... chores."

That part stuck. A handful of folk went pale. Others scoffed.

"Six of you," said Mira, the miller's wife, arms crossed. "Six grown lads, and one woman broke you?"

"She weren't right," another insisted desperately. "Big as a draft horse. An eye like ice."

"Eye? A cyclops?" called someone from the back.

"No, she. Her other eye had a scale patch." One remarked.

The bell rang again, sharper this time.

They went out with lanterns as the light failed, four men with poles, two women with bandages, and Old Rennick, who'd fought in three border skirmishes and still walked with a limp that weather couldn't hide.

They found them where the boys said they would.

That quieted the laughter.

Tarl lay where he'd landed, chest rising shallow and wrong, ribs pushed inward like a crushed basket. Breck stared at nothing, eyes open, breath thin but steady. Hesse's mouth... no one spoke of Hesse's mouth. Rennick knelt, touched a broken tooth with his thumb, and whistled low.

"Fist," he said after a moment. "Not a club. Gods help me, that was a bare hand."

They secured them to doors and shutters, then hauled them back slowly and carefully. By the time they returned, the story had grown teeth.

"She fought bare-handed."

"She laughed the whole time."

"She set her axe aside like it was nothing."

"She kicked Tarl so hard he flew."

That last part drew snickers once the worst fear ebbed.

“Flew, did he?” called Danna the shearer. “Must’ve been the wind at his back.”

Someone else added, “Aye, the same wind that carries fools off cliffs.”

There was ribbing, then quiet at first, then louder as fear gave way to familiarity. The truly skilled folk, the ones who’d held lines or broken charges, shook their heads.

“Six on one,” Rennick muttered into his cup later that night. “And you didn’t even bleed her proper.”

“Hesse cut her; she just smiled,” one of the runners insisted weakly.

Rennick looked at him over the rim of his mug. “Then thank whatever gods you keep that she did.”

By morning, the hamlet agreed on a shape of the truth, even if details wavered.

A lone giant woman. Big. Calm. Strong enough to end a fight without killing if she chose. Dangerous, yes, but not cruel. The axe mattered less in the retelling than the choice to leave it behind.

And somewhere between the jeers and the groans, a lesson settled in.

Next time a traveler laughed and *set her weapon down*, you didn’t rush her.

You backed away.

Quietly.

She walked her path further south, casual, unhurried, enjoying the warmer clime and bountiful game. It was an easy trip compared to the last few years.

It was here she heard the cries of injured and dying men. She crept forward carefully to see the men of the south, half a dozen. Some lay still and lifeless in pools of blood. These were hard men, bandits by the look, cut and stabbed, laid low, most dead or dying. One man might live, she thought, his face torn and ripped by... something. She touched her eyepatch, remembering the day it happened. The wounds weren’t the same, but they triggered a painful memory she had long tried to forget.

The man with the rent face saw her, thought the blood, as she rose to her intimidating height, and he fled. Leaving his companions to their fate. Sharda did not chase. She looked at those who remained and deemed them beyond help. The ground, however, gave up something intriguing: small tracks, quick, desperate, and obviously effective. There was no blood trail, nothing but disturbed earth and trampled grasses to make the trail.

She followed it, curiosity? Perhaps. But it piqued her interest in a way few things had in years. Something small and fast had laid these men low.

The trail wasn’t obvious, but it wasn’t hidden either; it was made in haste, so she followed for nearly a mile. Then she found him, and the real story started.

A curious little kobold full of desperation and defiance in equal measure. A knife-quick thing with bright eyes and broken speech, whom she dubbed Mouseknife without thinking.

And for the first time in over a decade, her life became measurably better.

Companionship, long absent, returned in a shape she had never expected. She welcomed it without understanding why. Perhaps she had been seeking it all along, in ways she could never name.

Chapter Two, Eeyagoo.

Where the Road First Cut Them Together

Eeyagoo did not see the humans; he smelled them, and Mimi stiffened, sensing danger. She smelled it too. Old leather. Cheap oil. Human sweat left too long on a damp cloth. The air carried it badly, carelessly, like men who had never learned that the world listens back. He slowed without stopping, letting his steps shorten, letting his breathing quiet.

Four, maybe five heavy footfalls. He snuck a look, it was foolish, he knew better, but curiosity can come at a cost. They didn't have bows; that was good, but they noticed him.

They saw him and laughed.

A lone kobold on the road, barely three feet tall, wrapped in mismatched leathers patched and repatched again, carrying a bone spike and a short cutter that looked more like scavenged tools than weapons. One of them spat into the dust.

"Oi, lizard-rat!" the biggest called, armored in stitched hide and confidence. "Drop the blades, and maybe we don't nail your tail to a tree!"

He said nothing. He tilted his head, as if listening to something far away. Let them close. Let them smell victory. Let them decide they were already done. Then he moved.

There was no cry, no flourish, only economy. He dropped low and surged forward like a sprung trap, ducking beneath the first man's clumsy swing. The bone spike came up hard and fast, slamming into the back of the knee. Tendons parted. The man collapsed screaming, surprise turning instantly into pain. A quick stab to the liver to end the threat and Mimi leapt from his shoulder, transforming into a ball of claws and teeth. She hit the second man in the face, he screamed a muffled cry, dropping his weapon and trying to pry her off, tearing his own flesh as he did.

Eeyagoo twisted with the fall of the first bandit and tumbled up behind another, driving the cutter up between ribs, into lung and liver, deep enough that the breath left the man forever.

The fourth bandit turned too late.

Eeyagoo kicked off the dying body, spinning through the air like a thrown knife. He slid under a club, came up inside the man's reach, and buried the curved spike into the soft hollow of the armpit. Blood sprayed hot and sudden.

They were shouting now. Fear crept into their voices.

"He's too fast, gods,"

One tried to flank him. Eeyagoo rolled into his shins, rose in the same motion, and stabbed with ruthless economy, ankle, inner thigh, groin, ribs. Not killing blows. Breaking blows. Bleeding blows.

He did not block. He slipped. Twisted. Let their strength carry past him. A dagger slashed where his head had been a breath earlier. He was already behind that man, crunching the spike into the base of the skull.

"My face!" screamed the man with a spray of blood as Mimi leapt and flew back to Eeyagoo's shoulder, backing away.

Eeyagoo sprinted into the underbrush, he did not wait to see who lived. He ran.

The woods and scrub swallowed him as it always had, thorns and roots tearing at his legs, breath burning, heart pounding so loud it felt like it might draw pursuit all on its own. He did not slow until his lungs screamed. He collapsed into the hollow of a burned-out stump, shaking, blood slick on his claws that was not his.

Safe. He checked Mimi, there was blood on her but not hers. "Good, fight well." He reached in his sack for some dried meat, the last of his stores for now, and offered it to the small dragonish creature curled on his shoulder and neck. She chirped happily, chewing on the tough meat, then melded into his cloak, snuggling down to rest, for now. He steadied his breath, tried to calm himself, but it was not to be.

A heavy footfall approached, he crouched ready to erupt out of hiding if needed.

Steps. Measured. Too heavy for men.

Eeyagoo tensed. Mimi remained hidden but ready, blades up, body coiled to strike or flee. And then she stepped into view.

She was enormous, three times his height, built like a moving cliff. Hair wild red with streaks of white braided tight at her temple. One eye gone, replaced by a polished scale that caught the light like deep blue ice. In her hands was an axe that should not have existed, clear as frozen water, its heart glowing red and pulsing like a living thing.

Power rolled off her in waves.

She had moved quietly, impossibly so for her size. But Mimi had tensed seconds before Eeyagoo heard the footfall in the still of the woods.

Eeyagoo snarled, backing deeper into the stump's shadow.

"BACK," he hissed in ragged Common. "I cut. Not go easy."

She stopped instantly. Her expression was hard for him to read, experience with big folk was limited and almost always violent.

Hands rose, slow and deliberate. No sudden movements. No mockery.

"Not after you," she said, voice rough but calm. "Let's not waste blood today."

She knelt.

And then, impossibly, she set the axe down. He considered bolting then, but her reach, her presence, gave him pause.

The weapon hummed softly, light dimming as if it obeyed her.

"That's resting," she said. "You can too. I am not hunting you or your kin."

Eeyagoo stared. His impression was one of great danger, but she offered no attack yet. This confused and intrigued him. That, mixed with the uncertainty of escape if he tried, kept him still as his mind raced.

She reached into her pack, causing him to tense again, but Mimi, hidden in his cloak, had relaxed. He watched as she unwrapped food, not fancy, not bait. Bread scarred by travel. Jerky stiff with salt and spice. She placed it on a flat stone between them and withdrew her hand.

"Eat if you're hungry," she said. "Talk if you want. Or don't. I'll listen either way."

Silence stretched, taut as a drawn wire.

Finally, hunger won.

Eeyagoo crept forward, every muscle ready to spring. He snatched the food and retreated a step, chewing fast at first, then slower as the taste hit. Good meat. Long-keeping. Proper spice. Not surface-pretty nonsense.

"Good," he muttered. "Keeps long."

She smiled faintly, watching him without pressure. Her look was one of appraisal, he had seen that before, but this time he was not discounted, deemed less. If he read her look correctly.

"I'm Shardra," she said. "How did you walk through those men back there with not a scratch I can see on you?"

He swallowed and grinned, a sharp, feral thing.

"Big enemies loud," he said. "Think small means weak. Think wrong."

She huffed a laugh. "You have fight in you little Mouseknife, more than most I've known."

He puffed up slightly. "Mouseknife is good name," he declared. "Sharp. Small. Fast."

Shardra sobered then, studying him properly.

He rummaged in his sling and produced a squat gourd bottle, sniffed it, took a sip of thick fermented root liquor, then, without hesitation, offered it to her.

"You brave," he said. "Try."

She sniffed it and nearly choked laughing, sound booming through the trees.

"Gods below," she wheezed. "That's a crime."

"You shouldn't be alone out here," she said. "Not long-term. World eats lone things."

"You trick?" he asked bluntly. "Sell kobold? Use as bait?"

She raised her palm. "By my axe and the ash of my fathers, no."

A long moment passed.

Then Eeyagoo nodded once.

"Okay," he said. "I follow. But I choose camps. And don't touch tail when sleep."

She grinned. "Deal."

They did not walk ten miles together before the world tested that decision.

Shardra heard it first, the shift in wind, the wrong rhythm of stone. She crouched, one hand already on the axe.

"Movement," she murmured. "Big. Not beasts."

Eeyagoo hissed. "Ambush." In his cloak Mimi readied for battle, but he rested a stilling hand on her, bidding her remain hidden. Who knows what the big axe would think of her.

They burst from cover like a broken dam, three of them, skin like scorched clay and obsidian, weapons burning with inner heat. No warning. No words.

The first stone shattered beside Shardra's head. Another clipped her jaw, the third smashed into her shoulder, raising a welt.

She ignored it, roared and charged. The axe answered, flaring cold-blue, red heart pounding. A sweeping arc caused the attackers to duck and leap back to avoid the glistening blade.

"NOW, she yelled, looking away from where he crouched in the shadows.

He did not hesitate. He launched into them, a blur of rust and bone, straight into the hammer-wielder's neck. Shardra met the sword-bearer head-on, axe splitting stone and bone alike. Fire of his blade met the frost of

her axe. Her prodigious strength won out as the sword crashed back into its wielder, cutting his shoulder and staggering him. Her follow-through spun into a reverse cut that carved through his thigh, bone and all. He screamed, and staggered down to one knee.

Another came at her from the side, earth-kin, taller than a man but not by much. A hammer swung like a comet, Sharda took the blow on her left shoulder and roared in pain. But she didn't stop.

She rammed the haft of her axe into the Tal-Shie's stomach, then spun and took his head off with a roar and a spray of earthen blood.

Meanwhile, Eeyagoo landed on the shoulder of the fire-hammer wielder and stabbed downward with his bone spike, sinking it into the base of the creature's neck. He twisted as the Tal-Shie howled and tried to grab him. Eeyagoo kicked off, spun in the air, and landed low, slicing the back of the Tal-Shie's knee.

"Fall DOWN!" he hissed, voice half-snarled. The Tal-Shie fell.

But it wasn't over.

The wounded sword-bearer staggered up, and stabbed. Sharda took a wicked slash across her ribs down to her hip and nearly dropped her. She twisted, teeth clenched, and drove her axe upward through his gut, lifting him off the ground. He convulsed and died.

The air stank of blood, and poison. Sharda's breath was ragged and fast as the adrenaline faded and the pain set in. She fell back against a rock, her wounds bled freely. The twisting cut from the sword by far the worst. "Shard-curse it. They cut me. Deep."

Eeyagoo was already moving. "Bad smell on blade," he said, sniffing the sword's edge, then his own wound. "Venom. Deep seeping. Slows heart. Clots blood wrong. Makes sleep that doesn't end."

His claws moved fast, bandages, bone needles, bundles of leaves and black moss crushed to pulp in his tiny hands. He stitched her wound with practiced speed, then packed a foul-smelling poultice into it.

"Hold breath. This sting."

"Good. Means it works. You're a healer?" Sharda grunted, surprise evident on her pained expression.

"Do what can, not know this," he gestured to the wound and blade. "But like must tie wound hold."

He worked fast, chewing on a poultice to slow the poison in his own veins from a wayward dagger thrown by one of the things. It was long, he barely had enough twine, she passed out halfway through but he kept working. Then he did the same for himself, sewing a clean line of black thread across his side.

Then, he looted the fallen. Their weapons were jagged, strangely warm, and etched with glowing sigils. Their packs carried blackened rations and glassy stones humming with power, useless, maybe dangerous. He piled the spoils near the small fire he had made and rested lightly with Mimi hidden but on watch to help guard them.

By morning the giantess was moving and awake, if in considerable pain. He offered a stew that she found surprisingly good.

"Thank you Mouseknife, that would have been my last fight if not for your skills."

She seemed genuine, it struck him.

"Did what needed," he shook his head. "Lucky."

She smiled, shaking her tangles of red hair out of her face and towards the side where the patch rested.

"Still, I thank you, truly. You could have left me."

He turned and tilted his head. “No, we together. No leave.”

It seemed like an oath but was spoken as normal conversation.

Eeyagoo went to move the bodies or cover them, only to find they had dissolved away during the night. Vague outlines of ash and dust were all that remained. The odd leathers they wore remained, but he did not touch them.

When he reported this Shardra seemed to become lost in a daydream for a few seconds, then shook her head and shrugged. Still, they took what was useful. Eeyagoo scraped the poison into a clay vial. Shardra strapped one of the hammers across her back beside her axe.

Then they moved. Fast as she could manage, which was surprisingly fast given the injuries. They stopped often to rest, traveling several miles or more, neither speaking.

Finally, under the leaning shadow of a wind-blasted pine, they made camp, no fire. Eyes watching the dark.

Shardra spoke first, voice low. “They didn’t scout. Just attacked.”

Eeyagoo nodded. “What they?” he asked.

She looked at him, her single eye still bright with fire.

“Creatures from the far West, I heard stories as a child, these seem like them.” She laid the weapons they had taken out between them.

After they camped beneath a huge warp pine, the wind rustled dry needles like whispers of something long buried trying to speak again. Shardra sat hunched over one of the strange blades, its jagged edge glowing faintly like embers under ash. She turned it in her calloused hand, watching how the metal seemed to ripple, like heat over stone.

“This isn’t steel,” she muttered, more to herself than to Eeyagoo. “It’s older. Don’t know how I know that, but I do.”

The kobold sniffed it, cautious. Then scraped the metal with a claw, his nose wrinkled. “Metal sings. Magic’s stuck inside it. Old spell. Not good. Smell wrong.” He shook his head. “Too tight, caught too long.”

Shardra laid it down and reached for the warhammer. Its head was carved from some dark glass-like stone, veined with red and gold, and heavy enough to crack a man’s spine through plate. The haft was scorched and etched with tiny script, Kalaalitian, she realized with a jolt.

Her brow furrowed.

“These... aren’t just raiders. They’re still at war.”

Eeyagoo tilted his head. “What war? With who?”

Shardra stared into the wind, memory curling behind her eye like smoke.

“Kalaalit. Kingdom of fire-books and tower-lords. These, these were Tal-Shie, they came from Tuarnedelose... land of dead magic. Fought for hundreds of years with Kalaalit, over some wound the earth still won’t let heal. Wizards called fire from moons. Tal-Shie cracked mountains to drown them. No one won. Just silence, and bones too cursed to bury.”

She reached out, laying a finger on the warped sword again. It was buzzing faintly now, in time with her pulse.

“Thought they were gone. Broken. Hiding. But this,” she gestured to the weapons and the sigils. “This says they’re still fighting. Still marching. No kingdom to defend, just a war that never ended.”

Eeyagoo hissed through his teeth and crouched over one of the poisoned daggers they'd found. He sniffed and scraped it with the bone spike.

"Poison's not made. Grown. Fed to metal. Not kobold trick. Not right."

Shardra nodded. "This metal's not right either. Feels like the world was softer when it was forged. Like it was meant for a time when death was slower, but magic was meaner."

"How know?" Eeyagoo asked, head tilted in the way he did when he studied things he didn't quite fathom.

He waited when she sighed and looked at her hands.

"Sometimes, I dream of old things, lost things. Things I've never seen or heard, but this feels right. They are the Tal-Shie. Elemental Fae from far away and long ago. Nightmares out of old stories."

He looked up, she hoped that was enough, and it was. He nodded and looked back to the weapons.

"Safe?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, but at a guess, no."

He looked at her, then back to the pile, then back to her. "Hide? Bury?"

She nodded and he immediately walked over to a patch of earth and started digging. And he could dig, not spade or shovel, just claws and strength. Shortly he had a pit twice as deep as he stood and he clambered out seemingly pleased with his efforts.

"Good?"

She nodded.

They wrapped the weapons in thick cloth, bound them in rope, and buried them a few dozen feet from the camp.

"We'll mark it," Shardra said. "If we don't make it to Taurdain, someone ought to know where this is."

Eeyagoo scratched a mark into the bark of the nearest tree, a simple glyph meaning danger, cursed, death-in-metal. He added a second line beneath it: mouseknife-saw-this.

They ate little that night, wounds still stiff and throbbing. Shardra's ribs were blackening beneath the bandages. Eeyagoo's side leaked a little with each breath.

But sleep did not come easy.

Somewhere far off in the trees, a shriek echoed, answered by nothing but silence.

The Bonded One

During his early wandering, Eeyagoo discovered a cave deep and dark. It had smelled safe at first, but soon the smell of death and rot filled the air. He found a chamber littered with the bodies of fallen big folk. What had killed them, he could not tell. They had various injuries. Torn armor. Twisted limbs. Ugly punctures.

"Week? More?" Eeyagoo mumbled softly to himself. Hard to tell how long. Long enough to be safe, he thought.

He decided to loot the fallen, taking any tools and such, he might use and could carry. A gold ring, warm to the touch he slipped on his thumb. It seemed to take the edge off the chill, much to his delight, he hated the cold and this was a welcome boon. His bag, the Seer's bag of his warren, he had carried since she sent him on the fateful path that horrible day, seemed full. Then, when he looked for more space, there was more room in the satchel. He was startled and puzzled at the bag but decided to examine it later.

As he continued to explore the cavern, he made a fateful discovery. In its depths he found a clutch of strange eggs. Eggs he did not recognize from years of life in the warrens. He was deciding if they were edible or not when one moved. It began shuddering and starting to hatch. It was the only one that seemed to be alive, at least while he was there.

That hatchling was a small amorphous thing that he recoiled from at first, memories of the slimes rushing forward causing involuntary action. But it smelled safe. It moved slowly at first and stretched a tendril upward toward him. Then it started changing. The shapeless mass formed into a lizard-like form. It chirped an odd warble, more akin to the birds of the surface than a small reptile.

He tentatively reached forward to touch it when it leapt onto his arm. He was startled at first, almost moving to strike it, but it stopped on his shoulder and perched there, looking around as if it belonged there.

Eeyagoo thought it must be a mimic baby, and named it, not very imaginatively, Mimi.

Mimi, the shapeshifting carnivorous creature, became a constant companion from then on. From the moment of hatching, she seemed bonded to Eeyagoo, clinging to him physically and emotionally. She seemed to need or want, constant skin contact, often riding his shoulder with her tail wrapped protectively around his neck.

He tested many foods and found Mimi's favored foods were toasted insects and lightly cooked meats. She will eat nuts, fruits, and vegetables, but clearly dislikes these. Over time she has learned to vocalize a handful of simple Common words, often mimicking tone rather than meaning.

Eeyagoo talked to her treated her as family, something he missed greatly. His whole life had been surrounded by his clan hundreds of others, to be alone was a pain he was happy to forget.

He would talk with her for hours at night in Draconic and his broken Common. He would read from the old books the Seer's bag held, which spoke of many things, practical and less so. The books were his solace. Where they came from, he did not know, but other than the ones on magic there were books on herbs, both ones he knew and those of the surface world. The seer had called it the clan's legacy, whatever that meant. Books on poisons, and most interesting to him, as well as a book on treating wounds. Several were in Draconic, an older but readable form, and some were illegible to him.

Mimi perched on his shoulder watching as he turned the pages, occasionally repeating some phrase he had read aloud.

Years in the Wild

For nearly two years, Eeyagoo and Mimi lived as ghosts between stones and trees. Cold weather was their greatest enemy. Eeyagoo hated the cold. It gnaws at him, slows him, and forces hard choices. Even if the gold ring kept him from the worst, it was still uncomfortable. He learned to dry meat, toast insects, stitch hides, and select camps invisible to larger folk.

His knowledge of stone proved critical. After days of searching, he located a tiny fissure leading into a larger cave system with fresh water and no major inhabitants beyond insects. There they made a fragile home, until the outside world intruded.

Mimi came flying in, frantic, when larger folk began clearing the surrounding woods. Eeyagoo understood the pattern immediately. More would come. They would be older, stronger, and organized. He shushed Mimi, quietly packed up the camp, and left. The night covered their exit and the big folk were none the wiser.

He began teaching Mimi how and when to fight. Signals to stay unseen or sting a target. He recounted slowly and repeatedly an encounter he had just after leaving the warrens, when watching some big folk. An armored

one with a large sword, noisy and clumsy but dangerous. A fae or elf that smelled of mint and struck from shadow. And a mage who threw fire.

He had lived. He was not sure it was skill or luck. The fighter he handled, something he had done in the warren. But the other two had been dangerous, and he left wounded and vulnerable. He did not even loot the fallen that time, just fled to be safe and hide. He chose to leave rather than die unseen.

He instilled in her that hiding and avoiding a fight was safer than a battle. He had no concept of honorable combat and other surface notions. It was live, or risk dying.

This equated to Mimi avoiding any interaction with others, except the little fae that stayed with them a while in the deep woods of northern Mithrin. Beezzidalidhalth or some other absurdly unpronounceable name it had given. He called it Beezy, and it stayed with them for several weeks talking too fast for him to follow at times and playing with Mimi. She spoke of old herbs, rare plants, the way of the woodlands, how to get honey without the sting. He learned many things from it before, one day it was gone, they never saw it again. He sometimes missed the conversation even if it was hard to follow. But the Fae are strange and unknowable, perhaps he offended it? Or it got bored, he would never know.

The Night Mimi Revealed Herself

Eeyagoo had traveled with Shardra for nearly half a season before he let her see Mimi, or rather Mimi showed herself. It was not mistrust that stayed his hand. The giantess had never given him cause for it. Rather, he did not know how anyone was meant to react to a mimicing, small, hungry, clever, one that had learned his scent and cadence, the rhythm of his breath and the feel of his pulse. Such creatures were spoken of in warnings and tales, not introduced beside a cookfire.

So, Mimi remained hidden. She lay coiled in pouches and sleeves, flattened into buckles or bowls, stilled into the dull shape of a coin or spoon. She listened. She waited. And when it suited her, she moved.

Shardra never pressed him, though she obviously suspected something. She was a woman made of restraint, marked by scars she did not explain. When she leaned on the haft of her great axe by the fire, or murmured prayers to the old gods into the smoke, her remaining eye held no suspicion, only a watchfulness born of long survival. Still, Eeyagoo wondered what she would do if she knew. What she would think if she learned he carried a creature that could become almost anything, and had chosen him besides.

The question lingered until one clear night, bellies full on roasted roots and salted hare, when Mimi decided the time had come.

Without signal or warning, the dull coin softened in Eeyagoo's pouch. It stretched, reshaped, took on scale and limb and small, uneven wings. A tiny pseudodragon climbed his arm, bronze plates catching the firelight, lamp-black eyes bright with interest. She settled on his shoulder, tail curling possessively against his collarbone, as if she had always belonged there.

Then she chirruped, voice thin and uneven, a patchwork of sounds she had stolen and kept.

“Warm fire. Shiny rocks. Eat now. Good.”

The words were Draconic, broken and imprecise, learned by listening and gaining some understanding. They were his words, bent and echoed back with simple satisfaction.

Shardra stopped chewing. She did not reach for her axe. She did not speak. She merely lifted one brow and regarded the small creature with a long, careful look. Then her gaze shifted to Eeyagoo and stayed there, patient and expectant. Not accusation. Not alarm. A request.

He scratched Mimi beneath the jaw, and she leaned into the touch, her throat fluttering. He shrugged, as if this were not worth hiding anymore.

“Mimi mine,” he said. “Found her near old cave vault. Was baby thing. No bite. I talk nice. She stay. I teach. She learn. Clever. Good hide. Good trick. Good.”

Shardra listened without interruption. When he finished, she did not laugh or scold. She only nodded once.

“Well,” she said. “That makes us three.”

There was no more to it than that. No judgment, no warning. From Shardra, it was as close to acceptance as Eeyagoo had ever known.

Mimi, however, was unconvinced. She kept her distance from the giantess, watched her with unblinking eyes, and refused the shiny spoon offered in peace. She sniffed it once and turned away, offended. Her appraisal was quiet and thorough, and whatever verdict she reached, she kept it to herself.

Yet she never left Eeyagoo’s side. Wherever he went, she followed, curled against his throat at night, perched on his shoulder by day. Devotion, in her way, absolute and unyielding.

When their steps brought them close Taurdain, it was together. The giantess with her frost-singing axe. The wiry kobold with his scavenger’s pack. And the small, watchful mimic in borrowed dragon form.

They sought knowledge, of Shardra’s axe called Rimeheart, of its making and its past, of whether it had chosen Shardra or merely waited for her. Archivists and rune priests waited ahead, in towers of iron and sea stone.

Shardra walked with purpose. Mimi with suspicion. And Eeyagoo, for the first time since the warren drowned, walked not alone.

Before Mithrin, Waiting for the Tide

They had not planned to stop.

That was the truth of it. However, the refugee camps were overcrowded and unkempt. A hundred or more people milling about in a camp suited for less than half that. The few knights guarding the people were unable to keep up with their needs. The cursed populace fleeing in search of cures for a pestilence of divine origin.

The coast camp lay spread across a broken shelf of land where the plains met the sea, wind-scoured, half-flooded when storms came in, and crowded with folk who had run farther than their strength could carry them.

Shardra took one look and slowed her stride. Eeyagoo noticed.

Mimi blended in and hid within his cloak.

They were meant to be passing through, seeking passage, nothing more. But the camp smelled wrong: rot beginning to set in, old blood poorly cleaned, latrines dug too shallow, fear pressed into everything like damp cold. And the two still needed healing after the recent fight; they could use some recovery time.

Shardra set her pack down.

“That’ll not do,” she said. One of the Knights asked what their business was. Shardra, gruff as ever, said, “We plan to help while we await passage to Taurdain.” She looked around at the folks standing staring up at her. Their faces changed when she said Taurdain. “What’s wrong? Why are all these people here?”

The Knight, a junior member of the order, stiffened a bit then sighed. “You’ve not heard? Taurdain is cursed by the Tal-Shie gods. We won the war, but they had revenge. A malady, a fading affects all her trueborn people.”

He gestures to the ramshackle encampments. "These seek refuge in Auris, Lady Gavashoon offers what aid they may give. But nothing cures it, the weakest fade fastest, the old, the sick, the injured." He gulps a bit. "The newborns..." He looks up at the giantess, then down at the kobold, who seems to be studying the camp. "If you mean to help, we welcome it. The few of us here do what we can, but it is not nearly enough."

The Knight, Sir Malrick, went on to explain that *The Hag*, was making supply and refugee runs non-stop since the calamity befell Taurdain. And that they might be able to gain passage if they were willing to work for it.

Shardra looked down at Eeyagoo, then back to the knight. "I'm Shardra, he is Mouseknife, or Eeyagoo if you can wrap your tongue around it. We will do what we can while we wait for a boat. So, something is going to Auris, not sure that works for us." Eeyagoo, nodded his head. "Yes heal, help where can."

That *The Hag* was coming was a shocking thing to Shardra, who had heard tales of the ship. It sailed to the northern ports in Kadathe' her homeland over the past few years. But that didn't keep the rain from the children's heads or feed them in the here and now. So, Shardra went to work building structures that could withstand the elements. Pain crossed her face when she had to really use her strength. Her stitches made the job difficult. She didn't ask what was needed; she started building what she deemed appropriate.

Shardra tore down wind-fallen timber with her bare hands and hauled it back on her shoulders. She dug drainage trenches deep enough to actually matter, not the shallow scrapes folk made when they were too tired to hope. She raised frames for shelters that leaned with the wind instead of fighting it, anchoring them with stone and rope she knotted so tight even storms couldn't pry them loose.

She worked until her palms split. Then she wrapped them tightly with some cloth Mouseknife kept for bandages and worked more.

Shardra wore four long braids on the right side of her head.

They began behind her ear where the hair grew thick in her mane and ran longer than the rest of her hair, hanging well below her shoulder. The braids were pale, bleached nearly white against the deep copper red of the rest. They were clean and tightly bound with small bone rings that kept them from unraveling.

Eeyagoo noticed them and finally asked one quite night after a long day.

They were resting beside a low cooking fire. The kobold sat with his legs folded beneath him, cleaning a narrow blade with careful strokes of oiled cloth. His yellow eyes moved between the blade and the braids hanging over Shardra's shoulder.

"You cut them?" he asked.

Shardra shook her head once. "No."

She lifted the braids slightly so he could see them better. "They are not haircuts. They are deathmarks."

Eeyagoo tilted his head. "Death... marks?"

Shardra nodded. "One for each who must not be forgotten." She touched the first braid. "My father." The second. "My mother." The third. "My brother." Her hand rested for a moment on the last. "The boy who fell the day I lost this."

She tapped the gleaming blue scale eyepatch that covered the ruined eye. "They are not cut. Never cut. They are grown, tended, and carried. As long as I live, they remain."

Eeyagoo watched the braids for a long moment. Among kobolds the dead were rarely remembered one by one. The warrens fought constantly. Goblins, cave beasts, raids, collapses, sickness. Loss came often and quickly. Names faded because there were always more dead than memory could hold. To remember them all would break the mind. "I remember some," Eeyagoo said slowly. "But... not like that."

Shardra shrugged once. "My tribe does."

Eeyagoo considered the braids again. He understood the meaning easily enough. A promise carried in plain sight. A refusal to let time erase a person. What he did not understand was how someone could carry so few. Four. For someone who had seen war, that seemed impossible. He said nothing more that night.

Then she wrapped them tightly with some cloth Mouseknife kept for bandages, and worked more.

Every day, once she saw how low the food stores were, she went out onto the plains.

Not because she enjoyed it, though she would never admit fear, but because food was needed and the plains did not give themselves freely. The land out there was wide and merciless, a vast open bowl beneath the sky where there was nowhere to hide and nowhere to rest. Sightlines stretched for miles. Wind carried sound away just as easily as it carried scent, and anything that lived there had learned two lessons well: how to charge when cornered, and how to wait when patience would kill more surely.

Shardra learned the same. She started slowly but built to significant hunts, sometimes twice a day.

She brought back meat regardless.

Riekmoose first, great antlered beasts whose bulk hid surprising speed, brought down with careful stalking and a clean strike. She dragged two of the beasts in one day to the amazement of many. Plainsalter after that, leaner and wilier, forcing her to work for every cut. Then spinebacks: low, armored things with barbed ridges and tempers like kicked furnaces. Those took half a day and most of her patience, and when she dragged their carcasses back, she did so bleeding and grinning. Eeyagoo fussed over the new wounds, but Shardra didn't seem bothered. He removed the stitches from the old wounds with satisfaction. The scar was long but not thick, and it did not restrict movement.

Her feats of strength were the talk of the camp, and the Knights were often amazed by what she would drag in from the hunts. The camp had begun to believe she was untouchable.

That belief died quietly, in the tall grass.

It did not roar.

It did not charge.

It appeared, unheard, unseen, and unfelt, until its claws and fangs sank deep.

One moment, the plains were empty, but for wind and grass; the next, the grass itself rose and became teeth and muscles and murder. It struck from behind and above, a blur of motion so fast it felt unreal, sweeping blades flashing where forelimbs should have been. The impact drove her to one knee before she even knew she had been hit. Had it managed to get her neck, she would have been done.

Claws tore, raked, and hooked. They bit deep and pulled, tearing at the thick cloak she wore, trying to open her like a carcass. Teeth followed, long and curved, clamping down on the shoulder, a brutal wound, and then her thigh equally dangerous with crushing force.

Shardra screamed once, not in fear, but in rage and pain, and buried her axe deep into the beast's side, wrenching it as roughly as she could. It bit deep, crushed ribs, and surely tore a lung or something vital. She was shocked; she hadn't heard it, seen it, or even smelled it. It appeared on her back, tearing before she even knew it was near. The creature recoiled, silent even in pain, vanishing back into the grass as if it had never been there, save for the deep blood stains.

She did not chase it. She could not. Rimeheart had bitten deep, but so had the creature. She tried to wrap the worst wounds and staggered back towards camp, thanking the gods above that it was as close as it was.

Blood soaked her leathers, ran down her leg and side, and darkened the earth with every step. She stumbled, half-blind, following the compass of stubbornness alone until the camp came into view. Then she collapsed against the lean-to she had built with her own hands.

She pointed shakily back toward the plains, to the shocked refugees and the Knight standing watch.

“Half a league, maybe a bit more hard to tell..” she rasped. “That way. Follow the blood. Take two men, no, make it four. Bring it back.”

Someone tried to argue. She cut them off with a wet cough and a grin that was more teeth than humor.

“It’s got a lot of meat.”

Eeyagoo was already at her side, concern evident even on his normally unreadable face. His hands moved with practiced speed, pressing cloth into the wounds, binding where flesh had been torn open, murmuring, not prayers, not comfort, just steady words meant to keep her awake and breathing. Bite marks. Claw gouges. One wound dangerously close to an artery; he often targeted himself.

The refugees stared. They had watched her haul logs five men would struggle with, had seen her stride back into camp unbloodied from hunts that would have broken lesser folk. To see her like this, soaked in red, swaying, mortal, shook something fragile in them.

Eeyagoo looked up once, his eyes sharp. “She lives,” he said calmly. “Will heal. No worry.” They believed him. They had seen his hands work. They trusted those hands.

Shardra grabbed his sleeve weakly and pulled him closer. “Get the big claws,” she whispered hoarsely. “And the teeth. I want something other than scars to remember it by. Maybe some teeth, too.” She repeated, groggy.

Shardra drifted in and out while Eeyagoo worked. The pain came and went in waves, sharp when he cleaned a wound, distant when he pressed it closed, and the sky above them was a pale, indifferent smear. She breathed through her teeth, one hand clenched in the grass, the other slack.

“Hold still,” Eeyagoo murmured. “Deep one. I stitch.” She didn’t answer at first. Then, suddenly, her good eye opened, unfocused. “It was already there,” she said. Eeyagoo paused, needle hovering. “What was?” “The beast.” Her voice was rough, confused. “I didn’t feel it. No wrongness. No... nothing.” She swallowed. “I should have moved.”

He waited. He had learned when to let silence do the work. “I always move,” she went on, more to herself than to him. “Even asleep. Even half-drunk. There’s always a moment. A breath. This time...” Her jaw tightened. “It was on me tearing, biting before I even felt the air move.”

Eeyagoo stitched again, careful, slow. “It hid good,” he said, gently. “Very good.” She shook her head weakly. “No. it wasn’t there...then it was” Her hand twitched, fingers curling as if grasping for something that wasn’t there. “The shaman said...” She frowned, struggling. “Said I wouldn’t see it coming. That seeing wasn’t the gift.” A faint, humorless breath escaped her. “Said when it came, I’d already be moving.”

Her eye drifted closed. “And I wasn’t,” she finished, barely audible.

Eeyagoo tied off the stitch and set the needle aside. He didn’t speak for a long moment. He watched her breathing, counted it, and made sure it stayed steady. After a while, he said quietly, “Magic? Maybe. I look in books.”

Her lips moved, but no words came. She was already slipping again, pulled under by exhaustion and pain. Whether she heard him or not, he couldn’t tell.

He nodded satisfied when two of the Knight of Ukko arrive. They offered the blessings they could spare thanks to the improved overall health within the camp. "It is meagre but should help her recover." Eeyagoo, nodded and offered his thanks. "It is our duty to do what we can, especially for one who has aided so many." They seemed discouraged by the situation. Later The leader of the contingent arrived to pay respects and ask how she was doing. "Good, breath good, heart strong." Eeyagoo said. "You do magic?" he asked obviously uncertain. Sir Karidel looked at him a moment, they thoughtfully replied. "Ukko grants us blessings, nothing like the old days, but if our faith is strong, he listens to our prayers and grants boons and blessings. I am glad we were able to help; the wasting resists our faith."

The men returned long after dark.

They came dragging a thing none of them had words for.

Nearly two thousand pounds of muscle and bone, a great rent in its side, ushering it into stillness. They hauled it on a reinforced wagon, pulled by four men who looked as though they might collapse where they stood. Had there been fewer of them, it would have taken hours, if it could have been moved at all.

It was feline in shape, but only in the loosest, most insulting sense of the word.

The body was long and low, built for sudden acceleration. Its forelimbs ended not in paws but in great sweeping blades, natural scythes of bone and keratin that curved forward, perfect for hooking prey and pulling it close. The hindquarters were massive, corded with muscle meant for explosive leaps.

Its head was narrow and cruelly efficient, jaws filled with long, backward-curving teeth designed to hold, not tear free. The eyes, all six of them, were already dull, but even lifeless, they seemed to drink in light.

It's hide, that was its greatest wrongness.

The color of the plains grass itself, but not one color, dozens. Pale golds, dusty greens, gray-browns, all shifting subtly along the length of its body. In life, it would have vanished the moment it stopped moving. Now, torn and blood-slicked, the illusion was broken, but even marred, it was beautiful in a terrifying way.

Eeyagoo leaned in close.

He sniffed.

Then again.

Nothing.

No musk. No predator stink. No territorial marking. His keen senses, honed by years underground and on the road, found nothing but blood.

"Ambush stalker," he murmured. "Kills without warning. No scent to give it away."

His fingers carefully traced the edge of a scythe. Then he ran his claws through the dense short fur. "Hide is... good."

Shardra amazingly recovered enough by morning to move about the camp slowly. Between Eeyagoos' skills and unguents and the Knight's prayers, she was able to walk with a limp. Her left arm was in a sling, with a broken collarbone, that would take longer to heal even with aid.

Bruised, stiff, sore enough to curse every movement, but alive.

By the time she woke, the refugees had already field-dressed the beast under Eeyagoo's guidance. He tested the meat carefully, sniffed, tasted, and waited for reactions. True to his word, he had the long scythes, teeth, and claws working to clean them.

"It is food," he declared. "Good meat."

They portioned it out with quiet efficiency. The best cuts went first, not to the strongest, not to those who had pulled the wagon, but to the sick. To the children. To the ones whose ribs showed through skin. There was enough for the whole camp for days, which was good because Shardra did not hunt again for several days.

Shardra approved silently.

Eeyagoo scraped the hide himself, working methodically, reverently. The skin was immense, heavy, the fibers dense and resilient beneath his blade.

“A tent,” he said with a laugh that surprised even him. “big enough to make.”

By afternoon, Shardra had built the stretching rack, hammering stakes and lashing cord with grim satisfaction. Eeyagoo went back to moving through the camp as he always did while the skin dried, checking wounds, brewing teas, fixing what could be fixed.

Always, just slower and more carefully than she usually would have.

And the plains, for all their beauty, learned that even their deadliest could be taken and turned into shelter, food, and survival.

Aftermath: The Quiet That Followed Survival

The camp did not celebrate.

There were no cheers when the beast was dragged in, no raised voices when its bulk finally lay still in the firelight. Instead, a strange hush settled, thick, reverent, almost fearful. People stood at a distance at first, staring at the thing that had nearly taken the one person they had come to believe could not be taken.

Eeyagoo sketched it in his books, noting the oddities of its nature and the strangeness of its abilities based on what she had told him. It was not shown in any of his books, not even hinted at. None within the camp had seen its like before and that raised a fear. One he could not dispel.

Shardra lay propped near the central fire, bound in layers of cloth and leather, her breathing slow and steady but shallow with pain. Firelight flickered across her face, catching the pale scars old and new alike. She watched the camp with one good eye, silent now, her usual laughter absent, replaced with weakness and fatigue.

Children were ushered away gently. Adults lingered.

They spoke in low voices, as if afraid the plains might hear them.

“It was *there*,” one man whispered, staring at the beast’s hide. “Right there. Where we walk every day.”

“A hunter without a roar,” another murmured. “No warning. No sign.”

“Like the land turned on her.”

Eeyagoo moved among them quietly, blood still dark on his sleeves, checking bindings, answering questions with nods and brief words. When someone thanked him, he inclined his head but did not smile. His eyes returned again and again to Shardra, measuring her breath, counting time.

When the stew finally began to boil, rich, heavy with meat that would feed dozens, people gathered closer. Not to the food, but to each other. Cups were shared. Blankets passed along. Someone told a small story about Taurdain before the war, about a festival by the river that had once existed.

For the first time in days, no one interrupted.

That night, no one slept easily, but fewer lay awake alone.

The Knight of Ukko: Omen or Warning

Later, when the camp had settled into uneasy rest, a junior knight of Ukko stood watch near the perimeter. His armor was too new, his surcoat still stiff, his face young beneath the scars he did not yet carry.

He had seen the beast dragged in.

He had seen a giantess near death.

And it troubled him.

He approached one of the senior knights quietly.

“Sir,” he said, voice low. “That thing... I’ve never seen its like.”

“No,” the older knight replied. “Nor should you have.”

The junior knight hesitated, then spoke again.

“It hunted without scent. Without sound. It waited. That’s not a beast driven mad by war or hunger.”

The older knight studied the plains beyond the firelight.

“No. It’s a creature that learned its lessons well.”

“Do you think it’s... connected?” the junior asked carefully. “To Taurdain? To what’s wrong with the land?”

The silence stretched.

“Ukko teaches us this,” the older knight finally said. “Storms do not appear without cause. But neither do they always mean judgment.”

The junior swallowed.

“Then what does this mean?”

The older knight glanced back toward the fire, where Shardra lay alive when she should not have been.

“It means the world is sharpening its teeth,” he said. “And it means there are still those who can survive the bite.”

The junior knight nodded slowly.

That answer did not comfort him.

But it steadied him.

Eeyagoo continued to visit dozens of sick tents, never announcing himself.

He appeared where he felt he was needed; the recent events caused him to halt his daily forages for herbs and other natural items he might gather. Knowing such a thing lived here made him eager to see the plains at his back.

He moved through the camp like a shadow that stitched things back together. He cleaned wounds others would have left to fester, packing them with foul-smelling pastes that worked despite offending every civilized instinct. He bled fevers carefully, then gave them foul broth that eased the healing. He brewed teas from weeds everyone else had trampled without knowing their worth.

He never once said this will hurt.

He only said, “Hold,” and then did what needed doing.

Children learned to watch for him. When they saw the small kobold moving between tents, they stopped crying, not because he was gentle, but because they saw the comfort he gave to loved ones and they were not afraid.

Mimi only came out when they were alone, just the three of them. And then she often shaped herself like a mouse or something familiar in the camp to avoid notice. She stayed with Eeyagoo for the weeks they remained in camp, only venturing out in the dead of night and not beyond the camp edge, hunting rats, mice, voles, and bugs. She still avoided Shardra as if her size itself was enough to make her fearful, but she seemed to be growing more comfortable.

The camp began to breathe again.

No one asked them how much they wanted.

No one offered coin.

And they never asked for either.

When a camp elder finally tried, Shardra waved him off with a snort.

“Save it for needs in Auris,” she said.

The Knights of Ukko watched. They watched as just days after being nearly killed, Shardra cautiously began to hunt again, bringing in smaller game at first, but soon back to her usual fare.

They were used to seeing refugees, used to desperation, to bargaining, to people angling for protection or favor. They saw none of that here. They saw a giant woman hauling beams like a laborer, a kobold working until his hands shook.

Just work.

Day after day.

One knight noted how Shardra never slept deeply, always half-turned toward the tents. Another observed that Eeyagoo treated Ukko’s soldiers and refugees with the same care, no more and no less. A third realized that the camp’s sickness rate had halved within a week.

When *The Hag* finally arrived, black hull looming like a promise and a threat all at once, the camp stood steadier than it had any right to.

The shelters held.

The sick lived.

The children laughed again.

The Knights of Ukko did what they could to ensure passage was granted.

But when Shardra and Eeyagoo walked toward the docks, packs heavy and steps unhurried, every knight present straightened.

Helms came off.

Hands touched chestplates in salute. Recognition. Thanks.

Among those stationed there, the names Shardra and Eeyagoo were spoken afterward with quiet respect, not as heroes, not as saints, but as something rarer and more challenging to earn:

People who did the right thing, even to their own detriment, when no one was watching.

And that, in Ukko’s Order, was esteem of the highest kind.

Gaining passage on *The Hag* turned out to be a non-issue. The Captain merely gave them a look over, asked if they would fight if needed, and then motioned them aboard.

The Hag

The Swan and the Storm

Three days south of the refugee camp, they spotted her, a War-Swan from the Innarlith Navy, the Dragon Queens' army. Usually, you could barely see them, colored as they were to match the horizon, but this one strayed too close, and the watchers on *The Hag* were top-notch. "Bold," Grebdin grumbled. "Keep our heading and watch her, watch her close. If she approaches closer, notify me at once." Talbot nodded. Grebdin knew it was in good hands. The ship's mage Seimaiss Sarr, a pale, thin elf from some unknown land, shadowed the First mate.

The next day, the sea was glass. Dead calm. Not a wave, not a whisper. Only the low groan of the ship's hull and the distant, spectral creak of ropes.

Then she began an approach. A pale silhouette on the horizon, rising from the morning fog.

Gold-gilded hull. High wings carved from silver-laced cedar. Sails white as purity and just as false. At her prow, the crowned sunburst of the Dragon Queen glared like judgment, imperious, radiant, and utterly unearned.

A hush fell across *The Hag's* deck. The wind died, as if the world itself held its breath.

Captain Grebdin stood at the prow, a coal-black titan of a minotaur, still as carved obsidian. He raised his massive spyglass, took one long look, then spoke with the voice of a mountain cracking:

"Master Sarr. Send our word."

The elven mage moved quickly, robes billowing in sudden arcane wind. A raven of midnight ink and green flame took shape on his outstretched palm. Into its mind, he whispered the message:

"Venture no closer.

The Hag is sovereign. Your Dragon Queen holds no dominion here.

Test us, and suffer the full extent of our wrath.

Turn now. Or be unmade."

The raven launched, slicing across the sky like a dark blade.

It did not make it far.

A streak of gold light, swift, cruel, precise, pierced the sky and struck the raven mid-flight. The bird exploded in a shriek of embers and feathers.

A shot. A warning. A challenge.

"Raise the warning flags," Grebdin growled, turning slow and terrible toward the quarterdeck.

"Sound three bells."

"Ready all."

"*And await my word.*"

A flurry followed. Boots on planks. Steel on steel. Sails creaking into position. The hum of sigils being carved anew along the gunwales. Fear, yes, but *purpose* too. For we knew who stirred in the belly of the ship.

From below, *the underhold*, he came.

Kraglann. Siege Master of *The Hag*. Warlock. Bringer of Ruin.

He strode forth like a spirit of vengeance given flesh, short, broad, his umber skin smudged with soot, eyes bright with unshed madness. His beard was ragged, singed, and wild. His coat scorched, charred at the hems. Burnt leather hung from his shoulders like old battle flags.

And as he passed each cannon along the gun deck, he *spoke to them*.

Whispers in a tongue none of us knew. Not elven, not dwarven, not any human dialect. It was *older*. *Hungrier*.

The cannons hummed in reply.

He touched each one as if it were a priest touching a holy stone. The runes etched into their sides, runes only Kraglann understood, for his hand engraved them. They flared with dull, red heat in response to hit triggers.

His battle lust was a *force*. A gravity that bent the air around him.

And this wasn't just a battle. This was *vengeance*, for Kraglann had a bloody history with the Dragon Queen.

Through his spyglass, the Captain watched the war-swan close in. No hesitation. No shift in course.

An Elven *wind-mage* stood at her foredeck now, arms raised. The air around him shimmered and swirled with unstable power. Urging her forward, ballista and archers stood ready on her decks.

Their answer was clear. They would not turn.

So Grebdin lowered the glass.

And he gave the words that cracked the world open.

“Burn her to the waterline.”

“No quarter.”

“The cannons are yours, Kraglann.”

And then, gods help us all, the siege master *smiled*.

Eeyagoo and Shardra stood on deck watching with fascination and anticipation. For as the crew were scurrying about, battle was near if the enemy didn't heed.

What followed was entered into the maritime record in Mlthrin by the Captain of a ship who witnessed the exchange.

Incident Report – Naval Engagement Observed Along the Shattered Gulf

Date: 4th Day of the Bloodmoon

Reporting Vessel: *Valestrider*

Captain: Ergan Thorne

At mid-morning, while passing north of the Iron Shoals under fair calm weather, we witnessed a violent and total engagement between a known warship of the Thylorian Free Corsairs, identified as *The Hag*, and an Innarlithian War-Swan, presumed to be the *Gilded Vow* or *Seraph of Flame*.

The encounter began after an attempt by *The Hag* to communicate was shot from the air. Three bells sounded, a warning flag was raised, and yet the War-Swan continued directly towards *the Hag*; intent was clear.

At approximately half till noon *The Hag* opened fire with all portside cannon. The precision and brutality of the assault were immediate and overwhelming. The Innarlithian vessel attempted evasive maneuvering but was systematically destroyed. Almost immediately, the upper decks were ablaze. Within a few minutes, the ship was listing. The next volley fully engulfed the vessel and the surrounding sea in flames.

No survivors were observed.

One figure, presumed to be *The Hag's* siege master, was seen standing amidst the smoke, seemingly unaffected by the surrounding fire and recoil.

The commanding officer of *The Hag*, a minotaur, gave no visible command beyond a single gesture at the onset.

Recommend this incident be flagged for *Arcane Naval Review*.

Recommend trade routes avoid proximity to *The Hag* for the foreseeable future.

Captain Ergan Thorne

United Islands Merchant Authority

The Folly of the War-Swan

A crew member recounts the story more traumatically, one would say.

I should have jumped. I *should've* jumped. The sea would've been kinder.

I thought I'd seen horror. I've held the line at Port Wroth and survived the Night Siege at Frostharbor. I watched Tal-Shie sky ships nearly sink the Hag. But none of it, *none*, comes close to what I saw when the Captain gave Kraglann the guns.

I was belowdecks, powder line, just another hand on the rope, hauling, loading, resetting. You don't think down there; you just obey. You move or you burn. But then I heard it, *his* voice. Kraglann. Loud. Clear. Like molten rock tearing through your ribs.

Then the first blast hit. I thought we'd run aground. The walls screamed. My ears bled. I looked up the ladder well and saw light where there should've been shadow, *light* and smoke and fire, and that sound again, the one that lives in your bones.

The Innarlithian ship, it was a damn cathedral on water. Beautiful. Unbreakable.

Kraglann broke it.

He *broke it with fire*.

He walked along the gun deck like he was anointed, speaking to the cannons like they were saints. He glowed, *I swear on my mother's grave, he glowed*. Not with light. With *power*. Wrong, old, deep power. You could feel it in your teeth. In your marrow. The way prey must feel a lion's breath before the pounce.

And all the while, the Captain just stood behind him. Watching. *Letting it happen*. No orders. No corrections. Like he'd finally opened a cage and didn't care what came out, as long as it *went forward*.

When the war-swan sank, it didn't just burn. It screamed.

And Kraglann stood there, arms out, black coat tattered and flickering at the edges, laughing into the smoke.

I won't sleep again.

Not with that sound in my ears.

Not with that *look* in his eye.

Not with the smell of charred gold and burning silk hanging in my clothes.

Gods forgive us.

What Shardra and Eeyagoo saw was a brutal display of might; the cannons fired, and runes flared along the barrels. Kraglann walked along the gun line and laughed, oblivious to the smoke and sound. The Innarlithian

Ship was torn apart before she ever got in range to bring her weapons to bear. The once majestic ship sank below the waves with no survivors. It was quick and merciless. The type of overkill meant to send a message.

Shardra had never seen this level of destruction. She had a vague idea what cannons were, but this. Gods above, this was monstrous. Eeyagoo had covered his ears tightly and almost curled into himself, trying to hide from the noise. Mimi seemed unfazed but remained still and hidden as she had done since they came aboard.

After the carnage ended, Kraglann headed back below to wherever he stayed when not needed. Shardra and Eeyagoo retreated to their cabins, ears ringing and stunned by the destructive power. *The Hags'* reputation was surely well deserved.

Attack in the Night

Late that very night, another attack occurred. Silent, stealthy, covert.

It came, with the moon low and clouds blotting out the stars.

A dozen or more Water caste Tal-Shie boarded *The Hag* like the sea itself, silent, patient, and utterly confident it belonged everywhere it touched.

There was no shouted warning. No bell. No frantic cry of "Raiders!" to wake the sleepers below.

Only the soft, efficient work of murder: a watchman's breath stolen in a hand's clamp, a knife slid under ribs with a practiced twist, the muffled thud of a body settling against wet planks so it wouldn't clatter. The night wind carried it all away, salt, tar, rope, and the faintest iron tang that didn't belong.

Shardra and Eeyagoo were awake below, talking in low voices the way people do when sleep won't take them, and the ship's steady creaking feels like a living thing. Eeyagoos' ears kept twitching, tilting toward sounds that didn't match the rhythm of rigging and water, footsteps too careful, a scrape too controlled, a whisper of cloth against wood.

He went still.

"Something wrong," he breathed, not a question.

Shardra was already moving, cloak dragging behind her like a pale wave.

They hit the companionway fast, Shardra leading with Rimeheart angled across her chest. The hatch swung open and the night poured down on them, cold, briny, and black.

The deck was already carnage.

A spear punched toward Shardras' face before her boots even cleared the threshold. She caught it on the flat of Rimeheart with a clang that shivered up her arms, drove the haft sideways into the doorframe, and snapped it like kindling with sheer, contemptuous strength. The broken half skittered away over slick planks.

The spear's wielder stood in the moonlight for the space of a heartbeat: dark blue skin slick with seawet sheen, white hair hanging in a wild, salt-heavy mass, long-limbed and thin compared to the Tal-Shie they'd seen on the plains, built for speed, reach, and cruel precision.

It didn't matter.

Shardra surged forward like a landslide. Her shoulder hit him full in the ribs; the air left him in a wet grunt as she drove him down. Boards flexed beneath the impact. Before he could twist away, before his fingers could

even find a blade, she brought Rimeheart down in a compact, brutal blow, not a flourish, not a duel, just execution, and the Tal-Shie spasmed once and went limp, chest crushed inward as if the sea itself had decided to claim him. The blade flared and pulsed as she tore it free.

Around them, *The Hag's* deck was a slaughterhouse lit by scattered lanterns and hard starlight. Several crewmen lay sprawled where they'd fallen, blood leaking in thin streams that ran with the pitch and brine, turning the planks into a treacherous, shining smear. Every step threatened to slide; every handhold felt wet. The ship rocked gently, indifferent, making the gore creep and shift as if alive.

At the far end, near the quarterdeck and the clustered shadows of the rigging, Captain Grebdin and his officers were locked in a pitched fight with a group of the blue-skinned attackers. Steel flashed and disappeared. A lantern swung overhead, throwing wild, strobing light across faces: grim crew, blank Tal-Shie eyes, a spray of blood that looked black under moonlight. The clash of blades and the slam of bodies against railings finally became too loud to hide. Down below, hatches banged open, boots thundered, and someone shouted in panic as the reality hit.

That's when the alarm became unnecessary.

Shardra didn't wait for formation, orders, or anyone's courage to settle.

She waded in.

Rimeheart carved the night open: a swing that took an arm at the elbow; a backhand that shattered a kneecap and dropped a Tal-Shie into the bloodslick; a stomp that cracked ribs with a sound like breaking driftwood. She moved with frightening brutality, no wasted motion, only lethal intent, each strike guided by a brutal kind of clan-taught certainty. Where she stepped, bodies folded. And her axe began to shine enough to light the deck around her. At its core, the pulsing red mass is so like unto a heart.

Eeyagoo vanished in the fray, slipping into the shadows.

Not by magic, just by instinct and shadows. He slipped behind a coil of rope, under the cover of a swinging sail's dark belly, along the edge where lantern light thinned. At first, he tried what had worked before: daggers thrown low and fast, their edges smeared with thick blueback venom paste. The blades landed true, thigh, shoulder, side, and the poison should have dropped an ox.

The Water Tal-Shie barely flinched.

Their bodies took the venom and ignored it.

Eeyagoos' stomach tightened. He didn't have time to be surprised; surprise got you killed. He changed tactics instantly: hit-and-run, not to kill, primarily to slow and cripple. Tendons. Hamstrings. The soft places behind the knee. Bonespike was plunged into the liver when an attacker was offered the chance. He made them *limp*, made them *slow*, made them *bleed*.

He kept thinking: *Don't get stuck. Don't get pinned. Don't end up in front of them where reach matters.*

Because a straight swordfight with someone twice your size, especially someone trained, wasn't a fight. It was a mistake.

And then a mistake found him anyway.

A Water Tal-Shie with a short blade and a hooked, net-maker's knife stepped into his path as if he'd been waiting for the shadow to move. Quick. Skilled. Not charging, not roaring, just turning at the perfect moment with the same cold patience as the tide. Eeyagoo parried once, twice, his arms stinging from the impact. The Tal-Shie pressed, driving him back toward an open patch of lantern light. A small cut to the arm, followed by a stab that almost got him badly.

Eeyagoo's claws scraped on the slick deck. He felt his footing slide half an inch. He felt, too, the awful, simple truth:

He's better than I am at this.

He kept it together anyway, ducked under a slash, took a shallow cut across the forearm, and answered with a desperate jab meant for the inner thigh. They traded a flurry that felt like a full minute but was probably only three seconds. Eeyagoos' heart hammered hard, and he tasted blood from a cut on his snout.

Then, A gunshot.

Not the thunder of a cannon, but still it cut through the din of the battle. A heavy, brutal *boom* that punched through the storm of noise. The Tal-Shie's head came apart in a sudden, obscene burst. Eeyagoo flinched as warm spray hit his cheek and throat. The body sagged, knees folding, and dropped like a ragdoll.

Eeyagoo stared for a half-breath into the space where a face had been.

He didn't see the shooter in the chaos, only later learned it had been Grebdins' revolver, calm, precise, and unforgiving as the man who carried it.

The rest of the fight collapsed into frantic, ugly momentum.

The Water Tal-Shie tried their magic, of course, they did. The air went damp and heavy in sudden pulses, as if the deck itself were sweating. A handful of planks became treacherously wet in an instant, then icy; a wave-smell rose from nowhere. One crewman tried to scream and clawed at his own throat as seawater poured from his mouth in choking gulps, lungs filling as if he'd been shoved under the surface while standing upright. He fell hard, thrashing, and drowned on the deck with his hands still grasping at empty air.

But Seimaiss Sarr was at Grebdins' side, and where the Water Tal-Shie tried to pull the sea aboard, Seimaiss cut it off, sigils snapped in quick, harsh gestures, counter-phrases spat like curses. The worst of the magic collapsed into harmless spray, a pressure in the ears, a nauseating lurch that passed.

And then the attackers broke.

Not because they ran out of courage, but because they saw the battle was lost.

They were bleeding. Crippled. Half their number already down under Shardra's brutal advance and the officers coordinated defense. They glanced to the rail, to the black water below, and chose the only escape the sea ever offers: overboard.

Five vaulted the rail and vanished into darkness with barely a splash. Two more were blown or knocked off the deck, one by a swinging, desperate shove from an officer; one by a brutal impact that may have broken him before he hit the water. Whether they lived or died, the sea didn't bother to say.

When it ended, it ended suddenly, like a rope cut.

Silence didn't return; the ship still creaked, wind still moaned in the rigging, but the *violence* stopped being everywhere at once.

Half a dozen blue-skinned bodies lay sprawled across the planks. Blood pooled in low spots and slid with the ship's gentle roll. Lanterns guttered. Men panted. Someone retched over the side. Someone else knelt by the drowned crewman and stared at him as if they could force the sea back out of his lungs through will alone.

Shardra stood among the bodies, chest rising and falling, cloak spattered dark. She looked like she'd been carved out of the same hard night as the ship, bruised and bleeding already where blows had landed, but upright. Unfinished.

Eeyagoo wiped his face with the back of his hand, smearing blood rather than removing it. His ears rang. His fingers shook with leftover adrenaline, furious and thin.

The Captain was wounded. Talbot too. Several crewmen nursed cuts that were clean and precise but likely deadly due to poison. Tal-Shie seemed to love poison blades and arrows. There was a familiarity to those wounds that made Shardra's stomach tighten and made Eeyagoo's mind race.

We've seen this before... but they've seen it more.

Kraglann burst onto the deck late, fury written in every line of him, eyes wild, beard bristling, hands already flexing as if itching to build something awful and loud to answer the insult. Runes flared angrily and deeply in the plates of this greatcoat. He took in the bodies, the blood, the crew hauling the wounded, and he snarled like a dog denied its bite.

Grebodin caught him by the shoulder with one massive hand and pulled him close, speaking in a low, measured rumble that carried no panic at all, just command. Kraglann huffed, jaw working, then finally spat a curse and stomped back below decks, furious at the world for not waiting for him to arrive.

Afterward came the practical work: lanterns steadied, bodies counted, planks scrubbed with seawater and ash, the wounded moved to the surgeon's corner. The crew moved with the grim efficiency of people who had done this before, perhaps too many times.

They produced treatments for Tal-Shie poisons, refined, labeled, familiar in their hands. An ointment that stung like fire. A bitter tincture that made the tongue go thick and the veins feel cold. They pressed it into Shardra and Eeyagoo's hands with no ceremony, and when Eeyagoo asked, the answer was simple:

"Captain said fer ya ta study it," one of the crew muttered. "Just don't trust it always to work."

Eeyagoo tucked the vials away like a treasure into the seer's satchel when he returned to the cabin.

They searched the dead and found little that explained *why*, no orders, no maps, no emblem worth naming. Only the same unsettling pattern they'd seen before: odd baubles and trinkets, vials of poison paste, bits of worked stone and metal that didn't belong on a battlefield, things carried with intention.

Some weapons were not Tal-Shie-made, foreign steel, sea-worn, valuable if you ignored the hands that held them. The crew treated the Tal-Shie's usual corrupted metal the same way Shardra and Eeyagoo did: with a look that said Leave it. Don't bring it close. Don't sleep near it. Don't invite that kind of wrong below deck.

Grebodin's voice rumbled behind them, deep enough to feel through the soles of your feet.

He lifted one of the trinkets, a smooth stone, carved and set as if meant to be thrown.

"Spell stones," he said. "They trigger on impact. They do what they were made to do."

He turned it in his fingers, studying the unfamiliar markings with a predator's calm.

"This kind..." A pause. "I don't know. We haven't faced the sea-born ones before. Only the other elements."

His gaze swept the deck, the bodies, the wet planks, the rail where the water waited beyond.

"But you can be certain of this: if they carry it, it has a function. A reason." His nostrils flared once, like a bull scenting blood. "Always be wary of their creations." He gathered them carefully and handed them to Master Sarr, who nodded and headed below decks.

Then, as if the battle were merely a disagreeable interruption in the ship's schedule, he nodded toward the hatch. This had been a warship for some time, and the survivors seemed to take the attack in stride.

"Get yourselves cleaned up," he said. "Meet me in my cabin for dinner tomorrow."

And with that, Captain Grebdin headed below decks, leaving behind the stinking, slick deck, the dead who wouldn't rise, and the uneasy feeling that this was just the beginning.

Dinner with the Captain

Shardra knew it the moment she stepped into the Captain's cabin and felt the weight of attention settle like a second ceiling. Grebdin did nothing without reason, and he did not invite passengers to his table out of kindness alone. This was a courtesy, yes, but also an assessment, a chance to see how steel and silence shared space after blood had been spilled.

She ducked slightly to enter. The cabin was lofty by ship standards, built to accommodate Grebdin's immense height, but she was still just a touch too tall. The ceiling beams scraped at her awareness in a way she did not bother to hide.

The Captain sat at the head of the long table, his massive frame at ease despite the narrow confines. "Welcome," he said with a deep baritone voice, gesturing widely at the table. "Take a seat and enjoy this rare feast our cook Markla prepared for us today." Lantern light traced the old scars crossing his coal-black hide, pale lines etched by shot, blade, and fire. Blood still stained his uniform from the night, dark and dry at the seams. His horns bore marks of age and repair, tips blunted not by weakness but by use. He then began to eat slowly, deliberately, eyes half-lidded, missing nothing. As he ate, he spoke, clear and poignant. "You two did well last night, saved some of the crew, and your assistance afterward was most welcome," he pointed his fork at Eeyagoo for the last. "If you find yourself in need of passage again, or work, send word to our nearest port. You are always welcome aboard." He then began eating some sea creature that looked broiled again. Talbot raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Shardra had heard the stories since coming aboard. How Grebdin once kept *The Hag* afloat with a shattered rudder lashed by a chain while under siege from flying Tal-Shie ships. He personally hauled a burning powder cart overboard before it could gut the lower decks. And managed the sail of the crippled ship, then known as *The Sea Hag*, to port in Thylor to save it. They spent almost a year there, making *The Hag* the terror she is today. The crew loved to tell tales, and they said many in the days before the dinner. One claimed a king's ransom in gold and jewels was paid for the refurbishment and her cannons. "It emptied VonBlitzkrieg's coffers, nearly his entire fortune." This came from Mr. Talbot, who served with Roger VanMorien, VonBlitzkrieg, and Grebdin during the early days of the Harvester war.

Mr. Talbot sat at the Captain's right, neat as a ledger. His spectacles caught the light as he watched everyone and no one at once. His presence was unobtrusive by design, a man meant to be overlooked until it was far too late. A rare erudite man who didn't lord over those less educated.

Shardra claimed the opposite side of the table with the confidence of someone who had never been asked to make herself smaller. She sprawled into the chair, boots planted wide, one arm hooked over the back, already grinning at the spread laid before them.

The table groaned beneath excess.

Black-crusts of leviathan flank steamed beside bowls of pickled kelp hearts that popped faintly when bitten. Skewers of something pale and jointed, reef locusts, Talbot murmured, were brushed with honey and ash. A tureen of marrow broth shimmered with floating herbs that refused to sink. At the table's center rested a platter of sliced fruit so rare Eeyagoo had only seen it sketched in apothecary margins: star-pears from the southern reefs, their faintly luminous flesh tasting of iron and rain.

Eeyagoo sat beside Shardra, posture careful, eyes wide with interest. The smells alone were an education: salt, smoke, rendered fat, strange spices from ports he'd never seen. He unconsciously cataloged each scent, comparing them to sulfur pits, mushroom stews, and boiled things that sometimes bit back.

The room hummed with the creak of the hull and the deep, steady breathing of the ship herself.

Shardra tore into a slab of leviathan flank with relish, grease shining on her fingers.

"Hah!" she barked, laughter booming off the cabin walls. "You should've seen the look on that bastard's face when I bit his sword arm. Thought leather armor alone would save him."

Grebain did not look up from his plate.

"It did," he said evenly. "If only for a moment."

Shardra slammed the table, ale sloshing dangerously close to the rim of her mug.

"That's why I like you, Captain. No fluff. Just facts and fighting."

Mr. Talbot cleared his throat delicately, dabbing at a splash of gravy on his sleeve.

"If we're recounting highlights, let's avoid the incident with *War Swan*." He paled slightly. "Some memories deserve a shallow grave."

Grebain continued eating, eyes still on his plate.

"Had to be done." Mr. Talbot nodded, but still seemed shaken.

Shardra laughed harder, a sound like rolling thunder, then stilled, remembering. The laughter thinned, but did not vanish.

Meanwhile, Eeyagoo had discovered something he found fascinating.

He picked up what looked like a coiled sea-creature from a platter between them, an armored snail the size of his palm, shell lacquered red and drenched in hot spice and oil, tiny clawed appendages tucked tight against its body. Most folk cracked them open with picks, teased the meat free.

Eeyagoo sniffed it once. Then bit down shell and all. There was a sharp crack, followed by a wet crunch. He froze mid-chew. Then, delight.

"Oh." He paused, eyes bright. "Heat. Salt. And... pain. Good pain."

Shardra leaned over, staring. "You just ate the shell."

"Yes." He chewed. "It resists. Then breaks. Like armored beetle. Angrier."

Talbot leaned forward despite himself. "That shell will ruin most teeth."

"Grow back," Eeyagoo said, clicking his tongue experimentally.

Shardra howled with laughter. "Mouseknife! Gods help us if you find anything spicier."

"I hope," he said earnestly.

Mr. Talbot watched him with open fascination now. "Your teeth grow back? Truly?"

"Yes, slow take seasons." He replied eating another shell and all.

"Did you eat things like this in your homeland?" Mr. Talbot asked, looking intrigued.

Eeyagoo considered this. "We boiled things in sulfur pits. Ate them before they moved again. Sometimes during." He searched for the word. "This... not same."

Shardra shoved half a loaf of bread into her mouth, cheeks bulging.

"'Ss fahnsh' buh' d'm guh."

Eeyagoo turned to her, head tilting. “what?”

Mr. Talbot answered without looking up, translating the garbled speech effortlessly. “She finds the cuisine indulgent but acceptable.”

Shardra swallowed and grinned, brushing crumbs from her face. “See? He gets me.”

Eeyagoo smiled faintly, then reached for a small dish of preserved fire-eel eggs suspended in clear oil. He sniffed, hesitated, then dabbed one against his tongue.

He stiffened.

“...It bites,” he said with quiet approval, and ate three more before anyone could stop him. He leaned back, seeming to savor the spicy treat for a minute or so.

Then he grew somber.

He studied Shardra, not the scars she wore openly, not the confident sprawl, but the tension beneath it. The way her shoulders were never quite relaxed. The way one side of her face remained angled from the lantern light.

His gaze lingered on the polished scale covering her left eye.

“How happen?” he asked softly.

Shardra’s laughter slowed. Not stopped, just thinned.

“Big fight,” she said after a moment. “Claws. Bad weather. A lot is going wrong at once.”

Eeyagoo nodded, unconvinced. He did not accuse. He waited.

“Claws?” he repeated.

The table grew quieter. The lantern hissed.

Shardra set her mug down.

The wood beneath it cracked, just a hairline fracture, spidering outward from where her fingers had clenched too hard. Ale sloshed, stilled.

“You see too much sometimes, Mouseknife,” she said, her voice steady in a way her hand was not.

“I try see enough.”

For a moment, she did not move.

Her jaw worked once, as if on a word she refused to let free. Then she pushed her chair back and stood, the legs shrieking against the deck.

“Not now.”

She did not look at him as she crossed the cabin. The ladder took her weight with a dull groan, boots striking the rungs like measured blows.

Only after the hatch closed did the room seem to breathe again.

Silence settled in her wake.

Eeyagoo looked from the door to the others, ears twitching.

“I did not mean harm. Wanted... accuracy.”

Grebدين took a long swallow of his drink.

“She answered you as much as she could.”

Mr. Talbot folded his hands. “Trauma rarely enjoys tidy questions.”

Eeyagoo glanced around the cabin, nostrils flaring slightly.

“Where fire-maker?” he asked. “Short one. Smells like iron and thunder.”

Talbot smiled thinly. “Master Kraglann keeps irregular hours.”

Grebدين set his cup down with care.

“He does not dine,” the Captain said. “He works. Or broods. Sometimes both.”

Eeyagoo considered this.

“He does not like people.”

“No,” Grebدين agreed. “He tolerates us.”

Outside, boots paced the deck beneath the stars, slow, deliberate, the sound of someone wrestling with memory.

Below, in the lantern-lit cabin, the Captain watched his remaining guest with quiet care, and his spymaster weighed what had been revealed without ever giving offense. Eeyagoo, sampled every food on the table despite his small stature. The little Kobold seemed to stop and categorize each dish, asking the source of the spice and other facts, much to the amusement of Mr. Talbot. His relish for the devilishly hot spicy dishes was obvious.

The Hag then sailed on.

Several days later, the moment returned, not as a wound reopened, but as a door quietly unlatched.

The cabin provided for them aboard *The Hag* was small but solid, its walls thick with layered ironwood and pitch. The porthole framed the night sea in slow, breathing swells. A lantern burned low, more comfort than light.

Shardra sat on the edge of the bunk, elbows on her knees, hands clasped together as if anchoring herself in place. Making herself fit comfortably in a space not suited for her size. Eeyagoo sat opposite her on a stool, back straight, tail wrapped loosely around one ankle. Mimi perched on his shoulder, her colors muted, deep, listening hues, unusually still.

Shardra did not look at either of them when she spoke, just staring at the floor.

“It was my fourteenth winter,” she said at last.

Her voice was steady, but only because she kept it so.

“Another clan came to trade. Furs, iron, stories. Sometimes... arrangements.” She swallowed. “Couplings. To bind bloodlines. To keep old grudges from growing teeth again.”

She turned her gaze to the porthole, watching the dark water slide past as if eye contact might splinter her resolve.

“A young one from the other tribe and I wandered off. Not far. We could still hear the conversations. Still smell the cooking.” A pause. “But far enough.”

Her fingers tightened together.

“The winds were strong that day, and they carried a strange smell, like burnt hair. Suddenly, the air was full of huge creatures. They took him first,” she said quietly. “Fast. Razor-quick. No sound. They came from above.”

Eeyagoo did not move. Mimi leaned into him.

“One blink, he was there. Next blink, gone.” Shardra’s jaw set. “Snatched up and over the cliff like he weighed nothing at all.”

She closed her eye.

“The elders heard him cry as he fell. That scream...” Her voice thinned but did not break. “That’s what brought them running.”

She stared into the glass again, seeing something else entirely.

Shardra’s gaze was unfocused, fixed not on the porthole but on something far behind it.

“I don’t know what they truly were,” she said slowly. “Only what they felt like.”

Her fingers curled, rubbing together as if she could still feel it.

“They smelled first,” she went on. “Before I saw anything. Burned hair. Old grease, an old cook plate after a summer without use. And the fetid rot of carrion when they were close. It caught in the back of my throat and wouldn’t let go.”

She swallowed, jaw tightening, and shuddered despite herself.

“And wings. Gods.” A breath, shaky. “Two sets. One over the other. Leathery, stretched thin and oily. They reflected the firelight wrong; the light slid off them instead of touching. When they beat, it sounded like canvas tearing.”

Her eye flicked, as if something had passed close.

“They didn’t screech. No sound other than the wings, really. You could feel them instead, in your ears. A feeling like the air itself flinched when they moved or tried hard to avoid them. Like being underwater and realizing too late you need to breathe.”

Her fingers dug into her sleeve.

“When one hit me from behind, I remember the spines first. Jagged. Uneven. Some broke off inside my armor. Others dragged across my skin and left lines that burned cold.” Her teeth clicked together once. “Then the weight. Too much weight for its size. Like it, carried something heavier inside it. Something that didn’t belong in the world.”

“Not clean. Not sharp the way steel is sharp.” Her voice roughened. “It was wet. Slimy. Like being struck by a bone torn fresh and bloody.”

Her hand lifted, sketching shapes in the air, too many, overlapping.

“They had too many limbs. Too many attempts at limbs. Legs that bent the wrong way, jointed twice where there should’ve been once. Some ended in hooks or spines. Some just... tapered into grasping things covered in stiff, bristling hairs that scraped and caught and *pulled*.”

She closed her eye.

“It wrapped around me, wings and legs and all. Not to kill. Not right away.” Her voice dropped. “To *hold*. To cling. Its hooks caught in my hair, my cloak, my flesh. I could feel its hairs moving, independently, like they were tasting me.”

A long silence.

“I remember thinking it wasn’t trying to eat me,” she said finally. “It was trying to *take* me.”

Her lips pressed thin.

“And the worst part?” She opened her eye again, glassy. “I don’t remember its face. I don’t think it had one. Just a mass of wrong parts where a face should be. As if the idea of a face offended it.”

She let out a breath that sounded almost like a laugh, but wasn’t.

“Some of that might not be true,” she admitted quietly. “Fear does things. Memory bends.” Her gaze sharpened. “But it’s how it lives in me now. That’s what it is when I dream.”

Her hand drifted, unconsciously, toward her eyepatch.

“And sometimes,” she added, barely audible, “I can still smell the burned hair.”

She turned then, finally, to look at Eeyagoo, and at Mimi, who met her gaze without a sound.

“I don’t remember anything after that.”

The silence stretched, heavy but unbroken.

“I woke days later to the Shaman’s face,” Shardra continued. “Tulkak. Old. Scarred. Smelled of herbs and smoke and old magic.” A faint, rueful breath. “She’d been watching me breathe for three days.” She faintly gestured behind her. “My back took weeks to heal. It was...bad. Without Tulkak I wouldn’t have made it, they said they could see the bones.”

Her hands flexed, as if remembering weakness.

“I couldn’t talk. My limbs didn’t listen. They felt... borrowed. Like they belonged to someone else and I was wearing them wrong.” Her brow furrowed. “I had to learn almost everything again. Walking. Holding a cup. Recognizing my own strength.”

She shook her head slowly.

“It was like something was taken from me. Not just the eye.” Her voice dropped. “Something inside. And it took a long time to claw it back.”

Her gaze lowered.

“I didn’t recognize faces. Friends. Family. My father would come in, and I’d know he mattered, but not why. My siblings visited every day. Short visits. They’d ask my name. Their names. Test me gently, like touching a bruise to see if it still hurt.”

She exhaled through her nose.

“The process took nearly a year. Tulkak never left me alone long. She sang old clan songs when my thoughts slipped. Kept me angry enough to fight my way back.” A pause. “Anger helped.”

Shardra looked directly at Eeyagoo now, holding his eyes.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” she said quietly. “But I don’t want to talk about this. Ever again.”

Eeyagoo nodded at once. No hesitation.

Mimi nodded too, solemn as a vow, and then, very softly, said, “Stitches.”

The word landed gently, absurd and perfect.

Shardra barked a short, surprised laugh, the tension cracking at last. She shook her head, a small smile tugging at her mouth.

“Stitches indeed,” she said.

Then, softer, as if sealing the memory away again:

“Stitches indeed.”

The lantern flickered. The sea rolled on. And for the first time since she’d spoken, Shadra leaned back against the wall and let herself rest.

The Port of Voolnishart

The harbor of Voolnishart spreads like a living mosaic across the glittering crescent bay, cradled by sweeping headlands and watchful towers wrought from blackstone and coral-white marble. The air thrums with the sound of gulls and foreign tongues, the scent of salt and spice, fish guts and perfume.

The ships bobbing in the sapphire waters are as varied as the people who crew them. Sleek elven sloops with hulls like wind-sculpted bone lie moored beside hulking orcish trawlers, all muscle and ironwood. Goblin paddle-skiffs, jury-rigged with bizarre smokestacks and teetering cabins, cut tight circles near Kobold salvage barges, their decks crawling with scaled tinkerers shouting over one another in squeaky, indignant tones. Merchant galleons from the south fly sails painted with jungle beasts, while narrow Vistari cutters with high prow-beaks glide in with spices and silks. Warships without cannon but bristling with ballistae and arbalests fly the standards of Mithrin’s many clans.

Sailing into the harbor this morning was a behemoth of black iron and reinforced stone, rests *The Hag*. A terrible silhouette against the dawn, her armored hull like the shell of some primeval leviathan. Her carriage cannons loom from fire-blackened ports, and her prow bears a vast, angular wedge of black metal, an armored ramming blade forged for sheer brutality. Not decorative, not symbolic, this is a weapon, an unholy iron wedge capable of cleaving through hulls and tearing through warships to break the keel.

The docks themselves are a raucous marvel. Cobblestones from half a dozen quarries patchwork the streets, while buildings crowd one another with joyful defiance of uniformity. There are goblin bazaars built like termite mounds, narrow spires of stacked stalls with tarps flapping in every hue. Minotaur forges squat low and reek of soot and molten bronze. Elegant elven terraces, all pale glass and vine-covered balconies, rise nearby in serene contrast.

Between them strolls a people unmatched in diversity, dwarves with etched steel breastplates and merchant ledgers, orc dock-workers in wide leather belts carrying crates like kindling, kobold guides with speaking rods shouting directions, and humans of every shade and language hawking wares or negotiating cargo fees.

Here in Voolnishart, the old world ends and the new is always arriving, by sail, oar, or the dread thunder of *The Hag*.

Mithrin, Between Dangers, Made Larger

People stood watching the ship as she glided into the loading berth, with a smoothness that stood in stark contrast to her appearance. *The Hag* was known here, and the city took notice when it arrived. News of the War-Swan was fresh on everyone’s lips. The crew of *The Hag* spoke with them as they left, drawing even more attention. Kraglann was on deck, watching them go, a rare sight that started tongues wagging. Captain Grebdin, had exited with them and introduced them to the harbormaster cordially. And rumors began to swirl immediately. They were new to the city, evident by the way they looked around, and a Karakan Giantess was a rare sight even in this diverse city.

Mithrin did not rush you.

That was the first thing Shardra noticed, again, and more sharply this time, because she'd lived long enough to know how rare it was for a city to **choose** calm. Mithrin was big, but it didn't sprawl like a wounded beast. It *stood* like an old soldier who'd survived sieges, plague years, riots, and still found time to argue about bread crust and barrel taxes.

Shardra and Eeyagoo made their way into the city after a brief discussion with the guards. It wasn't often a Karakan Giant entered the city; she was 11ft tall, drawing eyes wherever she went. The people were cordial but not eager to approach. Shops were barely large enough to accommodate, and foodstuffs were all too small, requiring several portions. Eeyagoo managed the payments; he always seemed to have the coin needed, and after a while in the city, people began to notice.

Some things in Voolnishart announced themselves by smell before sight.

Tar and salt. Hot iron. Spices crushed under boots and carts. The harbor was a living thing, ropes creaking like tendons, sails breathing, gulls screaming accusations at everyone and no one.

Eeyagoo stopped at the edge of the docks and simply *looked*. So many paths. So many noises that did not mean danger.

Shardra laughed once, low and pleased. "Careful," she said. "You'll hurt yourself thinkin' this hard."

Mimi chirred, wings half-unfurled, dazzled by color and motion. There were small creatures of all sorts around the docks, birds, monkeys, and even small dragonlings, similar to her favorite shape. She felt bold and perched on Eeyagoo's shoulder openly for the first time, really ever with so many around.

For once, no one was hunting them.

Stone streets curved like they remembered older paths. Markets bled into workshops; workshops bled into taverns; taverns spilled laughter into alleys that smelled of fish brine and forge smoke. Everywhere there were signs of life that had learned to endure: rope lines thick as wrists, shutters reinforced, door frames scarred by old repairs.

Shardra walked it like she was evaluating shelter for winter, eye on roofs, doors, wind angles, the quality of stone, and looking to large establishments or outdoor ones and walking carefully so as not to trample anything in the crowded streets. Most made room, but some were preoccupied and would suddenly startle at the sight.

Eeyagoo walked it like a man who was gathering for years of travel. His eyes were on tools, salts, oils, *books*, skills, and spices. He constantly sniffed the air. Mimi did so as well, barely poking her head out in the noisy and busy streets.

And the city noticed them both. Not just people. Power did, too.

Momma Toki's Menagerie

They found Momma Toki by sound and smell before sight.

Something hissed. Something larger chuffed irritably. Something in a cage clicked its teeth like it was keeping time. And over it all, one voice, cracked, sharp, affectionate and threatening all at once:

"No, you *get that* out of your mouth or I swear I'll feed you to something that'll bite you back!"

The menagerie was a controlled riot: cages stacked like crates on a dock, pens fenced with rope and iron, troughs, barrels, hanging nets, and a dozen smells layered together, animal musk, old blood scrubbed clean, pungent herbs, oil, and the unmistakable scent of someone who actually cares.

Momma Toki herself emerged like a siege engine, with a bizarre 6-armed monkey-like thing on her shoulder that chattered along with her talking. A goblin with weathered skin, black teeth, and a healthy gleam in her eyes. She was a goblin crone, a gaze that could measure your worth by the way you stood. A young manticore, massive as a draft horse, shifted behind her, wings rustling, tail spikes half-raised like he disliked surprises.

Toki's eyes went straight to Eeyagoo.

Not fear.

Appraisal.

"Well I'll be gnawed," she said. "You walk like someone who knows how many teeth a thing's got before it bites."

Eeyagoo inclined his head. "Experience."

Shardra ducked inside crouching near the door and watched Toki's gaze slide from Eeyagoo to her towering frame. Then to the axe's wrapped silhouette, then, sharply, to the spot where a sensible person would expect a third presence. Shardra wasn't sure whether that was good.

Momma Toki smiled the way a trap smiles. "Come inside," she said. "Let's talk about what you *keep*."

They talked like professionals. Shardra waited, paying little attention to the conversation and always keeping the Manticore in view. He watched her, his eyes on her since she entered. Protective, dangerous. She made sure not to agitate him; they were here to shop, not fight, and he obviously considered her a threat. His mane of spines was stiff, and the tail flicked with agitation.

Eeyagoo asked about ants first, *big* binding ants, the kind he used to close tears when thread and needle weren't enough and time was the enemy.

"How keep them travel?" he asked. "Not die. Not go sleepy. Not bite wrong."

Toki produced clay-lined travel nests: stacked chambers, dampened moss, tiny vents punched with a hot needle.

"Humidity," she said, tapping the lid. "You dry 'em, they get mean and stupid. You drown 'em, they get fungus and die. You feed 'em sugar-resin and a little protein. Not too much. You want the bite hungry, not lazy."

Eeyagoo nodded as if this mattered as much as any sword lesson, because to him it did.

"And after use?" he asked. "How many keep?"

Toki shrugged. "You pinch the bodies, leave the heads. Heads hold. Heads don't let go. That's why folk fear 'em. That's why folk kill 'em. But you, " she jabbed a finger at him " , you use 'em like tools. Respectful. That's rare." She seemed to ponder his second question. "If you treat them good and don't take the queen, they keep producing for years." She pointed to a glass container as big as a cask. "Those are goin on 5 years." Eeyagoo nodded and they came to a price on two small jugs of ants.

Then came bluebacks: stabilized venoms, animal oils, the careful art of keeping a dose sharp without letting it rot. "Cold ruins some," Toki warned. "Heat ruins others. Keep 'em close to body in winter. Wrap 'em in cloth so they don't knock. And don't let some idiot sniff a bottle and die just to prove he's brave." He asked for books and Toki shook her head. "Not me, not here, but somewhere in this city you can find almost anything."

Shardra snorted. "World's full o' idiots."

"Aye," Toki agreed happily. "That's why I'm still in business."

Eventually, quietly, with Shardra pretending not to listen, Eeyagoo asked about something he never named.

Not with description. Not with confession.

Just... care.

“What if small watcher,” he said, eyes down, voice careful, “eats strange. Sleeps close. Changes shape. What keep thriving?”

Toki didn’t ask “what is it.” She didn’t ask “where did you get it.” She leaned in, voice lowering to the tone used for bargaining and secrets.

“Don’t overfeed,” she said. “Don’t smother. Don’t treat it like a pet. Treat it like a *partner*. Let it choose when to hide and when to show. If it starts sleeping *away* from you, then worry. If it stops taking food from your hand, then worry. If it starts biting you in your sleep, then you’re already late.”

Eeyagoo’s shoulders eased a fraction.

Toki’s gaze flicked to Shardra. “And you,” she said bluntly. “If you ever want to keep that axe from drawin’ the wrong kind of attention, stop walking like you’re daring the world to try.”

Shardra blinked, then laughed once. “That’s half my charm.”

Toki’s smile showed black teeth. “That’s half your problem.”

Eeyagoo seemed to really want to get one of the snakes, but had no practical way to keep and care for it, so reluctantly, he left with more bluebacks in little jugs like the ants.

The Salt & Horn, and the Minotaur Who Was Proud of Meat

The Salt & Horn wasn’t a shop. It was a shrine to preservation.

Hooks of smoked cuts hung like dark banners. Brine barrels lined the wall. Salts in jars, white, pink, gray, black, each labeled with origin and purpose. Racks of dried fish, strips of jerky, coils of sausage rope.

And behind the counter stood the butcher: a minotaur with a thick apron, scarred forearms, and a voice that filled the room without effort.

He took one look at Shardra and nodded, respectful.

Then he looked down at Eeyagoo and smiled with professional interest.

“Small one,” he rumbled. “You’ve got the eyes of someone who knows how long food should last.”

Eeyagoo nodded. “Need last. Long road.”

The minotaur’s ears twitched in approval. “Then you’ll want fat. Everyone buys lean and thinks they’re clever. Lean keeps you alive for a week. Fat keeps you alive for a winter.”

Shardra liked him immediately.

They argued, friendly, intense, over curing times and travel preservation.

Shardra bought dense winter protein: fat-heavy cuts, smoked slabs, marrow-rich bones.

Eeyagoo bought spices and pepper pastes, then the minotaur, proud as any craftsman, insisted he taste *their* house hot cure.

Eeyagoo’s eyes watered.

Shardra grinned. “Too hot for you, Mouseknife?”

He swallowed hard, coughing once. “Impossible,” he croaked, then, stubborn creature, took another bite.

The minotaur slapped the counter, delighted. “That’s the spirit. You’re welcome here.”

They purchased more meat than one would expect them to need or carry, and as much hot spices as Eeyagoo could get the butcher to part with. They left with a smile.

Curd of Madness, Where Cheese Had Opinions

Curd of Madness looked like a joke until you stepped inside.

The air hit like a wall, funk and spice and sweet rot, sharp enough to make your eyes water. Wheels of cheese sat like relics under glass domes. Some were veined green and blue. Some were dusted red. Some were ash-gray and looked like stones.

The proprietor was a thin, bright-eyed man with ink-stained fingers and the *focused madness* of someone who’d decided the world’s most important problems were solved by fermentation.

He greeted them like they were pilgrims.

“Welcome,” he breathed. “To genius.”

Shardra took one sniff and recoiled. “That smells like a boot fought a war.”

“Exactly!” the cheesemonger cried, thrilled. “And won!”

Shardra refused to try anything.

Eeyagoo tried **everything**.

The cheesemonger’s eyes widened as the kobold sampled ash-aged wedges, mold-veined slices, and one labeled only:

DO NOT COMBINE WITH ALCOHOL

“Deep taste,” Eeyagoo said solemnly, chewing with dedication.

Shardra glared at him. “You’re going to kill us.”

“Maybe,” he admitted happily, and bought two wheels of his hottest cheese.

Kraggenkor Forgeworks, and the Little Master

Kraggenkor Forgeworks didn’t just make noise.

It made *quality*.

The building breathed heat. Hammers rang like bell tolls. Sparks arced in brief, violent constellations. The smell of hot iron and quenched steel clung to the throat.

Garbrik Kraggenkor himself was there, big hands, bigger reputation, eyes that judged metal and people the same way: by how they held stress.

Shardra spoke to the smiths about practical things: cold-weather steel, field repairs, bindings that wouldn’t shear under ice and impact.

A smith named Thog the Bladewright showed her wedge kits and spare fittings. “If it can’t be fixed with a hammer and stubbornness,” he said, “it’s not worth carryin’.”

Shardra approved.

But Eeyagoo, Eeyagoo drifted toward the *small* stations: engraving, fine toolwork, the quiet work that saved lives without glory.

And there was **Sniksnik**, kobold engraver, little master, hands steady as prayer.

Sniksnik chittered when he saw Eeyagoo. “You’re the one with the quiet hands.”

Eeyagoo blinked. “Quiet hands?”

“The kind that don’t waste motion,” Sniksnik said.

They talked longer than Shardra expected, about cutters that didn’t sing on stone, about needles that wouldn’t snap, about clamps that held without tearing.

Eeyagoo paid without haggling. Healing tools, needles for stitches, small knives for safer cuts, and some daggers balanced perfectly, if a bit large for him.

Sniksnik observed him. “You spend like you’re runnin’ from tomorrow.”

Eeyagoo shrugged. “Prepared.”

Shardra noticed, then again, that bag.

An old-looking satchel at Eeyagoo’s hip that should have been heavy already... but never seemed to *get* heavy. He fed it purchases as if it were a hungry mouth. He had it when they first met, but just now she knew the damn thing had to be full.

Shardra had asked once where he got it.

He’d only said, “Seer’s bag.”

Even here, among artisans who understood enchantment by instinct, no one pressed him about it.

They just watched.

Fires of Kraggenkor

Two days later, the travelers descended the **Shudder-Lift**, an iron cage rattling down into **Kraggenkor Forge**, the subterranean heart of Mithrin. Heat rolled out in waves; anvils rang like war-drums against the vaulted chambers.

At the lowest landing a figure awaited them: **Garbrik Kraggenkor**, Master Smith and Runesmith, shoulders broad as forge-doors, beard bound in brass hoops that clacked when he moved. In one hand he held a hammer the size of a tombstone; in the other, a set of rune-keys that hissed with slammed-in sigils.

Beside him, perched on a stack of steel ingots for height, stood **Sniksnik**, the *Little Master Engraver*, an elderly kobold whose spectacles were thicker than bottle bottoms and whose taloned fingers trembled with excited precision. Where Garbrik’s every motion scattered sparks, Sniksnik’s drew them in, gathering ember-motes around his engraving stylus like fireflies.

“Welcome,” Garbrik thundered, voice echoing off slag-walls. “Archivum says you bear an axe of ice-song legend. Lay it on the rune-bed; we’ll see what truth rings out.”

Rimeheart was placed upon a cradle of rune-coals. No flame touched the blade, heat fled, and frost halos wreathed the steel.

Garbrik produced a *scope* of dwarven make, but Sniksnik squeaked, “Allow me,” and scurried forward, adjusting the brass tines with deft claws. He pressed the instrument to the axe, and a deep chime, like ice shearing from a glacier, rolled through the bay.

“Memory glassteel,” Sniksnik affirmed, peering over the rims of his lenses. “Filaments of frost-quartz in the lattice. A living core, crystalized heart, maybe cryo-wyrm or some elder beast.”

Garbrik nodded gravely. “Older than Mithrin’s charter, then. A blade forged back when Kalaallit still warred with Kadathe’.” He looked up at Shardra. “It hungers for stories, not souls. Feed it carefully.”

Shardra declined the forge-master’s offer to rewrap the haft in new leather; the petrified grip felt as integral as bone. Garbrik respected the choice with a solemn incline of his head.

Trailward Emporium, and the Virtue of Practicality

It was a place where everything had a purpose. Packs that didn’t chafe. Cloaks that shed rain. Oilcloth wraps. Fire-starting kits that worked in wind. Rope treated to resist rot.

The shopkeep, a woman with a braid like a rope itself, looked Shardra up and down.

“You’re not from soft places,” she said.

Shardra grinned. “No.”

“Good,” the woman replied. “Then you’ll like my wares.”

Shardra haggled for nearly an hour about work she wanted done to her great Icebear cloak that had taken so much abuse. She wanted a spine added, using the scythes from the plains beast, running down the middle of the back and reinforced to provide protection. And she wanted her crude field repairs redone and done right. Eeyagoo ended the negotiations by handing the owner a small pouch. She looked at it twice and nodded, seemingly pleased.

Shardra gave him a look. He said, “Talk later.”

Korrik’s Ironheel Emporium was louder, half shop, half brag. Tools hung like trophies. Korrik himself was a thick-necked dwarf with iron-capped boots and a laugh that could bruise.

He sold Shardra pitons that could be driven into frozen stone and a hand-axe for splitting kindling that balanced perfectly.

He tried to sell Eeyagoo a miniature battering ram.

Eeyagoo stared at it. “For what?”

Korrik grinned. “For doors that deserve it.”

Shardra barked a laugh. “He’s got a way with doors already.”

Leather Born of Memory

In Mithrin, the hide of the plains beast finally came free of its wrappings.

The tanner's shop smelled of oil, smoke, and old iron. The craftsman, a weathered man with scarred hands, ran his fingers across the folded camouflage hide and went very still.

"I've worked Griffon," he said quietly. "Manticore. Basilisk, once. This..."
He shook his head. "This learned how to disappear."

Eeyagoo watched closely as the hide was cut and shaped. He spoke little, but his eyes tracked every motion, every decision. He chose practicality over ornament, silence over flair.

The cloak came first.

It was heavy without being cumbersome, the layered fibers catching and breaking light in subtle ways. When Eeyagoo draped it over his shoulders, the effect was immediate, his outline softened, edges blurring as if the air itself were uncertain where he ended. In motion, it flowed strangely, colors shifting just enough to mislead the eye.

The boots followed.

Reinforced soles, thick but flexible, the uppers made from the densest sections of hide. They absorbed sound unnaturally well. When Eeyagoo walked across the shop floor, even the tanner frowned.

"Careful with these," the man warned. "You'll forget you're moving."

Eeyagoo nodded.
"That is point."

When Shardra saw the finished work, she studied it in silence.

Then she reached up and touched the line of teeth worked into her belt, fingers lingering on one scarred canine.

"Good," she said at last. "It tried to kill us. Instead, it'll keep you alive."

She turned away then, cloak of patched leather settling over her shoulders, the weight of her trophies familiar and grounding.

The world was still cruel. Taurdain was still wounded. The plains still hid their teeth.

But something had been taken from that cruelty and repurposed.

Not as a victory.

As survival.

And sometimes, that was enough.

The Rusted Eye, and What Was Not Said

The Rusted Eye smelled of dust, incense, and old secrets.

The owner was a woman with milky eyes that never quite focused on faces, only on the spaces around them. Her voice was like dry leaves in a breeze.

Eeyagoo smelled stone and dust and what he thought was old magic. Everything seemed unique and unknown to him. Amulets, rings, tankards, statuary from an older time, or simply somewhere far away. HE kept the Shopkeeper in his sight as he looked around. Shardra knelt by the door; she didn't venture deeper. The cases and shelves wouldn't allow it.

She studied the wrapped shape on Shardra's back and said softly:

"It doesn't sleep."

Shardra went still.

"It doesn't dream," the woman continued. "Be glad."

Eeyagoo shivered slightly and looked to Shardra, who it seemed was more than ready to leave without conversation.

They left with nothing bought, but both felt heavier.

"No go again," he said as they moved away. "Agreed." She replied.

Wine and Fire: The Gilded Ember vs The Laughing Cask

The rivalry was a local sport.

The Gilded Ember served spirits that warmed the bones and made the tongue brave. Their distiller, an elegant, silver-haired man, insisted that Shardra try a cask-strength red that tasted like smoke and cherries and old battles.

Shardra liked it.

The Laughing Cask was louder, rowdier, proud of its ales and fruit wines, and their vintner, a woman with stained fingers and a wicked grin, declared the Ember "a place for people who fear joy."

Shardra laughed.

Eeyagoo tested spirits like a chemist, small sips, thoughtful nods, occasional delighted hiss. Shardra bought bottles meant for the road: not for indulgence, but for warmth, antiseptic, and trade. Eeyagoo purchased spiced liqueurs; the hotter, the better.

The Underdark Market: Familiar to One, Alien to Another

The Underdark Market was actually a sprawling collection of tents in an open square beside a large tower adjacent to the trade district.

The entrance was watched.

By guards in armor, and magic. They gave them some rules, including what you could and couldn't buy. And let them in. They were city guards, not underfolk, which struck Eeyagoo as odd till he saw the marks on some of the stalls. Yezed, the dark Judge, he would have to talk to Shardra about that.

The area was tight, too tight for Shardra's liking. Things here were unknown to her, and she basically followed Eeyagoo, carefully avoiding knocking anything over.

Eeyagoo, on the other hand, relaxed, just slightly, as if this place made sense to him.

Familiar.

Not comforting. Just... known.

The market itself was alien in a way Mithrin's other streets hadn't been: fungi lanterns, glowstone signs, silk curtains, voices speaking languages that didn't belong in daylight. Drow traders with smiles like knives.

Duergar appraisers who weighed everything twice, once in coin, once in consequence. Strange stalls selling bottled shadows, petrified flowers, fungus-wines that made your teeth ache, inks that moved when you weren't watching.

Eeyagoo spent like a man with no limits.

Odd and rare things vanished into his bag: vials, salts, treated resins, needle sets, tiny cages, sealed packets of drying agents, and a spool of spider-silk cord so fine it was nearly invisible.

Shardra watched his money disappear and muttered, "Mouseknife, you're going to attract the wrong kind of attention."

He didn't look up. "Already have."

Because he had, agents of Harker watched from a polite distance, well-dressed, clean, pretending to shop. Asmith's eyes were different, rougher men, harder posture, waiting to see what could be taken rather than bought. Eeyagoo felt them, but he didn't flinch. What bothered him more were the spiders. So many spiders, small ones, nothing obvious, but they watched, and he thought he knew why. He kept glancing into corners, scanning cracks, listening for something he could not locate.

Shardra noticed his irritation. "What," she asked under her breath, "is eatin' you?" Eeyagoo's jaw tightened. "Watching."

"We're always watched."

"Not like this," he muttered. "Little spiders everywhere."

He disliked not being able to put a knife to the thing that watched. And through it all, unseen, unhurried, the Ghost Widow saw everything through a million ordinary eyes. Nothing happened in that market that she didn't permit.

They left the Underdark Market with supplies enough to keep them alive through a year of bad weather and worse enemies, and with the certainty that their spending had written their names in ledgers they'd never see.

Soon after, they were traveling along the docks; by this time, the rumors had spread throughout Voolnishart. The axe already carried a dozen names, none of them right. Some called it a relic of the Dragon Era, others a crown-breaker, others still a curse wrapped in ice and patience. Every telling agreed on the same truths: it was old beyond measure, and dangerous in ways no one could adequately describe. Useful, perhaps. Valuable, certainly. Safe, not even briefly. Along with these rumors were half-truths about the kobold that involved tremendous amounts of money. And so, the powers of Voolnishart did what they always did when faced with something they could neither ignore nor understand. They watched. No one was willing to ask.

Shinazazi watched first, and longest. She did not reach, test, or move at all. The Ghost Widow understood that things like the axe were never claimed by hands but by circumstance, and that information, not possession, was the sharper weapon. She listened to dock gossip and noble whispers alike, counted who spoke first and who repeated, who feared and who coveted, and then did nothing except loosen a word here, tighten a silence there, nudging others into motion while remaining still herself.

Asmith watched differently. He did not yet want the axe; he wanted agency. Who held it, why them, and whether the danger lay in the woman, the kobold, or the thing itself. He sent eyes instead of blades, listeners instead of killers, charting patterns and timings, trying to decide whether these newcomers were a problem or something he could ignore. He didn't seek conflict, but his smuggling businesses were always in danger if the wrong people got wind.

Harker wanted it immediately. Not from understanding, but from appetite. The axe represented a lack in his ledgers, a hole in his sense of ownership, and he could not abide that something existed beyond his reach. If it could be bought, he would buy it. If it could not, he would still try. And so, inevitably, someone made a mistake. He sent ruffs to test the group.

The docks of Voolnishart were loud as ever, gulls screaming over fish guts and sailors shouting above the groan of rigging, but there was a tension in the air that afternoon that Shardra felt long before trouble showed itself. Six dock roughs, badly spaced, worse armed, confidence born of numbers rather than sense. She stopped walking when they stepped into her path and looked at them as one might examine a poorly made tool. When the first man lunged, she sighed, stepped inside the swing, cracked his wrist, and put him down hard. After that it was quick and almost boring. A backhand sent one flying, a knife was caught and twisted free, a tendon cut here, a pressure strike there. Blood flowed, but no one died. One man stiffened and fell screaming, paralyzed by something small, fast, and unseen. The largest tried to grapple her and found himself seated on the planks with her knee between his shoulders, sobbing surrender into the wood while she waited patiently for it to be over.

By the time the city watch arrived, weapons drawn and tempers high, the fight had already collapsed into farce: a handful of bleeding but conscious men, a few unconscious, one rigid with terror, and Shardra sitting comfortably atop a defeated brute like a bench. Eeyagoo stood nearby, calmly wiping his blade clean, smiling. No lives taken. The lesson, however, was unmistakable.

That night, in rooms overlooking the harbor, conversations shifted. Shinazazi listened. Asmith recalculated. Harker raged. The axe remained unclaimed, and the powers understood, dimly, uneasily, that knowledge would come at a cost, and rashness would be paid for in humiliation, blood, or both. None of them yet grasped the worst truth of all: the axe was not waiting to be taken. It was a matter of watching to see who deserved to fail.

Leaving Mithrin

Shardra gathered her cloak and was very pleased with the work, which she deemed perfect. The scythes lay neatly along the center, protecting her spine and providing form when she used the cloak as a shield, with her odd fighting style.

When they left, Eeyagoo's bag held far more than it should. More than it ever had before, and yet it remained manageable for the slight little kobold to carry with ease.

A year of supplies, maybe more, and more tools than he should ever need. Cures, food, fire, cord, salts, spirits, strange little necessities that mattered only when you were dying. And several new books, he went out alone one night, well, not truly alone, Mimi was there. He traveled a short distance to a shop open only at night near the Underdark market. Here, he reluctantly spoke with a Derro. A learned creature indeed, but exceptionally adverse to sunlight, and usually they, as a people, were no friends of the Kobold clans. However, Eeyagoo found him to be delightful. He sold tomes and books from many realms. Some very old, many in languages he did not read. After explaining what he sought, Krrklda the Derros' name as best Eeyagoo could say, showed him a dozen books and tomes. He enthusiastically purchased half of them and left a list of others he would buy should the bookkeeper ever stumble across them.

When he returned, almost shaking, he was so happy, clutching the satchel. Shardra looked at it once, then at him.

"Where did you disappear to then?"

Eeyagoo shrugged. “Bookshop.” She nodded as he sat down over in the corner and pulled a book bound in hide and smelling of sage and mint from the satchel.

The next morning, they left Voolnishart behind and headed north. Shardra seemed to have wanderlust and said, “North seems good, summer is near, if we ever want to go, that’s the time. We may have too much attention on us in a place like this, and it’s too cramped. I need more space.” Eeyagoo nodded and followed along.

Voolnishart and its powerbrokers watched them go. The city council was late to the game, only becoming aware of them after they had left. The city watched them go, as it had watched them the whole time they traveled its streets.

And behind shutters and ledgers, behind silk and shadow, those who moved power in the city began to plan, not around what they had bought, but around what they carried and how much they bought.

Hrauk Devanow and the Battle of the Wagon

Not long after they left Voolnishart, heading north to Papal, they came upon a most curious situation. The story came north before the trio ever did.

It traveled faster than they walked, carried by campfires and guard-post gossip, retold with widening gestures and increasingly creative embellishment. By the time it reached the outer roads of Mithrin, it had already acquired a title: “The Battle of the Wagon.”

Hrauk Devanow told it best.

Hrauk was not a foolish man, nor a desperate one by nature. He was a modest, honest purveyor of mundane necessities, rope, nails, lamp oil, flour, dried fruit, soap that actually worked, needles that didn’t bend, hinges that didn’t squeal. His rolling wagon-store was a lifeline to half a dozen border towns that otherwise waited months between proper resupply. Filled to the brim with things common folk needed, nothing extravagant, few weapons, but far more tools, knives, pans, utensils, salt, lots of salt, and some spices.

He traveled guarded roads often, with patrols, to discourage the bandits along the trade route. He knew the patrol schedules and adhered to them meticulously. He greeted soldiers by name and remembered which ones preferred salted nuts to dried apples.

He also traveled with a cat. A big, scar-faced thing named Brindle, whose mere presence discouraged pests of every stripe. Had, rather, traveled with.

When Hrauk encountered the trio moving southward, he looked like a man who had not slept properly in days. His beard was singed in places. His eyes twitched. His wagon creaked under the weight of despair.

Shardra took one look at him and said, “You look like you lost a fight to something small and mean.”

Hrauk laughed, once, hollowly.

“Mites,” he said.

Eeyagoo stopped walking.

Mimi lifted her head.

“Tiny goblinoids, not much bigger than a mouse but a damn sight more troublesome,” Hrauk went on bitterly. “Barely clever enough to know cruelty is fun. Crawled up from some cursed hole near the old timber road. Infested my wagon so thoroughly that Brindle couldn’t stand it. Chased him off with pitch and needles and laughter.”

His voice cracked. “I miss that cat.”

Shardra grimaced. "Smoke them out?"

"Tried to consider it," Hrauk said. "But half my stock's food and powders. I'd ruin myself."

Eeyagoo was already nodding. "Yes," he said. "Stories show the way to rid mites. Trick out"

Hrauk blinked. "Trick?"

Eeyagoo grinned.

That was when Shardra knew things were about to get strange.

The Plan

Eeyagoo explained it quickly, efficiently, with the confidence of someone who had dealt with far worse infestations in tighter quarters.

"According to Seer's book, Mites love herb honeywort," he said. "Smell like safety. Like home. Cannot resist."

Shardra frowned. "That's... odd."

"Yes," Eeyagoo agreed cheerfully.

"It grow here," he continued. "Not hard to find. Mimi help. Need lots to draw them out."

Mimi chirred and leapt from his shoulder.

"And local pest," he added. "Stirges."

Hrauk's face drained of color. "Blood-drinkers?"

Eeyagoo said. "Yes, they eat mites."

Shardra crossed her arms. "You're going to pit mites against stirges."

"Yes."

"On purpose."

"Yes."

Hrauk stared at him.

"...will it work?"

Eeyagoo shrugged. "Stirges, like bats but smarter, take mites, leave us. Just find nest."

Then he vanished into the woods with Mimi, sending her to scout for the nest while he gathered the herb. She moved like a small shadow slipping between trees and spiraling, as Eeyagoo taught her, to search from the wagon out. After an hour or so, they both came back having found what was needed.

Preparation

Eeyagoo had Hrauk Devanow move the wagon nearly a league to the east, near an old stand of woods. "Stirge nest. Big one. In dead tree there."

Hrauk Devanow blanched. "Are you certain it is safe?"

Eeyagoo grinned. It wasn't comforting, as he intended. "No. But not very dangerous. Stirge good eats. If I can, I will take some."

Hrauk Devanow turned pale.

The herb smelled faintly like honey scorched on iron, pleasant at first, then cloying, then irresistible in a way that made your skin itch. Eeyagoo crushed it into paste and added some hot water. The scent wafted on the wind toward the wagon, and scratching was heard inside immediately.

He motioned to the wagon, "Open all up so they smell."

The mites emerged within minutes.

Dozens at first.

Then hundreds.

They poured from seams and crates, squealing with delight, dragging scraps of fabric and crumbs and bits of twine like offerings. Some were as small as an inch tall, others more than three. They started building a nest around the large bowl, and the first ones to arrive already seemed drugged. They danced and chattered in their high-pitched voices, staggering around, hitting one another. They chanted nonsense words. They wrestled and fought for position, oblivious to the darkening skies as the stirge nest took to flight.

Shardra watched, fascinated and disgusted. "I suddenly understand why people burn these things."

Hrauk stood behind her with a club, trembling. "I never want to see this many of anything again."

Eeyagoo nodded approvingly. "Good numbers."

When the Sky Fell on the Wagon

At first, the mites thought they were winning.

That was the cruelest part. The stirges made swoops, but just out of reach of the pointy sticks and twigs the little mites had.

Shardra watched from atop a fallen log, arms crossed, mouth twisted in equal parts fascination and disgust. "They're drunk," she said flatly. "The little bastards are drunk."

Hrauk Devanow stood a few paces back, gripping his club so tightly his knuckles had gone white. His wagon, his livelihood, sat at the center of it all, doors flung wide, mites spilling from every crack and seam like rot given legs.

"I hauled salt through blizzards," he muttered. "I faced bandits with crossbows. And this, this is how I die."

Eeyagoo crouched near the bowl of paste, eyes bright, tail flicking with satisfaction.

"No die, safe," he said approvingly. "Very drunk. Good."

The first stirge screamed overhead.

It was a thin, tearing sound, as leather ripped quickly.

Then another answered.

Shardra looked up, squinting at the darkening sky. "That's... a lot of wings."

Hrauk's voice cracked. "How many did you say lived in that tree?"

Eeyagoo shrugged. "Enough, they attack soon."

The First Real Dive

The stirges did not rush.

They circled.

Dark shapes against darker clouds, wings beating in slow, economical arcs. They were not maddened by hunger like the mites. They were focused. Calculating. Testing.

One broke formation.

It folded its wings and dropped like a thrown knife.

The impact was obscene.

It struck a mite mid-chant, its needle-like proboscis punching straight through it, pinning the shrieking creature to the dirt. The stirge fed immediately, wings mantling its kill as it drank.

The mites screamed.

Not in fear, at first, but in outrage.

One shrieked, hurling a thorn; another howled, trying to stab the stirge's wing.

A third leapt onto its back, stabbing wildly, squealing in triumph, until a second stirge slammed into them both and carried the pair shrieking into the air.

That was when panic set in.

The sky filled with wings.

Stirges dropped in waves, shrieking as they dove, scooping mites off the ground, off crates, off each other. The air became a storm of motion, leather wings, flailing limbs, blood spraying in fine, glittering arcs as feeding went from precise to enthusiastic.

Mites scattered in every direction.

Some tried to flee back into the wagon.

Eeyagoo had Hrauk light the trail of spirits he had poured earlier after they left the wagon to keep them away from it. Others lit tiny twigs ablaze, shrieking war cries and hurling burning brands upward. A few, drunk beyond sense, tried to ride the stirges, stabbing them mid-flight like deranged knights.

Shardra doubled over laughing.

She slid off the log and sat hard in the dirt, pounding one fist against her thigh.

"I swear by every god that's ever ignored me, this is the finest thing I've ever seen."

Hrauk made a strangled noise somewhere between horror and hysteria.

"They're flying with them! Why are they flying with them?!"

"Because," Eeyagoo said calmly, "mites bad at learning."

Mimi's Contributions

Through the chaos, something small and fast moved with terrifying efficiency.

Mimi darted between wings and bodies, a blur of motion too quick for most eyes to follow. She leapt, snapped, and returned, again and again, depositing her prizes neatly at Eeyagoo's feet.

The first stirge she dropped was dead.

The second was still twitching.

The third landed with a mite still skewered on its proboscis, the tiny goblinoid impaled like a grotesque ornament, arms still flailing weakly as if offended by the arrangement.

Eeyagoo stared down at it, blinked once, then reached out and cleanly ended the stirge with a practiced twist of his blade.

"...efficient," he murmured. "good Mimi."

Mimi chirred proudly and vanished again.

Another stirge arrived moments later, this one alive, furious, wings buzzing angrily as it tried to bite him. Eeyagoo snatched it by the thorax without hesitation, snapped its feeding spine sideways, and placed it carefully on a cloth beside the others.

“Fat. Good roasting,” he said, sorting it from the rest.

Shardra wiped tears from her eye. “Your little friend’s bringing you snacks.”

“Yes,” Eeyagoo agreed. “Helpful.”

Hrauk stared at the growing pile of stirges. “You’re not, you’re not going to eat those, are you?!” He asked, obviously alarmed.

Eeyagoo looked up, genuinely puzzled. “yes, good, want try?”

Hrauk paled further, almost ashen now.

Nature Finishes the Job

The mites fought viciously.

Tiny fires flared and died. Barbs and thorns pattered uselessly against leathery wings. A handful managed to stab stirges badly enough that both fell from the sky locked together, hitting the ground in tangled, screaming heaps.

It did not matter.

Nature was patient. Eeyagoo and Mimi finished off some of the mites that fled towards the log they sat on.

By the time the moon rose, the sounds had changed.

Fewer shrieks. More wet feeding noises. Then, slowly, nothing at all.

The last stirge took off heavily into the night, belly distended, wings laboring.

Silence fell.

The ground was... unpleasant.

Shards of wing. Droplets of blood. Bits of things best not named. The wagon stood untouched, doors hanging open, its interior finally visible and clean.

Hrauk lowered his club with shaking hands.

He stared at the wagon.

Then at the empty sky.

Then at the kobold calmly counting bodies.

“...you saved my livelihood,” he said softly, voice breaking.

Eeyagoo nodded once. “Good.”

He held up two fingers. “Twenty-two. Good roasting. Some bad. No let cat eat.”

Hrauk swallowed. “Cat?”

As if summoned by the word, Brindle reappeared from the darkness, leaping onto the wagon seat like nothing had ever happened, curling immediately. Hrauk laughed and petted his head as the returning hunter pretended to be asleep, purring all the while.

Shardra leaned back, hands behind her head, grin aching on her face.

“Best damn pest control I’ve ever seen. Certainly most entertaining”

Eeyagoo added mites to a mental list of truths in his books.

And the story went north, growing teeth and wings with every telling. Hrauk later continued southeast eventually going to Voolnishart to resupply. Telling the tale as he went.

Eeyagoo took six or seven of the flying terrors and deposited them under a large flat stone he pried from the earth. He then began making a cookfire using some of the wares he got in Mithrin. The skewers and rotisserie held nine at a time as he slowly turned them over the cookfire.

Hrauk was rummaging through his wares, taking stock of losses and damages. He wondered aloud, “How could so many have been in there? There were hundreds of them.”

Eeyagoo nodded. “Look in barrels, casks. They drain, nest inside, packed like hornets. Book say.”

Sure enough, he found an empty barrel of mead that had been full at the last stop. “Ah,” he said. “Found it.”

“Check all. Many mites. More than one nest, maybe. Burn barrels draw more if not,” Eeyagoo added.

“Thank you, Mouseknife, er, Eeyagoo,” Hrauk stammered. “Please, if you need anything, help yourself, within reason, of course.” He laughed.

His search found three total containers drained, with mite debris and nests inside.

Hrauk paid them in goods, a small keg of strong spirits, Shardra’s choice, and told the story to everyone who would listen from that day forward. Eeyagoo seemed content with the toasted Stirges, but food was near the top of his concern list, pretty much always.

As for the trio?

They walked northward the next morning.

Shardra still chuckled days later.

And somewhere along the twisting northern roads of Mithrin, travelers still tell the tale of the day a kobold, a giant woman, and a tiny winged thing waged war on pests and won by letting the world do the killing for them.

Chaos in Papal

Heading to northern Mithrin, the road lost its color, worn and less maintained than the wealthy trade routes further south. Papal was nestled along the river about 50 miles north of Voolnishart.

The laughter and spice-smoke of Voolnishart faded behind them as the Great Mithari River they walked beside led to Papal, a small city that endured rather than dazzled. The buildings were low and practical, timber and stone worn smooth by rain and labor, their lines bent inward as if conserving warmth or secrets. There was life here, certainly, but it moved at a slower pace, unadorned and cautious. Excess was absent, not from want, but from habit. This was a place that valued things that worked.

Shardra and Eeyagoo felt the town’s eyes on them immediately. Not fear, exactly, but appraisal. The people of Papal watched as farmers watch a coming storm, measuring, weighing, already deciding how to weather it. A giantess wrapped in layered hides and scarred leather, an axe as tall as a man bound to her back, and beside her a kobold whose stillness radiated danger rather than diminished it. Trade still happened, but it came carefully. A few merchants approached, voices guarded, curiosity tempered by instinct.

It was Eeyagoo who broke the tension, as he always did, this time by asking about peppers.

The effect was immediate. Opinions erupted, arguments about soil and sun, river fog and seed stock, smoked pods and dried firefruit traded from upriver. Papal knew peppers, and the discussion swelled until

Eeyagoo reached into his pack and produced a Hellfire pepper, whole and perfect, its dark red skin, almost black, glossy as if oiled. The air prickled around it. Silence followed.

When he asked if it could be grown, debate ignited anew, louder and more animated than before. An elderly matron finally shuffled forward, shawl heavy with herbs and river clay, and declared with certainty that the Verdant Menagerie in Voolnishart would know. Eeyagoo was visibly delighted, and equally annoyed, having missed it by days. Shardra, meanwhile, moved among vintners and brewers, quietly acquiring spirits strong enough to strip varnish and asking about ways to blunt extreme spice. Fermented goat's milk was suggested half in jest. She bought some anyway.

That night, they ate at the Faceless Sphinx.

The inn was old, older than the street itself, its stone sphinx sign worn smooth of features by time. Inside, smoke and meat-fat hung thick in the air, voices loosened by drink and familiarity. Stories flowed, then mead, then louder stories still. The town softened around the edges.

They accepted the group without prejudice, and when Shardra bought a round, they all seemed to decide everything was all right.

Until it wasn't.

The older man at the bar had been drinking since before sunset. No one remarked on it when he slid from his stool, until his fall folded inward, his limbs twisting into angles joints were never meant to hold. His muscles seized and crawled beneath his skin like trapped things. He made no sound at all. Blood began to leak from his eyes, his nose, and the corners of his mouth. Conversations died instantly. Chairs scraped back. Prayers were whispered. Icons clutched.

Eeyagoo moved first, nostrils flaring, eyes sharp. A local surgeon followed, a spare man named Ferkay with iron-gray hair pulled back loosely and hands already stained by a lifetime of bad outcomes. The man on the floor writhed silently, bones bending like wet reeds.

"No poison," Eeyagoo said firmly.

Ferkay nodded. "Magic," he replied. "A curse, or a possession. Search him!"

They searched the man. He carried little: coins, a folding knife, and a tightly bound leather ball sealed with black wax. When Eeyagoo lifted it, the man stilled, his body slowly relaxing back toward a semblance of human shape. The bundle was quickly placed on the bar. Patrons began to flee in earnest. The barkeep watched from behind the counter, eyes wide.

Then the man screamed. High-pitched and terrible.

Words poured out in unknown tongues as a pressure built, invisible and crushing, until it burst outward in a concussive wave that hurled bodies and shattered glass. The man sat upright, shrieking warnings, "Don't open it! It wants out!" His eyes were wide with terror.

Eeyagoo turned. And saw the bundle was gone. Behind the bar, the barkeep lifted it up and then stood rigid, eyes glowing green, face slack as she stripped away the wax seal.

The *thing* erupted.

Not emerged, erupted, as if the air itself had split open. Black and purple mass detonated outward, splattering the bar in ropes of glistening ichor. Tendrils snapped free like living whips, some thick as rope, others fine as wire, all moving with frantic, independent intent. Eyes opened everywhere, three-lobed, yellow, lidless, rolling and refocusing hungrily from impossible angles.

The barkeep was engulfed in an instant, lifted and folded into the mass without time to scream.

In the same motion, a tendril lashed out and struck Eeyagoo hard, squarely. The impact was catastrophic.

The sound was a crack like splitting timber as his small body was hurled across the room, spinning helplessly, smashing through a table hard enough to shatter it before slamming into the stone. Chairs exploded outward. Crockery burst into shards. He hit wood, then stone, and lay still.

For half a heartbeat, Shardra froze, a hesitation, out of character. Her mind flashed back to the grasslands for just an instant.

Then the world narrowed, anger built, and she charged.

The axe radiated a chilling cold as it bit into the thing, tearing through elastic resistance as black ichor sprayed across her layered hides. Tendrils struck her again and again, hammering her ribs, her shoulders, her back, each impact bruising, jarring, driving breath from her lungs. She made little attempt to block except for those aimed at her face. One wrapped around her forearm and squeezed until bone creaked. She roared and hacked through it, the severed length thrashing on the floor.

She waded forward, stomping, hacking, tearing the mass apart inch by brutal inch. The thing reacted, not with sound, but with pressure that crushed the skull and made the air throb. Eyes rolled wildly, fixing on her with furious panic as she drove it back through sheer violence, ignoring pain, giving as much as she took.

Then a new sound entered the chaos.

Mimi hovered above the wreckage, glowing faintly, wings beating in a slow, deliberate rhythm. She was fiery red, the rare color of her anger. She sang, not words, but cadence and resonance, a pattern that made the air vibrate. The creature convulsed, its tendrils spasmed uncontrollably, slamming into walls and ceiling as the sound tore through it. The yellow eyes leaked black fluid and retracted in agony.

Shardra pressed the attack without pause, hacking and stomping as the mass collapsed inward, retreating from the sound. Mimi's song tightened, rose, and the thing screamed once, audibly, impossibly, before folding in on itself and vanishing entirely with an audible pop.

Silence fell.

What remained was devastation: ichor-splattered walls, shattered furniture, and Shardra standing at the center of it all, her leather armor rent and torn, skin darkened with bruises already blooming across her arms and ribs. She had taken dozens of hits and returned every one of them.

Then she ran.

Eeyagoo was alive, barely. His breathing was shallow and ragged, blood trickling from his mouth, one arm bent wrong. Mimi landed on his neck and curled tight, humming low and steady. Shardra seized Ferkay by the coat and dragged him forward, her voice cold as a blizzard. "Help him."

Ferkay understood instantly. He worked quickly, carefully, splinting the arm, counting breaths, leaving Mimi undisturbed. Ribs were broken, but Eeyagoo breathed. The little dragon, Ferkay admitted, might be helping.

The man who had carried the bundle lay nearby, shriveled to a parchment-dry husk, emptied of everything that had once made him human. His back was a mass of ritual brands and a central symbol. No one ever learned his name. The barkeep and the bundle were gone, never seen again.

Eeyagoo recovered slowly. Weeks passed. Shardra stayed, tending him and feeding him bland food, which he endured without complaint. He read his books and seemed unbothered by his injuries; he seemed happiest whilst reading with Mimi and chatting casually with Shadra. She gave him a few mild treats, but never reached into the magic bag. "How do you find anything in there?" she asked once. He shrugged and winced. "Know where is."

One afternoon, he thanked her with a heartfelt thank-you. She sat beside his bed and told him what Mimi had done. His eyes widened only a fraction as he listened. Mimi slept curled against his neck, scales dull with exhaustion. When woken, she chirped happily. He said he was fine, then she curled back up and fell asleep.

Shardra watched them and shook her head. "I don't know what to think," she said. "She's learning. Growing. Doing magic."

Eeyagoo shook his head gently.

"Doing what she does," he said.

The road ran easy for a time after they left Papal. Fields stretched wide beneath an open sky, and the trade road carried steady movement in both directions. Word of the plains beast had already traveled faster than they had. Hunters and foragers noticed the trophies first. The scythes and curved teeth stitched into Shardra's cloak and belt drew the eye from a distance, and once attention settled there the questions followed without fail.

Most began the same way. Was it truly that large. Did it hunt alone.

Shardra answered plainly and without embellishment. It had been large. It moved without sound, or smell. It had died as any beast dies when brought down properly but it was a close thing.

Eeyagoo filled in the rest. He described its movement through tall grass, the way its scythe limbs carved arcs in the air, the pattern of its hunting grounds. Hunters listened with focus sharpened by professional interest. Some touched the trophies with quiet respect. Others shook their heads at the scale of it.

The dragon scale eyepatch only deepened the impression. Combined with Mimi's small, alert presence and Shardra's towering height, the three of them became a sight remembered and repeated. By the time they reached certain inns, someone had already heard of the giant with the scythe-beast cloak walking beside a kobold who spoke of herbs, peppers, and orchards.

Conversation rarely stayed on the beast alone. Once the telling was finished, Eeyagoo would shift the topic with patient purpose.

"What grow here," he would ask. "Peppers? Herbs in ditches."

Some dismissed the idea of peppers in northern fields. Others leaned closer, intrigued. He listened carefully to every answer, trading seeds or dried samples when he could. The road became a moving exchange of knowledge as much as distance. He scribbled draconic notes in the margins of the books and pages, weighing every comment especially from the older people.

Evenings brought quieter conversations. When the road cleared and the fire burned low, Papal returned to his thoughts.

One night, camped above a shallow stream, Eeyagoo watched the flames for a long while before speaking.

"Papal good place," he said at last.

Shardra did not look up immediately. She was cleaning her blade with steady movements.

"It is," she agreed.

He stirred the dirt beside him with a stick, thoughtful rather than restless.

"Not now. But someday."

Shardra leaned back against her pack, gaze lifting toward the dark horizon.

"You want to settle there," she said.

Eeyagoo nodded once. The words came measured and certain.

“Land good. Water easy guide. Orchards strong. Road close. Voolnishart near, tools and seed. Not too near.”

Shardra gave a faint breath of agreement. In Voolnishart she had to measure every doorway and every crowded street. In Papal she could walk without lowering her head or worrying about breaking beams with a careless turn.

“It has space,” she said. “Room to move. Fields wide.”

Mimi shifted on Eeyagoo’s shoulder at the mention of the city.

“And close enough that Mimi could visit,” Shardra added.

Mimi made a soft sound of approval.

“City good,” Eeyagoo allowed. “But Papal better for living.”

The thought settled between them without pressure. Not a plan. A direction.

The road itself reinforced the idea. Each settlement they passed bore the marks of strain and rebuilding. Some were little more than stable, well, and common room. Others had proper markets and shrines, though many buildings showed recent repair. Travelers spoke of flood damage, poor harvests in certain valleys, and thinning patrols farther north.

Eeyagoo listened to it all. He asked about blight patterns and soil types. He described how Papal had dug its irrigation with water in mind rather than against it. Farmers who had never considered redirecting runoff found themselves studying him with new attention.

“You dig before the flood,” he told one group beside a roadside fire. “Guide the water. Make it friend.”

A few nodded slowly. Seeds of another kind were planted in those moments.

Shardra watched the land with a different eye. She marked the movement of deer at dusk and the track of larger animals near treelines. Where brazen predators made tracks near settlements and roads and where they stayed clear. The further they traveled from Papal, the more careful she became. Travelers thinned gradually after two hundred miles. Wagons moved in tighter groups. Conversations grew shorter and more cautious.

Still, in the safer stretches, they shared food freely when hunting was good. More than once a pair of merchants or a lone pilgrim found themselves seated beside their fire, eating venison or hare while stories passed back and forth. The plains beast inevitably dominated those talks with hunters. Its size and ferocity seemed to grow slightly with each retelling by someone who had only heard of it secondhand.

Shardra never corrected exaggerations unless they became foolish.

Among all the faces on the road, Matthius and Feleneis Storm lingered in memory.

They met beneath a lone tree near a stone culvert, the couple resting with the ease of seasoned travelers. Matthius spoke openly of seeking land in the foothills north of Papal. His words carried a reverence for wilderness that neither of them named but both recognized. He spoke of predator balance and watershed health with quiet certainty.

Feleneis spoke less, yet her bearing suggested long discipline. The calluses on her hands and the economy of her movements marked her as someone trained in unarmed combat. Not a tavern brawler. Something more deliberate.

After they parted, Shardra commented on the pair as the road unspooled ahead.

“He listens to trees,” she said. “Like a druid, though not one I know.”

Eeyagoo nodded.

“Different order, maybe. Or own path.”

“And she moves like a monk,” Shardra added. “Trained. Balanced.”

“Good people,” Eeyagoo decided. “Papal could use.”

The thought returned later that night as they spoke again of settling. Papal did not only need crops. It needed capable hands and steady neighbors. The idea of people like the Storms building nearby strengthened the quiet hope.

By the time the northern reaches began to show their harsher character, the road had already changed them in small ways. They were known now. Recognized. Stories about the plains beast and the dragon scale eyepatch moved ahead of them like ripples on water.

Yet beneath that growing reputation, the more important shift lay in a simple possibility. Papal was no longer only a place they had helped. It had become a place they might return to.

Not yet. There were still answers to seek and threats unresolved. But as the miles fell behind them and the frontier pressed closer, the thought of wide fields, steady orchards, and room enough for a giant to walk without lowering her head began to feel less like a passing idea and more like the outline of a future.

The Storm

Three days later the sky turned the color of iron. The wind began before noon and carried the scent of heavy rain. By evening the storm broke with sudden violence. Sheets of water turned the road into a river of mud and the wind drove travelers off the open ground.

They reached the Wayfarer’s Inn just before nightfall. The building stood alone beside the road with a wide stable and thick stone walls built for exactly such weather. By midnight every room was filled with travelers who had fled the storm.

The rain did not stop.

For three days the wind roared across the plains and the river nearby swelled beyond its banks. Wagons stood idle in the yard while merchants and farmers shared crowded tables inside. Eeyagoo spent most of that time talking with whoever would listen. He spoke of irrigation from Papal and the use of peppers in preserving food. Some laughed at the idea while others asked careful questions.

Feleneis Storm had once told him that travelers carried ideas the same way rivers carried seeds. In that inn, watching strangers exchange knowledge while the storm battered the walls, the thought returned to him often.

Shardra spent the storm sharpening tools and listening to the wind hammer the shutters. When the rain finally eased, the yard beyond the inn had become a churned field of mud and broken branches.

The Broken Bridge

The storm had taken the bridge two miles east of the inn. When travelers reached the crossing they found the central span torn away by floodwater. Wagons lined the road on both sides while merchants argued about what to do.

Shardra studied the damage without speaking. The remaining supports still stood and the river had begun to fall. With enough hands the crossing could be rebuilt.

She began hauling timbers from the nearby treeline before anyone asked. Others soon followed. Farmers brought ropes. Merchants produced tools from their wagons. For three days the crossing became a small village of labor and shared effort.

Eeyagoo moved among the workers with the same curiosity he brought to plants. He spoke with traders from distant towns and farmers who had lost entire fields to the flood. When the work paused he asked about crops, soil, and the herbs that grew wild along the riverbanks. By the second evening a small circle had formed around the fire where he explained how Papal's irrigation channels kept floods from ruining the orchards.

"You dig with water in mind," he told them. "Not fight it. Guide it."

Some listened with real interest.

When the final beams were secured and the first wagon rolled carefully across the rebuilt span, the crowd cheered with tired satisfaction. The road began to move again.

Cirksher, where the Light was shelter

They reached Cirksher, a small hamlet. Maybe a border town in what might be northernmost Mithrin if the shoddy map they had could be trusted, at the hour when shadows grew long.

Shardra felt it in her gut before she saw it, an itch between the shoulders, the sense that something was in the dark. Then they saw the lights in the town.

Every lantern burned.

Not warmly. Not cheerfully. But *urgently*. Mage-light traced the roads in thin, glowing lines like chalk marks on a battlefield map. Door thresholds gleamed. Window sills shone faintly. Even the stones beneath their boots glimmered with a soft, anxious radiance.

The guards at the gate looked hollowed out, eyes ringed dark, hands tight on spear shafts. Their boots glowed. Their cloaks shimmered faintly, stitched through with crude runes that pulsed when the wind shifted. They didn't seem alarmed when the group stepped into the torchlight, more relieved than anything else.

Shardra stopped dead. "What in the nine hells is goin' on here?" she demanded.

One guard pointed at the ground, his hand trembling.

"It's loose," he said. "Somethin' that lives in shadows. Any shadow. Even the one under yer feet."

"Fourteen nights," the other added. "One gone each night. No blood. No sound. Just... gone."

He gestured toward a long line of townsfolk waiting outside a low stone shop, their faces drawn and gray.

"Old Delka," he said. "She's been layin' wards. Floor glow. Wall glow. Keeps folk safe while they sleep. But magic like that takes its toll. That line's for tomorrow's castin'."

Shardra grunted. She didn't believe in panics, but she believed in patterns.

Eeyagoo had gone very still, head tilted as he does when thinking hard, remembering things.

"Durknil could be," he whispered. "Bad." Hidden in his hood, Mimi was tense, on edge as if she sensed something dangerous.

Both guards looked puzzled.

Shardra looked down at him. "And?"

"Not of this realm," he said quietly. "Outer dark. Takes folk. Takes kobolds. Goblins worship them sometimes. Give offerings so it hunts others instead." He sighed. "Sounds like one from old stories."

Shardra scanned the glowing streets, the trembling people. "So," she said bluntly, "how do we kill it?"

Eeyagoo lowered his head. "Knew you would ask," he muttered. "Dangerous. Very dangerous." He recounted that the story said they drove it away. "Old story in books, wench like big pole for fish, and big hook pull out of shadow." He mumbled something, "Need magic bait. Very dangerous." Shardra nodded, and they headed towards the inn where many townsfolk were gathered.

The Inn Without Welcome

The inn was packed so tight the air itself felt tired.

No greetings followed Shardra's entrance, only wary looks, then relief that something *big* and *armed* had arrived: humans, elves, dwarves, a lone kobold shaking near the wall. Three half-giants sat shoulder to shoulder, faces grim, knuckles white.

Shardra didn't waste breath.

"Who leads you?" she asked.

Voices rose and tangled until an old elf stepped forward, robes patched and hands ink-stained. "Our Governess was taken early," he said. "Others followed. I suppose it falls to me. Elnak Brightweaver." He gave a rueful smile. "A poor name, not indicative of my skills, I am the appointed treasurer."

Shardra looked around. Counted the strong. Not enough.

"You have a Dunaliki or something like that," she said. "Shadow thing. From elsewhere."

"Durknil," Eeyagoo corrected softly.

At the word, the kobold screamed and collapsed, sobbing. Eeyagoo moved and knelt at once, murmuring in Draconic, steadying him. He motioned for Shardra to continue.

"We need twenty folk on the chain hoist. Ten if you three help." She nodded to the half-giants. "Strong chains. A ship's winch. Big grapples. Do you have something like that we can use, and are there enough strong backs to drag this thing out where we can kill it and mount its head on the gate?"

Someone asked, voice shaking, "You want us to fight it?"

Shardra barked a laugh. "No. You'll pull. I'll be bait. Standing on the grapples, it gets a nasty surprise when it grabs. If you have a priest, we could use a blessing on the grapples, just in case."

She unwrapped Rimeheart. The axe flared, cold and hungry. "It wants magic," she said. "This'll bring it."

The Thing That Came

So they set the trap in the square. Eeyagoo scribbled drawings on a parchment showing how things needed to be reasonably well. He found it easier to use a picture than explain, and the workers seemed to understand better what was required. A Wench for loading and unloading hay and goods was already nearby in a warehouse near the town square.

Rope was replaced with chains that ran through the winch, coiled like iron snakes. Grapples gleamed, freshly sharpened, blessed, and bound together to form a fearsome nest of hooks. The light from Delka's wards

painted everything pale and unreal. The townsfolk, the three goliaths, and several guardsmen stood ready. Cloth looped through the links so they could get a grip on the old anchor chain. They waited anxiously, tense, nervous, and more than a little scared. Shardra smiled at them and said, "Hold fast and pull hard as you can when you hear the signal."

Shardra stepped into the dark beyond the glow, placing her bearskin boots firmly in the grapples so the hooks surrounded her feet. It happened fast, faster than anyone expected.

The shadow thickened. The ground *opened*. Mimi tensed tight against him. Eeyagoo signaled and moved.

The Durknit erupted from the darkness and seized Shardra's legs.

Pain exploded as talons punched through muscle, pulling her toward the yawning dark behind it. Grapples saved her, tearing into the creature's arms and hands, stopping it from pulling her down and keeping it from retreating. The claws bit deep and ripped her legs open regardless. Blood soaked her boots.

Grapples did their work, biting deep into its flesh with a sound like tearing wet cloth.

The chains snapped taut. The people groaned with effort; the giants gritted their teeth and dug boots into the ground.

The Durknit rose more completely into view like a corpse hauled from deep water.

It was enormous, probably 20 feet in height, gaunt and starved-looking, skin pale and shriveled, stretched tight over jutting bones. Its eyes were black inky pits, not empty, but *deep*, as if the dark behind them went on forever. Its arms were too long, bent at odd angles as if it had extra joints. Its hands ended in thin black talons meant not to cut, but to *hold*, *grab*, and *take*.

Everything happened at once. Shardra roared and swung. Rimeheart flared bright as it struck across the skull. Bone cracked, frost flared, but the blow was glancing, not killing. She hacked again, carving deep into one arm, nearly severing it.

Black ooze spilled, not blood, but something thicker, wrong, and not nearly enough.

Eeyagoo leapt. He drove his bonespike into the side of its neck, where any living thing would bleed out. His cutter found no purchase on the skin. Its razor-sharp edge skipped across the skin without leaving a mark.

But the Bonespike sank satisfyingly deep. A deadly wound to most things, an artery should be there, but no.

Only a slow trickle of black ooze seeped free. He plunged the spike again, this time aiming for the spine, and it rooted hard between bones. Too deep, too tight, it was lodged.

The thing screamed. The sound was unbearable, high, shrill, wet, vibrating to the bone. People clapped their hands over their ears. Some fell to their knees retching. Some lost their grip on the hoist. Eeyagoo was almost thrown off as the chain slackened. The Durknit surged backward into the inky portal to somewhere. Too much, it was running, dragging Shardra and Eeyagoo with it.

His heart seized with a sudden fear; if it pulled him in. So he leapt free, leaving the spike buried deep in its back.

Shardra bellowed, "PULL WITH ALL YOU GOT!!! IT'S TRYING TO RUN!!!"

The chains lurched. Groans came from the warehouse as the people strained against the tension. Some of the clothes were already stained with blood, yet they kept pulling. Strain and Pain marked their faces.

The Durknit was dragged screaming back into the light. But only Just, and it fought fiercely against the pull. Shardra continued hacking at the thing. It seemed able to deflect and turn her blows effectively, even with its

forearms caught on the hooks. She had to aim for the head, the only thing in reach that wouldn't help free it. Hacking the arms could set it loose from the trap.

The Turn Came

Elnak Brightweaver ran out into the street without preamble. His bow notched and ready, the arrow was an incandescent, piercing beam of light. It had been three decades since he fired a bow in anger. But the skills of his youth were not diminished.

When he fired, it was like a falling star. His aim was precise; it struck beneath the creature's exposed armpit. The effect was immediate and horrific. The Durknil gurgled as black ooze fountained from its mouth in an attempt to shriek, but came out as a choking rattle. Shardra did not hesitate. She buried Rimeheart in its skull. The portal snapped shut, severing the beast at the waist.

The body thudded onto the cobbles. The chain surged, pulling the corpse towards the barn as many fell from the sudden loss of resistance. Eeyagoo tore the bonespike from its back, and it gasped again. A death rattle? Perhaps, but Shadra took no chances and beheaded it with one brutal strike. The black ooze it had for blood leaked from every wound freely now in death.

The stench was indescribable.

Aftermath

The stain from its blood never came out. Black as pitch, empty, hauntingly dark. Shardra had stains on her skin, in the wounds, and later in the scars. She eventually replaced her armor and boots, but the wounds never faded, only Rimeheart and the bonespike bore no stain from the blood. Even the fatal arrow dimmed and turned black after a time. The shape of the upper half of the Durknil was etched, burned into the city square.

Shadra had hewed off the head. Eeyagoo cut away the hands.

The cheering found Shardra first.

Hands reached for her. Voices rose. Gratitude, awe, relief spilling over one another in a babble that threatened to turn her into something she had never wanted to be.

She swayed once, caught herself on the haft of Rimeheart, and lifted her head.

"Enough," she barked, voice cracked but iron-hard.

The sound cut through the noise like a whip's crack.

She pointed with a blood-slicked finger, not at herself, but across the square.

"He turned the battle," she said flatly, nodding toward Elnak Brightweaver, who still stood with his bow lowered, staring as if he hadn't quite accepted what his hands had done. "That arrow saved us all."

Then her hand shifted, pointing down.

"And the plan was his," she continued, indicating the small, hunched figure already at work near the corpse. Eeyagoo was crouched over the Durknil's body, methodically sawing through the blackened wrists, careful to avoid touching the flesh directly.

"All I did," Shardra finished, breath rough now, "was bleed and hit things." She planted the axe point-down and leaned on it. "So give me some room," she said, the edge of her vision starting to gray, "to bandage my legs before I pass out." The crowd obeyed instantly, retreating in a clumsy ripple of fear and respect.

Eeyagoo was there almost before she finished speaking. He dropped the severed hand, wiped his blade on without ceremony, and moved to her side, eyes already scanning, already measuring damage. His expression did not change, but something in him tightened when he saw the state of her legs.

The hooked talons had not cut her. They had **torn**. Great crescent rents yawned along her calves, flesh peeled back, muscle exposed in slick red and black. Had the grapples not taken the weight when the Durknil pulled, the bones themselves would have followed it into the dark.

Shardra sank heavily onto the cobbles with a grunt, boots squelching. He wasted no time. He pressed a hard cloth into the wounds, leaning his weight into it without apology. Shardra hissed but did not cry out. Blood slowed. Not stopped, but slowed enough.

Then he reached into his kit and produced a small clay jar. Ants. Big ones. Thick-bodied. The kind with mandibles meant for breaking husks and bone fragments alike.

Shardra raised an eyebrow. "Don't you." Too late. Eeyagoo pressed the ants directly into the torn flesh. They bit instantly. Shardra sucked in a breath so sharp it felt like swallowing fire, her hands clawing at the stone.

The ants locked down, mandibles closing, tugging flesh together with blind, relentless strength. One by one, Eeyagoo pinched off their bodies, leaving the heads behind, living clamps that refused to let go.

"Hold," he said quietly. She did. When he ran out of ants, he began stitching. The needle was thin, new. The thread was waxed spider silk, almost too fine to see. Each pull was slow, deliberate, precise, and relatively painless due to the new materials he got in Voolnishart. Between stitches, he rubbed a paste into the wounds, pungent, bitter, burning as it went in, coagulant venom. Shardra groaned once, low and involuntary, then clenched her jaw and breathed through it.

Minutes passed. The square smelled of blood, frost, rot, and sharp herbs. Finally, Eeyagoo leaned back. He inspected his work closely, head tilting, eyes narrowed. Pressed once more to check for seepage. There was none. Only then did he exhale.

Shardra looked down at her boots. They were ruined. Massive white bear fur boots, now soaked through with red and streaked black where the Durknil's ichor had splashed. She stared at them for a long moment.

"I'm going to be very cross about that," she muttered faintly.

Eeyagoo huffed, a quiet, almost laugh. "Yes," he said. "But you live to be cross."

Only then did the tension leave his shoulders. Only then did he allow himself the smallest moment of relief.

Around them, the town of Cirksher began to breathe again, shakily, painfully, but alive.

And for Eeyagoo, kneeling in blood and shadow with his hands still trembling, that was enough.

The town cheered,
And then the sound broke.

It faltered, thinned, turned uneven, as though the joy itself could not decide whether it was allowed to exist. Some laughed too hard, some sobbed outright, and many did both at once. Relief spilled out first, loud and uncontrolled, and then grief followed close behind, heavy and inescapable.

Old Delka died sometime in the night.

She had spent herself empty. Night after night, she had drawn on her power, not in grand workings meant to awe or terrify, but in small, grinding acts of mercy: lighting floors so shadows could not bite, sealing thresholds, tracing faint glowing lines where children slept curled together like pups. Each spell was simple. Each casting was costly. And she had done it again and again until there was nothing left in her but will.

When Elnak came to her before dawn, the town still shaking from fear and exhaustion, she was already pale, already moving with the careful slowness of someone measuring out what little strength remained. He explained the plan quickly, the chains, the light, the need to *hold* the creature just long enough actually to end it.

She understood at once. The spell he asked for was not beyond her skill. It was beyond her endurance.

Elnak saw it in her face the moment she began to weave it. The tightening at the corners of her mouth. The tremor she tried to still by bracing herself against the bedframe. He opened his mouth to stop her, to suggest something lesser, something safer, but he *knew*. The same knowledge that had driven him to fire the arrow later stayed his tongue now.

It had to be this. It had to be enough.

Delka drew deeper than she ever had. Not recklessly, not in ignorance, but knowingly. Reaching past the familiar reservoirs of spell and study, down into the marrow of herself. The magic thickened, sharpened, bound itself to the arrowhead in a way that was never meant to last, only to *matter*.

Her breath came shallow. Her hands shook. Still, she finished her work. She looked up at Elnak then, eyes clear despite the pain, and smiled faintly. "Aim true, my friend," she told him softly, "lest all of us fall."

That was all.

Elnak moved as his younger kin were famed to do, swift, precise, grace honed by long years of restraint. For the first time in three decades, he took up his bow not for ceremony or practice, but for war. When he fired the arrow, the spell rode it like a falling star, bright enough to wound the dark itself.

When the shouting ended, when the thing lay dead, and the chains fell slack, someone thought at last of going to Delka.

They found her in her bed. Still. Peaceful. Her hands lay folded over the thin blanket, as though she had merely chosen to rest at last. Her heart, spent of all strength and spark, had not woken again.

The grief rolled through Cirksher like a second calamity. People wept openly in the streets. Older men sat and stared at nothing. Children, who had known her as the woman who chased away nightmares with a muttered word and a glowing hand, understood enough to cry harder than anyone.

She had given everything. There was no question of reward, of praise, of whose name should be spoken loudest. They raised a statue.

At the insistence of Elnak, of Shardra, of Eeyagoo, not to the warriors, not to the strangers who had come passing through, but to Old Delka, Savior of Cirksher.

The statue stood near the great dark stain in the square, facing the gate where the skull was mounted. She was carved as she had been in life: bent slightly with age, staff in hand, light rising gently from her feet.

For once, the town knew precisely how the fight had been won. They knew that without her, courage and steel would not have been enough. The plaque beneath her likeness bore the names of the lost, those taken in the nights before help arrived, and one more name added last, carved with special care.

Delka's.

And when the wind moved through Cirksher after that, it no longer felt like something hunting. It felt, instead, like a breath finally released.

The skull went on the gate. Not at once. Not in triumph.

First, it was dragged far beyond the outer fields, to a low fold of land where the wind scoured stone clean and no well or hearth would ever draw from the ground again. A pit was dug there, deep, lined with old iron sheets and broken paving so the earth itself would not drink what followed.

The pot they used had once served a tannery.

It was thick-walled, blackened by years of boiling hides and bone. Even then, when they lowered the skull into it and filled it with water and lye, the air recoiled.

The stench was beyond rot.

It was *wrongness* made vapor, oily, metallic, sour, and sweet at once, clawing at the throat and eyes. Men gagged. One vomited outright. Another turned pale and had to be led away before he fainted. The wind carried the smell in twisting sheets, and where it touched skin, it left an itch that lingered for hours.

They kept the fire roaring, the pot red hot, the mixture within roiling boil for hours.

Shardra stood watch despite her wounds, legs bound tight, leaning on Rimeheart like a walking pillar. She said nothing. Her presence alone kept the work going when more than one person considered abandoning the task and fleeing.

The boiling took most of the day. The skull resisted even then. Black residue clung stubbornly to the bone, seeping from cracks in the shattered crown and the deep gash where Rimeheart had split it. The water had to be changed twice. Lye was added again and again. Only when the sun dipped low did the bone finally pale, chalky, cracked, still wrong but *very dead*.

When they lifted it free, it was lighter than it should have been. Too hollow. No marrow in the bones. No weight of life ever having belonged there.

They did not bring it through the town. It was wrapped, hoisted onto a cart, and taken straight to the gate at dawn. They bolted it high above the arch, iron spikes driven through eye sockets and jaw hinges. As the skull settled into place, the light caught the fractures in its crown, and for a moment it looked as though the thing were screaming again.

It remained still. The stain in the square also remained. No amount of scrubbing lifted it, black seeped into stone as if the cobbles themselves remembered what had bled there. Children were warned away. Old folks marked themselves when they passed. Some nights, when fog crept in from the lowlands, the mark seemed darker, deeper, like a bruise that would never fade.

But the skull did its work. Travelers saw it from far down the road and slowed. Bandits passed wide. Things that hunted easy prey learned otherwise. Anyone with eyes knew Cirksher was no longer a place that could be taken quietly. It had paid in blood. And it would not pay again without making the world remember the cost.

They asked for no reward. That, more than anything, unsettled the people of Cirksher. Gold was how the world made sense of bloodshed. Land, favors, titles, these were how debts were measured and closed. But when the shouting faded, and the square fell quiet again, Shardra only shook her head at the offerings pressed toward her.

“Keep it,” she said. “You’ll need it more than we will.”

Eeyagoo was more specific. He asked for the talons.

The severed, iron-black hooks that had once dragged people screaming into shadow. He handled them with care, wrapping each in treated cloth and inspecting them not out of greed but with a craftsman’s eye. Along

with them, he requested a handful of jewelry taken from the corpse: an unusual ring that set his thoughts turning, and a pair of earrings no one in town recognized, proof they had not belonged to the taken.

A periapt was returned without hesitation. It was recognized at once as the Governess's charm, worn for years. Eeyagoo did not even suggest keeping it. The townsfolk received it with bowed heads and wet eyes, and it was delivered to her kin before sunset.

Governor Elnak, weary and newly burdened, made a different offer.

Land.

A holding near the river bend. Good soil. Safe roads. A place to settle, if they wished to lay down roots. Shardra listened respectfully, then declined with care rather than finality. "Maybe someday," she said. "If the world ever lets us stop." The offer, Elnak assured them, would stand.

They stayed nearly a month. The wounds needed it.

And Eeyagoo took the opportunity to send a parcel by wagon to Mithrin, addressed to Sniksnik, the little master at Kraggenkor Forge. In it were the earrings, the talons, and a lengthy request.

He spent his days fussing about Shardra, and reading the book of old stories, making notes in the margin. He spent hours, in total, days sketching trap designs and studying old library texts. He also read whatever the village had, regardless of the topic; if it seemed helpful, he would study it. Elnak translated a few old passages for him from what was elvish script. The old elf asked the source, but Eeyagoo only knew the warren seer had them. He left the originals in Elnak's care and took the translations to study. All the while Mimi sat and listened and learned.

Shardra healed slowly, too slowly for her liking. She limped through the town stubbornly, attending gatherings, helping where she could, refusing to be confined despite Eeyagoo's growing irritation.

Mimi seemed almost at ease with the people of the town after the first few weeks. The trip to Voolnishart had made her a bit more adventurous. But she was quiet, only speaking when no one else was around. She hunted rats, mice, and occasional pigeons. She was a terror in the air these days but seemed reluctant to fly in the town much.

"Rest," he told her more than once. "Heal. No walk all over the place."

She laughed every time.

"I'll rest when I need to, Mouseknife. I want to see what this pain earned. It's a good town." Her expression would turn thoughtful then. "But stayin' would be wrong. Don't know why. Just a feelin'." Eeyagoo would glance at Rimeheart when she said that.

He never spoke, but she understood.

Later, quieter, she admitted it.

"My dreams are vivid. If it can shape them, it might bend me even when I'm awake. If I start doin' things that ain't me... you'll say somethin', aye?"

For the second time, Eeyagoo saw something fragile in her face; he remembered the talk on *The Hag*.

"Yes," he said after a moment. "Oathbond swear. Trust you can."

"I know," she replied softly. "Thank you."

When the packages arrived from Hrauk, the town gathered again, not in fear this time, but curiosity.

Hrauk's letter came first, full of apology. He could not bring the goods himself; his route would not take him through Cirksher for another month. Another wagon had been arranged instead.

Eeyagoo tore into the parcels with undisguised glee. Bottles. Pots. Powders and a small scroll from the verdant Menagery. He opened and read it with glee, then rummaged through the items till he found a packet of soil. Glee crossed his features, unabashed glee.

He uncorked one of the pots and inhaled deeply.

Shardra groaned.

"Gods above, did you find *hotter* things?"

"Yessss. Oh yess," he hissed happily. "Local ladies say it's too hot for food, so I had to get. And this, cheese. Made from it. Dragonbreath cheese. And this, Hellfire Jerky."

He cackled.

Then he opened the next package slowly. Carefully. Almost reverently. Inside lay a note. He frowned, hrmphed several times, then handed it to Shardra.

"I can't read," she said plainly, waving it away. "And I doubt that's trade tongue. Might be dwarven."

He set it aside and reached deeper. What emerged silenced them both. A new cutter, perfectly balanced, edged with fine dwarven runes. A weapon that would *cut*, no matter what it was turned against.

Then the spikes. Two dozen. Fashioned from the talons. Otherworldly bonespikes, balanced so perfectly they felt inevitable in the hand. Eeyagoo counted them twice, disbelief flickering across his features.

"How could he do this?" he murmured. "Fast. So fast."

"Magic?" Shardra guessed.

"And no stink," he added, astonished. "No stink."

His reptilian face split into the widest grin she had ever seen, even wider than when eating his infernal stew. Mimi peered from her perch on his shoulder, still quiet, unusually so.

"Open pack," he said, pointing eagerly at the final parcel.

He motioned insistently. Shardra finally opened it after making him wait a short time.

Inside were boots. Kadathe's style boots. A perfect fit.

Great Icebear skin, thick and pale, fur-lined and beautifully worked even better than her old ones.

"How," she began.

He was still grinning like a madman.

"You told me, long ago" he said, "worried I cook them."

Shardra laughed, a booming, rolling sound that filled the room.

She hadn't laughed like that in weeks.

"Thank you," she said.

It took two days to find someone who could read the note.

Of course, it was Elnak.

He read slowly, brow lifting higher with each line. “What you sent,” he said carefully, “was... exceptionally valuable. He offers to run a tab for you. Your surplus stands at over fifteen thousand gold.”

They stared at one another. “Big number hard to understand.” He shook his head as if doing math in his head. “More than armies?!” Shardra laughed. “Elnak was the treasurer; he can show you the numbers, I bet.” The old elf looked up from the paper and then nodded, smiling.

“And,” Elnak continued, “a Master Sniksnik writes ‘hold’ once: in Dwarvish. Not Draconic. Odd.” He cleared his throat.

Eeyagoo nodded.

He had seen the engraving on the spikes. Now he understood.

“Iskat’,” Elnak pronounced. “Is catch.”

“Yes,” Eeyagoo said quietly. “Trigger word. Does what? Hmmph” he said, scratching his chin. Mimi decided to pop up and say “STITCHES” in Shardra’s deep, booming voice, then chitter with delight at the confused look on Elnak’s face.

Elnak smiled faintly. “Happy to assist. You’re leaving, then?”

Shardra nodded. “Within the week, if he’s done learning everything under the sun.” Mimi added “honeyfoil” in Eeyagoos’ voice this time, much to her own delight and the puzzlement of others.

“If folk come lookin’, and they likely will, tell them we went north. Say no more. Staying would draw eyes here you don’t want.”

Eeyagoo sat beside Elnak as he went over numbers larger than the kobold had ever considered. He took notes, asked questions, and grasped the topic quickly. He was stunned by the amount, unsure how even to picture it. “So piles and piles of gold?” Elnak laughed, yes, but most likely they put it in trade bars that are easier to stack and count, probably 15 bars is all. “So not so much,” Eeyagoo said, not fully grasping the concept. “No, no, they are worth the same amount, just a different form. “Ah,” he nodded.

Elnak nodded and bowed.

When the time finally came for them to head north, the town watched from balconies and doorways as they departed, scarred, limping, laughing softly, heading north along no straight road at all.

A bond formed.

“So,” she started, “tell me about your books.”

The fire was low and steady, fed with resin-scented wood someone in Mithrin had insisted was *proper eating-fire timber*. Fat dripped from skewers, hissing when it struck the coals. Bread, real bread, crusted and warm, sat between them, already torn rather than cut. Shardra leaned back against a crate, cloak loosened, boots off, the day finally done.

Eeyagoo ate carefully, savoring. He always did when the food was rich. He chewed, swallowed, then stared into the fire for a long moment before speaking.

“Was... long years,” he said quietly. “After warrens. After running. Book time.”

Shardra glanced over, one brow lifting.

Eeyagoo gave a rasping little chuckle. “Learned.” He tapped his temple with two fingers. “Head hurt. Words heavy. But good heavy.”

Mimi, curled beside him in her current favored shape, a palm-sized dragonling with translucent wings and a tail that *definitely* hadn't been that smooth yesterday, lifted her head.

"Stiiitches," she chirped, in Eeyagoo's own voice, stretched oddly long and pleased with itself.

Shardra laughed outright, deep and booming. "That one again."

Eeyagoo snorted. "She like that word." He reached out, letting Mimi climb onto his wrist. Her scales shimmered from dull amber to mossy green as she settled. "Medical books. She happy then. I read, she listen. No," he corrected himself, frowning, "she *hear*. Meaning... slippery."

Shardra tore another chunk of bread. "You taught her, though."

"Tried." He shrugged, small shoulders lifting. "Point to pictures. Draw bad pictures. Say word. Say *why* word." He hesitated, searching. "Hard. She repeat sound, not thought."

Mimi cocked her head and said brightly, "Poison," in a tone that was unmistakably Shardra's voice.

Shardra froze for half a heartbeat, then burst into laughter again. "She's got us both," she said, wiping at her eye. "Careful. Next, she'll be laughing like me."

Mimi tried. The sound came out wrong, too sharp, too high, but enthusiastic.

Eeyagoo smiled despite himself. "After a year... she chose shape." He gestured to her. "Little dragon. Comfortable. But not fixed." He pointed to her tail as it flicked, the tip briefly hardening into a faint stinger before softening again. "Sometimes sting. Sometimes not. Colors change with the mood."

Shardra studied Mimi with open curiosity. "And the books?"

"All kinds." His voice warmed as he spoke. "Stories. Old diaries. Poems I not understand but read anyway." He shrugged. "Surface thoughts live there. I wanted... know why big folk do things." He paused, then added softly, "Why they hurt."

The fire popped. Shardra's smile faded, just a little. She nodded once, slowly.

"And the useful ones?" she asked.

Eeyagoo's eyes brightened. "Those best. Herbs first." He gestured vaguely north, south, everywhere. "Read name. Find plant. Smell. Taste small, *small*," he emphasized, stabbing the air with a finger. "Learn soup. Learn salve. Learn bad mixes." He grimaced. "Some very bad."

Mimi leaned forward eagerly. "Plants," she said, reverent.

"Plants," Eeyagoo agreed. "After happy... animals." His hands began to move as he spoke, tracing paths only he could see. "Day things. Night things. Tracks. Nests. What eat what. How trap without killing. How kill if need."

Shardra tilted her head. "And she helped."

Mimi puffed up proudly.

"Oh yes." Eeyagoo huffed a laugh. "She *loved* that. Sniff, hunt, find." He ticked them off. "Birds. Eggs. Snakes. Small fur-things." He shook his head. "I hide things. She always find. Always."

Mimi sprang from his wrist to the crate, nose down, tail flicking. "Find," she declared triumphantly.

Shardra shook her head, smiling. "You two make a terrifying pair," she said. "All that quiet learning, then," she mimed a sudden grab. ", gone."

Eeyagoo shrugged again, but there was pride there. "I remember. All I can. Keep in head. For later." He looked up at her then, earnest. "That why I know things. Not magic. Just... time."

Shardra was quiet for a moment, chewing thoughtfully. Then she nodded. "Time spent right," she said.

Mimi chose that moment to crawl onto Shardra's knee, look up at her, and say, perfectly, in Eeyagoo's voice and with unmistakable joy,

"Stitches."

Shardra's laughter rang out, full, booming, so hard she nearly dropped her skewer. The kind that pushed the smoke aside and made the night feel briefly smaller.

Then it stopped. Not abruptly. Not sharply. It thinned, like breath drawn back into the chest, like a wave pulling away from shore.

She felt the weight. Small. Warm. Real. Mimi sat on her knee. Shardra went utterly still.

The fire popped. Grease hissed. Somewhere beyond the ring of light, Mithrin breathed and shifted. But inside that moment, nothing moved.

Shardra slowly lowered her gaze.

The little dragonling was perched there as if she had always belonged, claws resting lightly on heavy hide, wings folded neatly against her sides. Her scales glowed a deep, ember-red, not the sharp warning crimson of anger, but the rich, steady red of banked coals. Her tail lay relaxed, no stinger, just a gentle curve. She looked... pleased.

Shardra did not breathe.

Her hands, hands that had crushed stone and broken bone, hovered uselessly at her sides. She did not dare move them.

Eeyagoo saw it happen. He froze too, eyes widening, food forgotten halfway to his mouth.

"Mimi," he said softly. Not command. Not warning. Just her name.

Mimi did not turn.

Shardra swallowed. The sound was loud in her own ears.

"She," Her voice failed her the first time. She tried again, quieter. "She doesn't ever do this."

Eeyagoo shook his head slowly. "No," he whispered. "She... not sit on others. Ever."

Shardra's chest tightened. Something old and heavy shifted under her ribs, a thing she had learned to carry without naming. She stared at the fire because looking directly at Mimi felt like it might shatter the moment.

"Should I move?" she asked. "I don't want to scare her."

Mimi tilted her head, studying Shardra's face with bright, molten eyes. Then, carefully, *carefully*, she leaned forward and pressed her forehead against Shardra's thigh, a faint vibration running through her like a purr.

Shardra's breath hitched.

Eeyagoo's hands trembled where they rested on his knees. He watched as if afraid the world might correct itself if he blinked.

"She... choosing," he murmured, awe creeping into his broken cadence. "She choose where safe."

Shardra closed her eye. For a heartbeat, she was no longer a weapon, no longer a storm given flesh. She was... there. Chosen. Trusted by a creature that understood danger more intimately than most people ever would.

Mimi shifted again, then pushed off with a soft flutter of wings, drifting back to Eeyagoo. She landed on his shoulder, her scales still her happy orange. She leaned forward, nose brushing his jaw, then turned her head back toward Shardra.

Her voice came out wrong.

Layered.

Half Eeyagoo's careful rasp, half Shardra's deep resonance.

"Fam... ily."

The word wobbled, but it held. Silence fell like snow.

Shardra's eye snapped open. Eeyagoo stared at her, then at Mimi, mouth slightly open. "She," He swallowed. "She never use that word."

Mimi seemed satisfied. She stepped down, curled herself against Eeyagoo's neck, her tail looping loosely around him, not binding, not guarding. Just *there*. Her color softened to a dim, content red as her breathing slowed.

Within moments, she slept.

Shardra exhaled shakily, one hand finally lifting to press against her chest.

"...I'll remember that," she said, voice low and rough. "All my life."

Eeyagoo nodded, eyes shining in the firelight. He did not trust himself to speak.

The fire burned on.

And something, unnamed but real, had quietly taken root between them.

The Trek North

They entered Auris through the northern pass, just south of the Wyrllish Plains, a narrow, wind-carved throat of stone where banners hung stiff and watchful, and the guards looked at travelers the way men look at storms they hope will pass without touching their homes. Suspicion clung to the place like frost that never quite melted.

The pass wardens had nearly turned them back.

Auris folk were not cruel by nature, but they were guarded, layered over with habits born of survival, memory, and the unshakable belief that the wider world existed primarily to bring trouble to their doors. A giantess with a frostbound axe and a scarred kobold with something alive riding his shoulder were, by any measure, trouble-shaped.

"Passing through," Shardra had said then, patient but iron-backed.

"To Kadamthe'," Eeyagoo had added, voice careful, hands open. "Trade road. No quarrel."

There had been a long silence. The guards had spoken quietly among themselves, eyes never leaving Rimeheart, or the blue dragon-scale eyepatch that caught the light like a cold star. At last, grudgingly, they were waved on, with warnings, and eyes in their backs.

That feeling followed them all the way to the inn.

By the time they ducked beneath the lintel of the *Wayfarer's Hearth*, Shardra's good humor had worn thin. She rarely cared what others thought of her; fear was a currency she understood well, but Auris's quiet hostility pressed from all sides. Eeyagoo, by contrast, was watchful rather than troubled, his posture small but ready, instincts honed by years of being the wrong thing in the wrong room.

The door closed behind them.

Conversation faltered.

A serving girl froze mid-step, tankard trembling. Somewhere near the hearth, a man muttered a quick ward under his breath. Another voice, older, sharper, hissed, "Gods preserve us, there's a giant in the room." Someone else, not quite whispering, added, "And a rat loose by her boots."

Mimi lifted her head, eyes glinting, and clicked once, soft, curious, not entirely friendly.

Shardra did not glare. She did not raise her voice.

She walked.

The floorboards complained as she crossed the room. She reached a heavy oak table near the back wall, took it with one hand, and dragged it outward with a single deliberate pull so she could fit without snapping furniture meant for smaller folk. The chair groaned as she sat, close to the bar, Rimeheart resting within easy reach.

Only then did she lean back, firelight sliding across the blue scale set over her ruined eye.

"All right," she said, calm as a drawn blade laid flat. Her single green eye moved across the room, not missing anyone. "I hear the mutterin'. I hear the questions folk don't have the spine to ask out loud."

No one spoke.

"We're passin' through," she continued. "Not claimin' land. Not lookin' for trouble. Just fair trade, hot food, and a roof that doesn't leak."

A chair scraped. Someone snorted, a humorless sound.

Shardra's mouth curved, but there was no warmth in it.

"That little one you're all starin' at," she said, jerking her thumb toward Eeyagoo, "goes by Mouseknife to me. Some of you might know the name Eeyagoo."

Eeyagoo dipped his head slightly, Mimi curling tighter against his neck.

"Either way," Shardra went on, "he's welcome here. And before any of you decide otherwise, you're goin' to hear why."

The inn grew still, not politely, but carefully, like a room holding its breath around a sleeping predator.

"It was three weeks on the road," Shardra said. "Easy miles, mostly. Peaceful. Even fun, in places."

A flicker of something, almost fond, passed over her face.

“Ran into mites once. Whole wagon crawling. Ended with stirges everywhere, screaming pests, and a merchant cryin’ with joy when it was done. Name of Hrauk Devanow, swore he’d sing our praises in every caravan from Mithrin to Taurdain.”

A few reluctant chuckles surfaced, then died as people remembered where they were.

“But near the start of our trek,” she said, voice tightening like a drawn bowstring, “things went bad.”

She leaned forward, forearms on the table. Scarred hands. Steady hands.

“Tal-Shie war party. Five of ’em. Three fire, two stone. Not scouts. Not raiders. Soldiers. Armored like fortresses, metal and leather not right with the world. And mean as a winter famine.”

A murmur rippled through the room, fearful, knowing. Tales of the Tal-Shie were not stories that Auris folk enjoyed hearing close to bedtime.

“They came at dusk,” Shardra continued. “Quiet as graves fillin’. We were makin’ camp. Thought we had another calm night.”

She huffed once. “Mistake.”

“Mimi caught it first.” She nodded toward the small shape clinging to Eeyagoo. “Felt the air go wrong a heartbeat before steel moved.”

Her hand slashed down.

“Fire hit first. Earth boxed us in. No words. No warning. Just killing intent.”

No embellishment. No heroics.

“It was brutal. Painful. Ugly.”

She touched the haft of Rimeheart.

“Armor saved us. If they’d come subtly, we’d be dead. But they didn’t. They came like a battering ram.”

Her eye flicked to Eeyagoo.

“We won.”

A collective exhale, half disbelief, half awe.

“Rimeheart took two. Froze one solid and split another like wet kindling. Mouseknife and Mimi handled the rest, fast, clever, vicious in ways you only learn by survivin’.”

She paused.

Her jaw tightened.

“Their weapons were wrong,” she said. “Not cursed. Worse. Like they didn’t belong here. Twisted and felt wrong in mortal hands.”

A man near the hearth made the mark of the seven pillars.

“We buried ’em deep. Marked the ground. Didn’t want fools diggin’ for fortune. Metal like that ain’t worth the risk.”

She showed the scar, long, pale, angry.

“Eighty-seven stitches. He did ’em. While bleedin’ himself.”

Her voice dropped.

“Without him, I’d be dead.”

Silence.

“He treated poisons he’d never seen. Kept me alive. Fed me stew that burned my sinuses clean. Guarded me three days without sleep.”

She sat back.

“So I’ll say this once. He’s welcome. Anywhere I stand.”

Her mug cracked slightly in her grip.

“And I’ll hear no cross word.”

No one argued.

A mug lifted. Then another.

Only then did the room begin to breathe again.

After enough spirits were drunk, the inn began to feel more welcoming than a retelling of the Battle of the wagon, wildly inaccurate and exaggerated, caused much laughter.

By the time the story ended, the room was laughing.

Some shaking their heads. Some swore they’d heard it differently. Someone insisted the wagon had been *on fire* the whole time.

Shardra leaned back, boots hooked on the bench, listening as they became a folklore themselves.

Eeyagoo, quiet in the corner, added nothing. He wondered to himself why she added Mimi to the story, she was hiding then, never open. He did not dwell on it

Mimi chirred.

And somewhere in northern Auris, the Battle of the Wagon gained another impossible detail, another wing, another tooth, ready to be told again by the next fire, to the next crowd, as long as roads stayed dangerous and stories stayed hungry.

They left the next morning feeling better than they had in many days.

The Quiet Oath

They did it without witnesses.

That mattered to Shardra.

The fire was small, deliberately so, just enough heat to keep the cold from biting bones, not enough to throw shadows far. Mimi slept curled tight against Eeyagoo’s throat, her breathing a soft, clicking warmth. The axe lay across Shardra’s knees, its red core dim, pulsing slow like a heart that knew the night was safe enough.

Shardra stared into the coals for a long time before she spoke.

“I know now,” she said.

Eeyagoo didn’t answer. He never rushed words like that.

She rested a hand on the haft. The axe did not stir, but the frost along its edge thinned, listening.

“It’s bound to me,” Shardra went on. “Not to my hands. Not to my anger. To my blood. Whatever made it, whatever *it* is, it chose my line. I feel it. Always have. Thought it was just... fire in the veins.”

She exhaled, slow.

“It isn’t.”

Eeyagoo shifted slightly, careful not to wake Mimi. “Blood... not chain,” he said. Not a question.

Shardra nodded. “Aye. And chains break. Blood doesn’t.”

She finally looked at him then, really looked. Not down, never down, but straight across the fire, eye level.

“And because it’s bound to me... it can’t stay with the world if I fall.”

That got his full attention.

Shardra reached out and set the axe flat on the ground between them. The frost crept into the dirt, stopping short of his toes. The red core pulsed once. Acknowledgment.

“If I die,” she said, voice steady as stone, “you take it.”

Eeyagoo’s claws tightened in the earth. “Not mine,” he said immediately. “Too big. Too loud.”

Shardra almost smiled. Almost.

“Exactly,” she said. “That’s why you.”

She leaned forward, forearms on her knees, the posture of someone making terms with a storm.

“You don’t *use* things like this. You can hide them so deep the world forgets to ask.”

She gestured vaguely westward, toward the sea and the iron silhouette that haunted every port.

“The Hag runs deep routes. Barrier depths. Places gods don’t watch close. If it comes to it, if I fall and the axe still breathes, you ride her. You take it out past sound and light and you throw it overboard.”

She paused, then added, quieter:

“And you don’t look back.”

The fire popped. Mimi twitched but did not wake.

Eeyagoo swallowed. His voice came rough. “If... if axe fights me?”

Shardra shook her head once. Certain.

“It won’t. Not if I’m gone. It’ll know why.”

She reached out, then hesitated, respecting the moment, and finally placed two fingers against his chest, right over the heart.

“You understand limits. Better than anyone I’ve met. That’s why I trust you with this.”

Silence stretched. The axe pulsed again, slower still.

Eeyagoo nodded once. A small motion. A heavy one.

“I swear,” he said. “By breath. By watch. By last place world can’t reach.”

Shardra let out a breath. The tension eased from her shoulders, just a little.

She sat back, picked up the axe, and rested it against her side again like an old companion.

“Good,” she said. Then, because she was Shardra, she snorted softly and added,

“Not that I plan on dyin’ soon though.”

Eeyagoo huffed a quiet, broken laugh. Mimi murmured something half-wordless in her sleep.

The fire burned low.

Merchant Roads of Mithrin

The merchant had known something was wrong long before the village came into view. An hour earlier, perhaps more, when the road itself began to feel wrong beneath his horse’s hooves. It was too clean. There were no wagon ruts pressed into the dirt, no droppings left by draft animals, no scraps to draw birds down into squabbling clouds. Even the wind seemed altered, sliding low and cautious along the ground instead of moving freely through the open country. The road felt abandoned in a way that suggested not neglect, but avoidance.

When the village finally appeared, it did so without transition. There was no smoke, no distant sound, no hint of life. Only the remains. Buildings had burned down to their foundations, their outlines still visible in scorched stone cracked by heat that had not spread as fire normally does. Doors were missing entirely, not broken or charred, but torn free and carried off. Fences were gone. Carts, tools, and markers that should have remained even after a hard raid were simply absent.

There were no bodies. No livestock. Not even the pale scatter of bones that time and scavengers usually leave behind. Everything that could walk, crawl, or be eaten had been taken, and taken thoroughly.

The merchant dismounted slowly, his pulse loud in his ears, and led his horse into what had once been the square. He stopped after only a few steps. The bloodstains there had not faded with sun or rain. They had spread. From the darkened pools rose growths that should not have existed, twisted black leaves dusted with a pale, ashen coating. Their veins ran the wrong way, branching inward instead of out. Their edges curled toward themselves, as though recoiling from the light overhead.

He had traded in herbs and roots for thirty years, had walked fields and forests across Mithrin and beyond, and he knew plants as one knows old friends. These were not diseased or blighted. They were something else entirely.

He backed away, breathing shallowly, the certainty settling in his gut like a stone. Whatever had done this had not come to raid or punish. It had not passed through.

It had claimed the land.

And it would return.

Strangeness Is Noticed

Sleep came thin and sharp-edged, the kind that never truly settles. The cold saw to that. Shardra’s lean-to was thrown together with the speed of long habit, branches cut clean, hides stretched tight, the wind given just enough resistance to blunt its worst teeth, but the mountain air still found its way in. It slid along the ground, crept under cloaks, pressed into bone and joint with patient cruelty. There was no real fire, only banked embers cupped in stone, their warmth a memory more than a comfort. Eeyagoo slept curled tight against the earth, breathing shallow and steady, while Mimi had settled half against his chest, half against Shardra’s side, her surface dimmed to a mottled gray meant to drink in heat that barely existed.

Shardra woke with a violent intake of breath, heart hammering, hand already moving for Rimeheart before thought caught up. The sudden motion sent Mimi skittering upright, her skin flashing instantly to a sharp, warning violet, while Eeyagoo jerked awake with a startled hiss, knife in hand and eyes wide. For a breathless moment there was only the wind, howling down from the high slopes, worrying at the lean-to until it creaked and shuddered. Shardra stood there, frozen, listening to something she could no longer hear. The dream clung to her like frost: the certainty of being hunted without knowing by what, of danger so close it brushed past unseen, a pressure at her back that never quite touched. She could not name it. That unsettled her more than fear ever had.

“I heard nothing,” Eeyagoo said quietly after a moment, straining his ears again. Only the wind answered him. Mimi, however, did not settle. She flowed forward, low to the ground, violet deepening as she sniffed the air with soft, wet sounds, a faint growl vibrating through her body, not loud, but insistent. Something had been there. Close. Whatever it was, it had passed on.

Morning brought little warmth but clearer answers. The snow beyond their camp was disturbed far out, not fresh enough to be immediate, but not old either. Tracks circled wide, testing, never closing the distance. Shardra crouched to study them, breath fogging the air. “Rimehookt,” she said at last. “Small pack. Dangerous in numbers, but not foolish.” She straightened slowly, eye scanning the white. “They usually follow the riekmoose herds.” Her gaze lingered on the untouched snowfields stretching away from the road. “In spring they should be thick in these fields.” She frowned. “I don’t see any tracks.” She looked to Eeyagoo, then down at Mimi, who pulsed uneasily. “If the herds are thin, the hunters may become bold. We must be careful.”

They did not have to wait long for proof. Miles down the road, the land told its story without words. A trader’s wagon sat broken and half-sunk in thawed mud, one wheel torn clean away. The ground around it was churned and scarred, old blood dark against melting snow. A tent lay shredded nearby, its poles snapped, canvas ripped open as if by claws rather than blades. “Tough way to go,” Shardra murmured, voice low. A crossbow lay discarded in the muck, string slack, bolt long spent. Near the remains of the tent, a knife and a short sword lay where they had fallen, both stained, both useless now.

Eeyagoo knelt, sniffing the air and the blood with a practiced seriousness, eyes tracing the pattern of tracks pressed into the earth. Mimi climbed onto the wagon, slipping beneath the loose tarp and chirping sharply from inside, a sound edged with alarm. Shardra circled wider, eyes sharp for detail, fingers brushing the ground where hair might have caught. She found none. She straightened slowly and shook her head. “Odd,” she said. “High mountain predator. A Kreglper.” Her mouth tightened. “Big. Lionish. A solo hunter. They rarely go below the tree line.” She looked north then, concern plain and unguarded. Whatever had passed near their camp in the night had not been the Rimehookt alone, and that knowledge settled over them heavier than the cold ever had.

Heaug the Fatherless

Heaug the Fatherless, uncle to Shardra Shalkdottir, a relative she did not know still drew breath, sat like an ill-fitting monument in the foyer of Harker’s estate. The manor of the Trader-King of Voolnishart was an affront to restraint. The foyer alone was a cathedral to wealth: floors of veined green marble imported at obscene cost from the Tal-Shie borderlands, polished to a mirror sheen that reflected torchlight and ego alike. Pillars rose like petrified trees, each inlaid with filigreed gold bands engraved with the sigils of merchant houses Harker had broken, bought, or buried. Between them hung tapestries thick as winter cloaks, naval victories rendered in silk and dyed thread, scenes of coin-heavy caravans cresting mountain passes, and always, subtly worked into the margins, Harker himself: observing, directing, profiting. The air smelled of perfumed

oils, beeswax, and something sharper beneath, alchemical preservatives used to keep rot and vermin at bay. It clashed unpleasantly with the scent Heaug carried with him: cold iron, old leather, pine pitch, and the faint animal tang of a man who slept outdoors more often than beneath a roof.

Heaug did not belong here, and he did not care. He filled the space by accident of birth alone. A giant, like his niece, broad even by their kind, his shoulders hunched forward as if the world had trained him to expect blows from every direction. His skin bore the story of his life in scars: white seams where blades had bitten, puckered burns from sorcery and caustic beasts, old fractures that had healed crooked. The tattoos that marked his clan, black and ash-blue knotwork worked deep into the skin, were faded but unmistakable, echoing the same ancient geometry that Harker's men had seen on a certain fiery-haired traveler recently departed from the city in the company of a kobold with far too much coin.

His attire was brutally practical. A sleeveless coat of layered hide and boiled leather hung over a breastplate darkened with age and oil. The fittings had been replaced more than once, mismatched but well maintained. Fur lined the collar and shoulders, not for show but warmth, matted and trimmed by hand rather than tailor. His boots were scarred mountain things, thick soles, iron-shod toes, laces replaced with cord more than once. Every strap, every buckle, had been repaired in the field. His weapons were not ceremonial. A greatsword of eerie hue rested against the couch beside him, its haft wrapped in dark cord for grip, the edge kept wickedly sharp. A long knife rode one hip, a shorter dirk the other, balanced for either hand. There were throwing spikes hidden in his belt, and a crossbow slung over his shoulder pad that suggested he favored ambush as much as brute force.

Heaug sat stiffly on a couch too soft by half, the cushions sinking under his weight like they resented him for existing. He had been waiting longer than he liked. Waiting always meant vulnerability. When the servant finally returned, overdressed in layered silks and a stiff collar studded with gems that marked him as property as much as staff, his voice was smooth and empty. "Lord Harker will see you now." "Bout bloody time," Heaug grunted, levering his massive frame upright. The couch protested, springs creaking in relief. "Don't like ta wait. Or waste time." His voice was low, crushing gravel. "Of course, sir," the servant replied, already turning, already forgetting him.

The meeting room beyond made the foyer seem restrained. Gold leaf traced the ceiling beams. The walls were paneled in lacquered hardwood so dark it drank the light, broken only by inset displays of art objects and trophies, Far eastern glasswork, antique coin chests, weapons taken from defeated rivals and mounted like hunting prizes. The desk at the center dominated the space, carved from a single slab of rare stone shot through with crystalline veins that caught the light like trapped stars. Heaug did not know the name of it, but he knew the cost would have fed a mountain hold for years.

Behind it sat Harker. The first impression was worse than Heaug had imagined. A half-elf, immaculate and composed, every inch of him curated. His hair was styled with a clasp of worked platinum. Rings crowded his fingers, each gemstone deliberate, each a declaration. His clothing was a masterwork of tailored excess, layers of fine fabric in muted but expensive hues, embroidered subtly with sigils of trade houses and private marks only insiders would recognize. Even his boots gleamed. A peacock, preened and polished. Feck, what a waste.

Harker barely looked up as the giant entered, his quill still moving across parchment. "Take a seat. I'll be done with this shortly." Heaug bristled. His hands flexed once. "You wanna talk to me, you do it now or never. I'm tired." The servant opened his mouth. "Please, sir, Lord Hark ..glllch." The sound ended abruptly. Heaug's dirk pommel was buried in the man's mouth, driven upward with casual precision. There was a wet crack, a choking rattle, and then the servant collapsed bonelessly to the floor. "Don't interrupt me," Heaug said, not bothering to look down. "I don't think your lesson will yield any rewards," Harker commented mildly,

setting his quill aside at last. Heaug glanced down, then nodded. “Forgot how short he was. Meant ta stab ‘em in the gut.” As if that explained everything.

“What do you want, rich man?” Heaug demanded. “Information,” Harker replied smoothly. “On a woman seen in the city some weeks back. Traveling with a kobold. Carrying an axe carved of ice.” He watched closely. Heaug gave him nothing. “She bore tattoos strongly similar to yours,” Harker continued. “Same clan, perhaps?” “Not that I know of,” Heaug said without hesitation. “My clan’s dead. Snuffed out by them damnable fey from the far west.” It was a lie. A good one. Old, practiced, worn smooth by repetition.

Harker smiled thinly. He had other ways of knowing. “Ah. Of course you believed that,” Harker said, “until a few months ago. When you heard stories of a giantess and her exploits to the north, and near Taurdain.” The pause was deliberate. “I know this,” Harker continued, “because you were heard making inquiries not three days ago at the northern gate. And again at several local establishments.” “I don’t like folks nosin’ in my business,” Heaug growled. “As it happens,” Harker said, unperturbed, “I am willing to trade.” He produced a scrap of paper bearing a careful sketch of a mundane-looking satchel. “I want this,” Harker said. “The kobold carries it. If rumors are true, the axe is bound to her bloodline, which by extension might include yours.”

“My niece,” Heaug grunted, anger bleeding through now. “That axe was my brother’s. And our father’s afore that. Ten generations. It’s mine by right.” Harker smiled. Yes. Ownership. Entitlement. This was a language he understood. “So,” Harker said, “would you like to know the name of the town they were last seen in?” Heaug extended his hand. “I reckon so. But don’t cross me, rich man.” Harker scribbled a name, paused, and looked up. “You can read?” “Gimme the damn name.” Cirksher. Far north. Thin law. Plenty of places to disappear or to be found.

Heaug turned and left. As he walked through the manor, servants flattened themselves against walls. Guards watched him carefully. He welcomed it. Fear kept men honest. Outside, as he melted into the tangled streets of Voolnishart, Heaug’s mind was already working. Harker would have spies. Heaug would assume it. He would flush them. Or better, lead them somewhere else. Asmith had ways of dealing with watchers, if one knew how to ask without being seen asking. Shardra alive. That much was true. Everything else would have to be earned.

Back in the manor, Harker watched the door close. “Now we wait,” he murmured. Above him, unnoticed, a tiny spider clung to the ceiling, listening, always listening.

The Giant Walks.

Heaug did not leave Harker’s manor in haste. Haste was for prey. He stepped into Voolnishart’s streets as if he had every right to be there, because he did. The city bent around him in small, unconscious ways. Pedestrians drifted aside. Porters slowed their carts. Voices dipped a fraction when he passed, then resumed once he was several steps gone. The streets near the Trader-King’s estate were wide and clean, laid in patterned stone, each intersection marked with discreet brass plaques naming districts and sponsors. The smell here was polished wealth: wax, incense, citrus oil, and old money.

Heaug let himself be seen, turned left when instinct said right, paused at a fountain he had no interest in, knelt to retie a bootlace that did not need it. He counted reflections. Windows. Polished shields carried by house guards. The mirrored belly of a decorative brass urn. He did not look directly, not yet. You looked directly when you wanted to spook amateurs. There were three, maybe four, keeping pace at distance. None too close. All competent enough to think that competence made them invisible. Heaug smiled without showing teeth.

He drifted downhill, letting the neighborhoods change. The stonework grew rougher. The buildings leaned closer together, as if whispering. The air thickened with cooking smoke, fish brine, and unwashed bodies. He

crossed a minor market square, fishmongers shouting prices, dockwives arguing over baskets of shrimp still twitching with life. He shoved through without apology, knocking a man aside hard enough to spill a crate of shellfish. No reaction from the watchers. Good. They were disciplined.

Heaug turned sharply into a side alley without breaking stride. The alley was narrow, damp, and old. The walls bore layers of chalk sigils, warding marks, street-gang warnings, a few half-erased prayers scratched by desperate hands. The smell here was rot and piss and mold. He slowed, ran one massive hand along the stone as if steadying himself. One watcher overshot by half a step. Heaug turned, fast as a striking adder. The man froze. They stared at each other for a heartbeat. Then Heaug grunted, spat to one side, and kept walking. Message delivered.

Heaug crossed bridges over open sewers, ducked beneath hanging laundry, passed shrines no one tended anymore. He moved through districts where even the city watch preferred pairs, and never at night. A knife flashed once near his ribs; he caught the wrist, twisted until bone cracked, and dropped the would-be mugger without breaking stride. Let them see that too.

By the time the docks came into view, the watchers had multiplied, or so they thought. Heaug smelled the harbor before he saw it: salt, tar, fish guts, bilgewater, wet rope, and hot iron. The noise was constant and layered, shouted orders, creaking cranes, gulls screaming overhead, the slap of water against hulls. The docks of Voolnishart were not one place but a dozen stitched together: legal piers flying merchant flags, shadow wharves where names changed hourly, and the deepwater berths where only fools and monsters worked after dark. Heaug made for the latter.

He stepped onto a pier slick with algae and old blood, its boards blackened by pitch and time. Dockhands paused mid-haul to stare at him. Someone laughed nervously. Someone else crossed themselves. That was when the watchers made their mistake. They closed. Not all at once, never that obvious, but enough that Heaug could feel the tightening. He turned, planted his boots, and raised his voice. “Oi!” he roared. “Which one of you pissants wants ta follow me proper-like?” Silence, then motion.

Harker’s men moved in, trained, armored beneath coats, blades hidden but ready. At the same time, from the opposite end of the pier, figures detached themselves from shadow: Asmith’s agents, leaner, meaner, dressed like dock laborers but carrying themselves like knives. Two nets crossed in the same space. For half a second, everyone hesitated. Heaug hurled his axe, not at either group, but into the pier between them. The blade bit deep, splitting wood with a crack like thunder. “Talk it out,” Heaug said pleasantly, backing away. “I’ll watch.”

Someone struck first. It hardly mattered who. Steel rang. A body went over the edge into black water with a scream cut short. Harker’s men fought clean and disciplined. Asmith’s fought dirty and close, favoring blades meant for kidneys and throats. Heaug faded into the chaos, melting sideways off the pier and into the press of cargo stacks and rope coils. He listened to the sounds, grunts, curses, the wet thud of impact, and nodded to himself. Good. Let them bleed each other. By the time the city watch horns sounded in the distance, Heaug was already gone, moving inland again, unseen and unhurried.

The Word Reaches Asmith.

Asmith the smuggler lord did not like surprises. He sat in a counting room that smelled of ink, smoke, and old wood, a thick man with heavy rings and a permanent scowl carved by years of suspicion. When the messenger arrived, breathless, bleeding from a cut scalp, Asmith listened without interrupting. A giant. Tattoos. Dockside. A fight that should not have happened. Asmith’s fingers tapped once on the table. Twice. “Not random,” he said finally. “Too loud. Too neat.”

He stood, paced once, then stopped. “This wasn’t Harker,” he muttered. “This was someone settin’ the hook.” Understanding slid into place with a cold, familiar clarity. “A giant that wants to be watched,” Asmith said. “And wants us and Harker snarlin’ at each other.” He smiled thinly. “Clever bastard.”

He would not waste men chasing a mountain. That was how fools died poor. But petty reprisals? Those could be educational. Asmith turned to his lieutenant. “Find where he sleeps. Or who he drinks with. Or whose door he kicks in when he needs answers.” He paused, considering. “And if you can’t touch him... touch the world around him.”

Asmith did not know who Heaug truly was. He did not know whose blood ran in the giant’s veins. But he knew a dangerous game when he saw one, and he intended to play it cheaply, carefully, and with interest. Somewhere above them all, in places neither man thought to look, other eyes watched. But that was a problem for another day.

The Price of a Name. The reprisal was meant to be small. A warning, not a war. Asmith’s men chose it carefully: a flophouse near the old canal spur, a place where transient muscle slept when the docks ran dry. They had word the giant had been seen there once, drinking, not staying. Close enough, they thought. Close enough to send a message.

They were wrong.

The men went in quiet, three of them, blades short and coated with a paralytic sap. They found the room empty except for an old woman sweeping ash from the hearth. “He was here,” one of them said. She looked up slowly. “Was,” she agreed.

The floor collapsed beneath them. Not literally, but the illusion was convincing. The first man went down hard, ankle snapping with a sound like a breaking stick. The second barely had time to scream before something vast and fast slammed him into the wall. The third ran. He made it to the street before Heaug caught him.

The giant did not hurry. He did not shout. He simply appeared ahead of the man, blocking the alley mouth like a fallen statue. “Who sent you,” Heaug asked calmly. The man talked. Of course he did.

By morning, Asmith had the report, and the body. One of his older lieutenants stared at the corpse longer than necessary. “Boss,” he said slowly, “I know that mark.” He pointed, not at a wound, but at the pattern of broken bones. The method. Asmith stilled. “That’s mountain justice,” the lieutenant continued. “Clan punishment. Old kind. You don’t see it no more.”

Asmith leaned back, expression darkening. “Go on.” “They used to call him Fatherless,” the man said. “Because he killed his own father. Split him open in front of the clan.” Silence settled like dust. “Why,” Asmith asked. The lieutenant shrugged. “Depends who tells it. Some say the father tried to sell out their hold. Some say he beat the boy near to death and would’ve done worse. But the truth that stuck?” He hesitated. “The clan banished him. And then... they died anyway.”

Asmith smiled, not wide, but real. “So he’s not reckless,” he murmured. “He’s judged.” He waved a hand. “No more reprisals. Not direct. That mountain doesn’t fall easy.” Asmith had learned the shape of the threat. And respected it.

Burned Threads.

Harker learned of the dockside fight before the blood dried. He stood in his private receiving chamber, listening as reports stacked atop one another like bad debts. Names. Injuries. Arrests. One dead. Two vanished entirely. All of them his. He dismissed the servants with a gesture sharp enough to cut. When the

room was empty, he shattered a crystal decanter against the wall. “They knew,” he hissed. “They knew the docks were contested.”

His spymaster stood rigid, pale. “They believed the giant was isolated. A lone operator.” “A lone operator doesn’t walk two rival nets into each other,” Harker snapped. “That was bait. And they swallowed it like fools.” He turned, eyes cold now. “He wanted to see who would bite. And we obliged.”

The realization settled fully. The giant had never intended to work for him. Never intended to return. Worse, he had proven Harker’s reach imperfect. That was unforgivable. “Pull every remaining tail,” Harker ordered. “Anyone still watching him disengages immediately.” A pause. “And find out,” Harker added, voice quiet and dangerous, “what he really wanted from me.”

For the first time since the meeting, Harker felt the itch of uncertainty crawl beneath his finery. He did not yet know the name Fatherless. But he knew he had misjudged the man.

Threads Redirected.

High above the city, in places where dust never settled because nothing lingered long enough, Shinazazi listened. The Ghost Widow, daughter of Yezed, curator of the Underdark Market and vassal of the underdark in Mithrin. The spider was gone. In its place: echoes. Whispered vibrations along silk-fine pathways that had nothing to do with spiders at all. Information moved. Pressure shifted. A dock fight here. A failed reprisal there. Two powers reassessing without realizing why.

Shinazazi did not intervene. Not directly. One rumor died before it reached the wrong ear. Another was encouraged to travel just a little farther than intended. A messenger’s route changed by half a street. A bribe delayed just long enough to miss its mark. Nothing dramatic. Nothing provable.

She watched Heaug the Fatherless walk out of Voolnishart’s lower wards without pursuit, without bounty, without escalation. Interesting, she thought. He is not a blunt instrument. She watched Asmith pull back, recalculating instead of striking. Prudent. She watched Harker grow angry, not at the giant, but at his own people.

The Gate at Northwater Rise.

The North Gate of Voolnishart was not the largest, nor the busiest, but it was the most watched. It rose where the stone spine of the city narrowed and climbed, the road bending northward into colder country and thinner law. The gatehouse was squat and broad, built for siege rather than ceremony, its towers capped with slate and iron spikes dulled by salt air. Chains clinked constantly as the harbor mechanisms below adjusted to tide and traffic, and the smell here was different from the docks, less rot, more iron and oil, wet stone and old blood scrubbed imperfectly from the paving.

Heaug the Fatherless approached without hurry. He had shed nothing. Armor still on. His Greatsword still visible. No attempt at concealment, because concealment invited questions. His breath steamed faintly in the cooling air, and his boots rang heavy against the stone. The guards stiffened as soon as they saw him. Spears angled a fraction lower. Crossbows creaked softly as tension found strings.

“Hold,” came a voice, not shouted, not strained. Measured.

The Harbor Warden stepped forward. Alder Manse was not large by giant standards, nor even by Heaug’s reckoning of men, but he was dense, a thick, coiled presence like a crocodile half submerged. His scales were a deep river green mottled with gray, scarred along one side of the jaw where steel had once tried and failed to end him. His eyes were amber and unblinking, pupils narrow slits that missed nothing. He wore no ostentation: dark lamellar armor worn smooth by years of salt spray, a long coat reinforced at the seams, and

a trident bladed polearm resting casually in one clawed hand. The weapon was old. Well cared for. The haft bore nicks from parries, the head etched with harbor sigils and kill marks alike.

Alder's voice carried the rhythm of tide and current, slow, deliberate, never wasted. "You," he said. "Giant. Step no closer."

Heaug stopped two paces short of the gate line. For a moment, they only looked at one another. Heaug felt it then, not fear, but calculation. This was no soft bellied official. This was a creature that had killed men like Heaug and lived long enough to know what it cost. The polearm's reach worried him. The guards worried him less, but only because they were disciplined enough to matter if it came to it.

Alder, for his part, measured the giant's stance, the way his weight favored one leg, the looseness in his shoulders that spoke of sudden violence rather than slow strength. He noted the scars that told of ambush survived, not just battles won. Neither smiled.

"You leavin'," Heaug said at last, voice rough but even. "Or you plannin' to stop me all day?" Alder's tongue flicked once, tasting the air unconsciously. "There was blood on my docks last night," he said. "Men thrown into my water. Blades drawn where none were licensed." He let that hang.

"Wasn't me," Heaug replied immediately. "Dockside ain't illegal. Neither's walkin'. If men chose to cut each other over pride or coin, that's their foolishness."

"An innkeeper says otherwise," Alder said. "Claims you were present when a robbery turned... educational." Heaug snorted. "Three fools came lookin' to lighten my purse. Learned it was heavier'n expected." "Did they?" Alder asked mildly. "Didn't see 'em again," Heaug said. "Can't speak to their health."

Alder's gaze sharpened a fraction. "Curious," he said, "that men tied to two rival interests found each other at the same stretch of pier. Curious still that you were the common element." Heaug shrugged, slow and exaggerated. "City's full o' curious things."

The guards shifted. A crossbow bolt creaked. For a long heartbeat, the gate felt very small. Alder stepped closer, just enough that the reach of his polearm mattered. "You're not under arrest," he said. "Because I've no proof you broke my laws." He paused. "But you've stirred waters that don't need stirrin'. You've drawn eyes that don't blink."

Heaug's mouth twitched. Then he laughed, a low, rumbling sound like stone sliding down a mountainside. "That's good," he said. "'Cause I was makin' myself scarce anyhow. You just caught me on the way."

Alder studied him, then inclined his head a fraction. Not respect. Not submission. Recognition. "North road," Alder said. "Cold country. Thin patience." "Aye," Heaug replied. "Suits me fine."

Another silence. Finally, Alder lifted one clawed hand and gestured toward the open gate. "Go. And if you turn back, if my watch sees your shadow cross this threshold again, they will send word to me immediately." Heaug hefted The Barrier Blade onto his shoulder. "If I come back," he said, "you'll hear me long afore your lads do."

Their eyes locked one last time. Then Heaug turned and walked through the gate, boots thudding onto the open road, his massive shape shrinking slowly against the pale line of the north.

Alder did not move until the giant was a distant figure. "Log it," he said quietly. "Full report. No charges."

One of the guards hesitated. "Sir... Harker's people were involved. And Asmith's." Alder's eyes narrowed slightly. "That," he said, "is what's interesting."

Alder Manse's Report to Council. Subject: Karakan Giant, name unknown. Findings: Present at dockside altercation involving agents tied to Harker and Asmith. No direct evidence of unlawful action. Displays

significant combat capability and situational awareness. Departure north confirmed. Assessment: Unaligned actor. Likely catalyst or than instigator. Recommend observation if he returns. Note: Rival factions clashing around him suggests deliberate provocation or exceptional coincidence. Neither explanation is comforting.

Alder set the report aside and stared out toward the harbor, tail curling slowly behind him. A giant who made kings nervous. Those were rare. And never simple.

Silk and Paper.

Reports did not sleep. They rested. Alder Manse's account, precise, restrained, and dangerous in its implications, lay among dozens of other documents in the Council Archive: dock tallies, tariffs, watch rotations, petitions from minor guilds. It was bound in plain leather, sealed properly, stamped without flourish. Which is why it was perfect.

Shinazazi did not enter the archive. She had no need. The report passed through hands. That was enough. The junior clerk who catalogued it paused longer than usual, frowning faintly at the names Harker and Asmith sharing a page. He adjusted the order of the stack without knowing why, placing Alder's report nearer the top. When the seal bearer came for the morning deliveries, his fingers brushed that same binding first. Coincidence. Always coincidence.

The document arrived on the desk of Councilor Brethin Val, an aging maritime conservative with an obsession for stability, just before lunch, when his patience was thinnest and his memory sharpest. He read it once. Then again. He underlined a single phrase: Rival factions clashing around him suggests deliberate provocation. He did not mention it aloud at the afternoon session. But he remembered.

Later that evening, the same report found its way, briefly, into the hands of a junior adjutant attached to the city's foreign trade oversight. She was sharp, ambitious, and deeply suspicious of Harker's expanding influence. She read Alder's words and felt vindicated without quite knowing why. She copied a line. Only one. It was never meant to leave the room.

Across the city, in a lamplit office thick with incense and arrogance, Harker received a summary, not the full report, just a paraphrase. The phrasing was off. The emphasis wrong. It made Alder seem watchful. Not hostile. That bothered Harker more than accusation would have.

Asmith heard nothing at all. Which, in Shinazazi's calculus, was correct.

Heaug the Fatherless remained unnamed beyond Alder's dry notation. No embellishment. No mythmaking. Just enough to suggest weight without shape. And that was the point.

The Spider Does Nothing.

Shinazazi watched the city respond to absence. Harker tightened his internal discipline, purging incompetence where he could afford it and swallowing fury where he could not. His attention turned inward, fracturing his outward reach. Asmith, sensing pressure without cause, diverted resources away from dock violence and toward quieter, more profitable ventures. He grew cautious, annoyed, but not alarmed.

The Council began to whisper, not about Heaug, but about why Alder Manse had been allowed such latitude. About whether the Harbor Warden saw threats others did not. About how often rival powers seemed to collide without explanation. No one spoke Shinazazi's name. No one ever did.

High above in her coin tower, overhanging the undermarket, in a place where silk strands caught neither dust nor light, Shinazazi considered Alder Manse with mild interest. Competent. Not pliable. But predictable. She considered Harker. Vain. Dangerous. Noisy. She considered Asmith. Prudent. Limited. And finally, she considered the old giant walking north into colder lands, chasing blood and truth with equal hunger.

Disruptive, she thought, and smiled, though no one saw it. The report would be cited again. Not soon. Not loudly. But when it was, it would already have done its work.

Northbound, the Long Way. Heaug did not walk north as a conqueror. He walked as a man who had just learned his blood had not ended where he thought it had. That knowledge sat poorly in his chest. On the trade roads beyond Voolnishart, where stone gave way to packed earth and the air smelled of cold fields instead of salt, Heaug changed himself. The armor stayed, the weapons stayed, but his posture softened. His voice, when he spoke, lowered. He asked questions the way family did, not hunters. "A giantess," he would say. "Red hair. Scarred. Carries a strange axe." Concern, not challenge. People answered differently to that.

They saw not a brute but a weathered uncle searching for kin he thought long dead. Heaug let the truth show through just enough to make the lie unnecessary. And the roads answered him. In villages and caravan stops, at river crossings and toll bridges, the story repeated itself in fragments. A fight. A wagon. Stirges and mites and chaos. Tal-Shie dead in the road, their strange weapons broken and buried. A giant woman standing afterward, breathing hard, axe steaming in the cold air. Each telling was different. Each wrong in its own way. Heaug listened without correcting.

At Papal, the river city crouched like an old animal beside the water, broad quays, stone levees slick with moss, and a smell of wet grain and fishmeal that clung to everything. He stayed only a night. Long enough to drink weak ale, eat salt pork, and listen. That was where he heard the name Tal-Shie spoken again. That troubled him. He had known the Tal-Shie once, before wars made them myths again. If she had faced them and lived, Heaug felt the first true stirrings of unease. Not fear. Worry. Had she mastered the blade already?

He dismissed the stories of the kobold at first. Of course he did. A kobold was small. Fragile. Clever perhaps, but insignificant beside real strength. Heaug had crushed worse things underfoot without slowing. But the stories kept coming. Quiet ones, spoken after the louder tales had been exhausted. A skull taken. A thing beaten that should not have been beaten. Luck, some said. Trickery. Terrain. Heaug frowned into his cup. Luck did not repeat.

When he left Papal, he did not follow the road any longer than necessary. He cut across country, straight as the land allowed, boots tearing frost from grass, old instincts guiding him where maps would not. He crossed streams without bridges, slept beneath stars he remembered from a younger world. Toward Cirksher.

The skull greeted him before the walls did. It hung above the gate like a warning and a question both, too large, too warped, its horns twisted in ways no honest beast's should be. The bone was darkened by old blood and weather. Heaug stopped. Just stopped. Whatever that thing had been, it was no mere animal. And someone had killed it.

Inside the town, the stories tangled again. Everyone had their version. Everyone had been closer than anyone else. The tale shifted with every retelling, Shadra larger, smaller, fiercer, calmer. The axe glowing like a sun, or cold as a grave. The kobold a useless burden, or a cackling demon, or a clever little horror that crawled where giants could not. Heaug listened, weighed, discarded.

One account stuck. A goliath youth, barely grown, still clumsy in his own strength, had manned the hoist during the fight. He spoke plainly, without flourish, and did not embellish when pressed. "He didn't beat it with strength," the youth said of the kobold. "He beat it with planning." Heaug nodded slowly. That changed things. Unknowns were a problem.

The elf leader had been next. Elnak. Old, even for an elf. His hair had gone pale not with age alone but with time, too much of it, stretched thin. His eyes were sharp and tired in equal measure, the gaze of someone who had buried too many certainties to trust easy truths. Heaug had shown his markings openly then, pulling back armor to reveal the clan knots burned deep into his skin. "I seek my brother's child," he had said simply. "Not trouble."

Elnak had believed him. That was the problem. He had believed and still warned his people. “Loose tongues,” the elf muttered afterward. “They mean well. That makes them dangerous.” Heaug agreed. They spoke privately, briefly. Elnak claimed he had not been told plans. Only direction. “North,” the elf said. “That is all.” It rang true. Heaug prided himself on reading lies. This was not one. But Elnak himself? The elf watched too closely. Asked nothing. Offered little. A survivor’s caution. Heaug respected that and did not trust him at all.

Before leaving Cirksher, Heaug spread coin with care. Not bribes, those invited interest, but gestures. Thanks for hospitality. Payment for silence unasked. “Forget me,” he told them gently. “If you remember, remember wrong.” They promised. Some meant it.

Heaug turned north again. Toward old Kadathe’. Toward colder lands and memories he had not meant to revisit. His father’s blood. His banishment. The clan that had cast him out, and died anyway. And somewhere ahead, a niece who might already be something he did not recognize. He would find her. Weeks old trail or not. Eventually, stone always remembered the weight that passed over it. And so did he.

During the trek to Talismonde’

The forest did not move. The wind did not rise.

On the tenth day of cold travel, after the fifth cairn and the third spear driven into frozen earth, Eeyagoo finally asked the question that had followed them for miles. “Why stone and tree markers?” His voice was subdued, the words simple, but the weight behind them was not. They had passed too many signs of the dead for it to remain unspoken.

Shardra slowed her stride so he could keep pace beside her. Frost clung to her braids, and her breath drifted steady in the air. “It is a long tale,” she said. “I will not speak all of it. Enough.” She gestured ahead toward a distant line of pines standing unnaturally straight along the edge of a narrow pass. At first they seemed no different from the others, but as they drew nearer, rings of stone could be seen at their bases, half-sunk and weathered by years of ice. “In the old times, before the Fade dulled the world, the gods made their displeasure known plainly. Not in sermons. In winter that did not end. In the dead that would not lie down. There was a custom then, and it remains. The dead belong to her below, unless they are taken as worthy from the field.”

They approached the first of the trees. Each pine rose from a low cairn, the stones pushed outward by thickened roots. “Each marks a fallen defender,” Shardra continued. “Laid down beneath stone, a sapling planted while the earth would still yield. The rocks guard the roots from frost and scavenger. In time the tree grows strong enough to break the circle and stand alone. When it stands alone, it stands in testament. Old trees with stones at their base mark where men and women of the north fell.” She rested her palm briefly against one trunk before moving on. “We walk through forests of them and do not always know.”

Her gaze shifted toward a shallow hollow where broken shields and rusted helms lay frozen into the ground. “The elves tend their fallen in groves. The dwarves seal theirs in stone, and woe to any who break it. Their unburied dead are the most restless of all. Giants burn our own. We send them to the sky so ash troubles no one.” There was no pride in the statement, only certainty. “Here, custom matters. It binds what reason cannot.”

Eeyagoo’s eyes lingered on a half-buried axe head near the roadside, the edge still faintly true despite the frost. “Field not grave,” he said quietly. “Battle done. Things left. Not stealing if no mound.” It was not a challenge, merely the logic of his kind spoken aloud.

Shardra nodded once. “Many say the same. Sometimes it is true. A battlefield is not always a tomb. But the north remembers differently. You may take from the field if need demands it. Many do. Yet you acknowledge

the fallen first. You state your need. You leave something in return. A coin. Cloth. A word. Without that, you gamble.”

“Gamble,” Eeyagoo repeated, his frill settling low.

“With winter that lingers beyond its time. With dreams that do not end. With footsteps behind you when snow shows none.” Her voice did not rise. It did not need to. “You have heard of the Yitik tomb robbers.”

Eeyagoo inclined his head. “Open barrows. Took iron. Gold. Laughed.”

“They kicked down markers,” Shardra said. “Said old bones are only bones. The first died of fever before spring thaw. The second swore something stood at the foot of his bed each night and cut his own throat to escape it. The third walked into a storm under a clear sky and was never found. The rest returned what they could carry and rebuilt every cairn by hand.” She did not embellish. The story required none.

They moved again, passing the broken shields. Shardra bowed her head, fingers touching brow and chest. “Superstition, some call it. Perhaps. But here, superstition and truth share the same roots. We walk on ground bought with blood. We do not pretend it is empty. We acknowledge. We respect. We do not offend.”

Eeyagoo walked in silence for a long while after that. His people hid their dead in warrens deep and unmarked, layering bone beneath earth to deny predators and memory alike. To linger at a grave was to invite danger. To mark it was to draw eyes. He studied the pines rising from their circles of stone and considered the difference. “Very... different,” he murmured at last. “We hide dead. You let them stand.”

Shardra inclined her head. “We let them stand so they need not rise.”

The wind stirred then, faint and passing through the upper branches. Nothing more. At the next cairn, before he had fully decided to do so, Eeyagoo paused beside her and bowed his head.

They had made camp in the lee of a broken ridge where the wind came softer off the ice fields. The fire was small. Shardra never cared much for large fires when hunting country lay all around, so the coals burned low and steady. Eeyagoo sat close to them, turning a small stick in the embers while Mimi rested nearby in her usual dragonish shape, enjoying the warmth of the fire.

His eyes kept drifting to the heavy white cloak folded beside Shardra. The fur was thick even after all these years, pale as storm clouds and frost, and the boots beside it were cut from the same hide. Both were worn from long use but still well kept. At last Eeyagoo pointed at them with the stick.

“You kill bear, yes? Icebear. Big one. kill yourself?”

Shardra leaned back against her pack and watched the darkness for a moment before answering. “Yes.”

Eeyagoo tilted his head, studying the cloak again. “Young?. Fight bear that big?”

“I was younger,” Shardra said, and after a moment she gave a quiet breath through her nose. “You want the tale.”

“Yes,” Eeyagoo said simply. “Want hear how not die.”

Shardra drew the cloak across her knees and ran one large hand through the fur. “It is not a fine tale,” she said. “Just a hard one.”

She told him she had been hunting a Reikmoose bull and had tracked it for two days across broken snowfields and frozen brush. At first the tracks were old, but the trail grew fresher as she closed the distance. The bull had moved into a narrow draw where the brush grew thick and the snow crusted hard. It was a good

place for an ambush, which meant a good place for a hunter to wait. Unfortunately, it had also been a good place for something else to wait.

“I smelled the bear before I saw it,” she said.

Eeyagoo’s eyes widened. “You smell? Not see?”

“Yes. Icebear stink carries in cold air. Rot and frost together.” She held two fingers close. “It was not far.”

Eeyagoo clicked his teeth softly. “Too close. Very too close.”

“Yes.”

The bear, she explained, had been stalking the same Reikmoose. The bull had stopped in the frozen draw and both hunters had come upon it from different sides. For a moment neither had seen the other. Then the wind shifted.

“We both had the same thought,” Shardra said. “Then it saw me.”

Eeyagoo leaned forward slightly. “Charge, yes?”

“Yes.”

The icebear had burst from the brush like a falling wall. It was enormous, nearly twenty feet from snout to tail, its coat white with grey scars from old battles. Frost steamed from its mouth as it ran, and when it exhaled the air itself turned white with hoarfrost.

“Cold breath?” Eeyagoo shuttered. “Freeze things?”

“It can,” Shardra said. “My people worry less about the cold than the claws.”

She showed him with a motion of her hand how the bear struck first. The swipe came fast, claws longer than a man’s hand cutting through the air where her chest had been. Only the snow had saved her. Her heel slid as she stepped back and the claws passed through empty space.

“You slip,” Eeyagoo said quietly.

“Yes.”

“And that save you.”

“Yes.”

Shardra shrugged. “Luck lives beside skill in Kadathe’.”

The bear did not hesitate after that first strike. Icebears hunt giants and knew exactly what she was. It came at her again with jaws open and shoulders rolling like a breaking wave. Shardra stabbed for its throat with her greatspear but the beast twisted at the last moment and the iron head struck shoulder bone instead, glancing away. The return swipe tore across her forearm and she showed him the long pale scar that still ran there.

“Would have taken the arm if it closed the grip,” she said calmly. “If an icebear grabs you, the fight ends.”

Eeyagoo nodded very slowly. “I see.”

The fight dragged on longer than it should have. Every strike from the bear drove her backward through the snow and every strike she landed only angered the creature more. She realized quickly that she could not win by strength. Icebears were built for killing giants and in that regard the beast held the advantage.

“So I ran,” she said.

Eeyagoo blinked. "You run? From bear?"

"Yes."

He considered that for a moment and nodded. "Running good plan, keep living."

Shardra allowed the faintest smile. She explained that she had retreated up the slope of the draw, forcing the bear to follow where the crusted snow broke beneath its weight. Icebears were fast but heavy, and every step slowed it a little more. The entire time she watched for its next lunge, guided by that familiar warning that sometimes stirred before danger struck.

"That little twinge here," she said, tapping her temple. "It came before it jumped the first time. I listened to it."

Eeyagoo nodded thoughtfully. "Little voice inside?"

"Yes."

The bear charged again halfway up the slope. Its jaws opened wide enough to take her head and the frost cloud from its breath rolled across the snow like winter itself. Shardra planted the butt of her spear in the frozen ground and lowered the point.

"It came straight at me," she said. "Too angry to turn."

Eeyagoo leaned closer to the fire. "run onto spear?"

"Yes."

The iron head drove deep into the bear's throat as it collided with the weapon. The force of its charge carried the shaft nearly through the beast's neck, but the creature did not die immediately. Instead, it struck her even as it bled, its claws raking across her ribs and knocking her to the ground beneath its weight.

Eeyagoo winced. "Under it? Bad place."

"Yes."

For a moment she believed the fight was finished. The bear's breath froze her hair and its blood poured across her hands. It tried to bite her but the spear lodged deep in its throat choked the motion, preventing its jaws from closing fully.

"That moment gave me time," Shardra said. "I pushed the spear deeper and twisted it."

The memory hung between them for a moment as the fire crackled quietly.

"That finished it."

It had taken her hours to skin the animal after the fight. She had been wounded and exhausted but there was too much value in the hide to leave behind. Icebear fur was among the finest protection a traveler in Kadamthe could wear.

"All alone," Eeyagoo said with quiet amazement.

"Yes."

"You stubborn."

"In Kadamthe'," Shardra said, "you do not leave good fur behind."

She lifted the cloak slightly. The thick hide still carried faint scars where the great beast had lived its life.

"The teeth and claws were magnificent," she said. "Long as daggers."

Eeyagoo looked disappointed. "Where now?"

"I traded them in lean years," she replied. "They bought food."

He nodded with understanding. "Good money."

Shardra settled the cloak back down beside her and rested a hand on it.

"But I kept the hide," she said. "And the boots."

Eeyagoo stirred the coals again, watching sparks drift up into the dark. After a while he looked up at her.

"Almost kill you, close thing."

"Yes."

"And still you hunt after."

"Yes."

He studied her for a moment, then tilted his head. "You remember fight like good story."

Shardra considered that for a moment before shaking her head slowly.

"No," she said. "I remember it truthfully."

Her hand rested on the pale fur as she looked out into the darkness beyond the fire.

"It was a good fight," she said quietly. "And I lived. That is enough."

The forest thinned by degrees, giving way to low pasture carved from stubborn earth. Smoke rose in narrow columns from sod-roofed huts half-buried against the wind. Fences of split pine marked crude boundaries for lean cattle and shaggy goats that watched with dull, patient eyes. Kadathe' was never welcoming, even to its own. To strangers it was stone.

The first herders saw Shardra before she saw them. A boy on a low ridge froze, then ran, shouting toward the clustered huts below. By the time the trio crested the rise, men and women stood in a loose line before the village, spears in hand, not leveled but not lowered either. Dogs barked themselves hoarse and then retreated behind their masters' legs.

Shardra stopped well beyond bowshot. She planted the butt of her axe in the snow and rested both hands atop it, posture straight but unthreatening. She did not advance.

Eeyagoo felt the old tension in the air, the coiled memory of other winters. He had seen similar standoffs before, though rarely with himself cast as the lesser threat. Mimi hovered close to his collar, unusually still.

A man with a fur-lined cap stepped forward three paces. His voice carried thin across the cold. "State your business."

"Travelers," Shardra answered, her voice carrying easily without strain. "We seek salt, oats, and lamp oil. We pay fair weight."

There was a murmur among them. One of the older women spat into the snow, not in contempt but in warding. Giants had once come not to trade but to take. The stories had not thinned with the years.

"You camp there," the man called, pointing to a low hollow beyond a frozen stream. "No closer."

Shardra inclined her head once. "Agreed."

They made their fire where indicated, deliberately small. They waited. It was near an hour before two villagers approached with a sled, goods bundled tight. They did not come within arm's reach at first. Questions were

shouted back and forth, numbers confirmed twice. Eeyagoo stepped forward only when the man gestured sharply for him to do so. The exchange was swift. Coins were weighed on a hanging scale, hands never touching longer than necessary.

As they departed, a child peered from behind a fence post, wide-eyed. Shardra caught the look and, after a moment's consideration, drew from her pouch a small carved token of polished bone. She set it on a rock halfway between camp and village and withdrew without a word. By morning it was gone.

Further north, the land grew harsher. Wind scoured the plains flat, and the settlements clung tighter to the earth. In one hamlet, no one came out at all. Doors barred. Shutters closed. Only the smoke betrayed life within. Shardra did not knock. She turned them aside along the ridge, adding half a day to their journey rather than press the matter. "Old blood there," she said quietly. "Best not test it."

Trade became a ritual of distance. They would crest a hill and halt deliberately in the open. A white cloth tied to a spear shaft signaled peaceful intent. If the villagers wished commerce, they answered with a raised lantern or a horn call. If not, silence was reply enough.

Once, in a valley edged with birch, an elder approached alone, leaning on a carved staff. His beard was white and thin, his eyes sharp. He studied Shardra without fear.

"You are not of the raiding clans," he said, not as question but assessment.

"No," she replied.

"Your kind burned my grandfather's fields."

Shardra nodded once. "And men of yours felled three of mine in the passes east of here."

The old man considered this, then gave a small, humorless huff. "Long time past."

"Long enough."

He waved toward the sled behind him. "We trade. No trouble."

The exchange there was quieter. Less shouting. Still no one else drew near. When it was done, the elder lifted his staff in a gesture that was not quite respect but no longer suspicion either.

The cold did not relent for any of it. Wind cut through wool and fur alike. Frost gathered at lashes and beard. Livestock died where shelter was poorly built. Fields yielded grudging harvests. This was a land that remembered scarcity and guarded what little it had.

Old feelings lay beneath every transaction. Giants had once descended from the highlands in lean years, taking cattle and grain as survival demanded. Humans had answered with iron and fire, claiming valleys and timber in the name of settlement. Each side carried its own ledger of grievance, balanced by neither apology nor forgetting.

Shardra did not challenge the distance. She accepted it as one accepts winter. She halted well beyond comfort, spoke plainly, paid in full weight. She did not enter a village unless invited, and even then she stooped low and kept her hands visible.

Eeyagoo watched it all in silence. He understood suspicion. He understood survival. In Kadathe', both were carved as deeply as the cairns at the roots of the pines.

They traveled on through bleak pasture and bitter wind, three figures crossing a land that neither welcomed nor forbade them, but weighed them carefully at every rise.

The nearer they drew to Talismonde', the less brittle the air between traveler and villager became. It was not warmth, nor welcome, but a measured acceptance born of proximity to trade roads and the capital's long

shadow. Hamlets grew larger, fences straighter, watch posts better kept. Where once doors had barred at their approach, now faces remained visible in windows. Questions were still shouted across distance, but the answers came more quickly, and the scales were brought out without an hour's delay. Coin spoke clearly here. Caravans passed with regularity, and even suspicion learned to bend when silver weighed true.

There were exceptions.

In a stone-built settlement crouched against a low ridge, the ring of hammer on anvil ceased the moment Shardra's silhouette crested the hill. The dwarven smith emerged from his forge wiping soot from his hands, beard bound in iron clasps dark with age. He did not approach the trade boundary. He did not need to. His voice carried like struck steel.

"No trade," he called. "Not with her kind. Any man here who does so answers to me."

The villagers shifted uneasily. No one contradicted him. The smith's forge was their plowshares, their hinges, their nails against the long winter. His word held weight.

Shardra did not move closer. She lifted one hand and made a sign visible even at that distance, palm open, then closed over heart, then lowered. Not apology. Not submission. Acknowledgment.

The dwarf's eyes narrowed. "Keep walking," he said. "Or there will be retribution."

Shardra inclined her head once and turned without further word. They did not linger on the ridge.

After a time, when the village smoke had thinned behind them, she spoke evenly. "Some hold slights longer than most live."

Eeyagoo glanced back toward the low plume on the horizon. "Old blood?"

"Old blood," she agreed. "And old stone. The elves and dwarves distrust this new peace. Lands marked and named for giants again. Borders written instead of fought. To them it is parchment over wound." She adjusted the strap of her pack without breaking stride. "It may never change."

The road curved eastward toward broader valleys where traffic thickened. Wagons passed bearing timber and wool, their drivers wary but not hostile. At the next village the trade call was answered by a raised lantern before dusk had fully settled. Two men approached with a mule and did not demand the travelers camp beyond the stream. They kept their distance still, but the transaction was brisk, almost routine. A woman even asked the price of cured hides in the southern markets, voice steady if cautious.

Talismonde's influence lay in such things. Where coin flowed and caravans crossed, memory dulled at the edges. People learned the shape of profit alongside the shape of grievance. Giants were no longer only raiders of story but guards on the northern passes, mercenaries on royal payrolls, names inked into treaties sealed beneath the capital's towers.

Shardra accepted neither insult nor ease as personal measure. She walked as she always had, measured, watchful, hands visible when needed, distance respected when required. If a village traded, she paid in full weight. If it did not, she passed it by. The land remained bleak and unforgiving, but closer to the capital its people had learned a harder lesson than fear alone: survival favored those who could weigh coin as carefully as history.

Ahead, the road widened. Smoke rose thicker against the pale sky. Talismonde' lay still days away, but its gravity was already felt, pulling suspicion into something more tempered, if never fully set aside.

The Gates at Talismonde'

After an arduous trek across the tundra, they finally saw the city in the distance, its great walls ancient and proud. The massive southern gate was partially open as figures milled in and out. They all seemed to be soldiers and that put the group on edge.

The meeting with Ulkin the Ancient came about in a way that felt less like fate and more like a stone dislodged on a mountainside, inevitable once begun and impossible to stop. They arrived at the gates of Talismonde', the ancient walled capital of Kadathe', as the wind scoured the high road and the sky hung low and colorless above them. The walls rose like frozen waves, their age evident in every weather-softened rune and ice-choked seam, and frost clung to the stone as though the city itself breathed cold. The southern gate was slowly shutting as they approached.

The guards were firm, their halberds crossed, their expressions apologetic but unmoving. No one entered Talismonde', not now, not by decree of Corin the Third. Their words were practiced, repeated too many times to still carry comfort. Shardra listened in silence, then spoke. The sound that tore from her throat was not meant for the guards. It was the old mountain tongue, harsh and grinding like glaciers calving into the sea, and the words scraped the air raw. Eeyagoo had never heard her speak like this before, and the guards stiffened, glancing uneasily at one another. The language carried weight even to ears that did not understand it, each syllable heavy, deliberate, final.

For a long breath nothing answered, then the gate itself seemed to respond. A voice rolled forth from beyond the stone, deep and resonant like ice breaking far beneath a frozen lake, and the guards stepped aside as if compelled by instinct rather than command. The gate opened and Bukri the Earnest strode out, a Rimekin of immense stature, his skin the deep blue of ancient ice and veined faintly with lighter frost-lines that pulsed with slow vitality. He wore simple robes, light and practical, unsuited to ceremony or war, yet there was no mistaking that this was a being who could do both. He was twice Shardra's height, and yet his movements were careful and deliberate, as though the world were fragile beneath his feet. The guards remained at their posts, but concern flickered openly across their faces as Bukri passed. He switched to Kadathe' proper, then knelt so that his vast, black eyes met Shardra's gaze.

"How came you," he asked softly, "to carry this... this burden, child?" His hand lifted, one massive finger indicating Rimeheart. Shardra answered him in the same grating ancestral tongue, and though no one else present understood the words, the exchange weighed heavily upon them all. The air felt denser, as though meaning itself pressed down upon their chests. Bukri listened without interruption, and when she finished he bowed his head. At length he nodded. "They must visit Ulkin," he said, rising. "Stanik, request allowance. Use my name." He turned to the others, his expression grave but steady. "We will see you delivered where you must go. Worry not."

He gestured toward the sprawl of life clustered beside the city wall, a chaos of carts, tents, stalls, and makeshift shelters pressed against Talismonde's stone like barnacles against a ship's hull. "Find food and shelter in the trade camp while we await reply." At Eeyagoo's curious glance, Bukri answered the unspoken question. "The only shipments that move within the city now, and those are escorted by the Watch." A humorless smile touched his lips. "Dark days, but sellers grow eager when fear lingers." The gate closed behind him, the sound final and hollow.

Eeyagoo stared at Shardra for a long moment, and she felt it and looked down at him. "I know," she said quietly. "That was... not typical. But I saw him in the shadows and had to try. The old tongue still carries weight among those who know it. It makes words endure, like carving in stone instead of wood. I knew he would answer. Even if the answer was no." Eeyagoo nodded slowly. "So... you. Not... not axe-you. Just you."

She blinked, startled, then nodded. “Yes. Me. Older me. But not the axe.” “Good,” he said simply. “Find fire. Leave cold. Eat hot.” Her laughter boomed out across the camp, startling the nearby guards anew. “Indeed, Mouseknife. Find us something hot.”

The trade camp was harsh and alive, vendors hawking wares ceaselessly despite the weather, their cries following Shardra and the small kobold wherever they went. It was easy to find what they needed, food and shelter, even offers of companionship that were politely, if awkwardly, refused. The tent they purchased was shockingly inexpensive, pressed snug against the city wall and built in the northern style with a central hearth and smoke vent. It was more shelter than they’d known in weeks, and Eeyagoo immediately set to work. Shardra watched in open amazement as he unpacked his impossibly full pack: pots, spits, spices, even a massive kettle that should not have fit through the pack’s opening. He built the fire with kindling carried all the way from Mithrin and hung the kettle with practiced ease. Liquids went in first, not spirits and not oil, something else entirely. Meat followed, bought in generous quantity to sate Shardra’s appetite, and then fungi and tubers, sliced with flourish. He held up a pepper and looked to her. “Aye,” she said. “That’s fine. Just let me get mine before you add those black damned things.” He smiled, almost laughed, then froze.

The Stone That Should Not Be

Eeyagoo smiled, almost laughed, at something Shardra had said, the kettle beginning to murmur as heat crept into it and the smell of meat and fungus thickened the tent, promising warmth and fullness in a land that offered neither freely. Then he froze. The knife paused mid-cut, his nostrils flaring not sharply and not in alarm yet, but in confusion, and his head tilted just slightly, the way it always did when something did not fit his understanding of the world. “Who there?” he asked, voice low. Mimi lifted her head from his neck at once, the tiny mimicing’s body tightening, her frill flaring faintly as a hiss escaped her throat, not loud, but warning, and she stared at the tent flap with unblinking intensity.

A small hand slipped beneath the hide and lifted it, and a thin face peered in. The figure recoiled immediately upon seeing Shardra, staggering back as if struck by a sudden gale, and the reaction was too strong, too practiced, fear exaggerated in a way that rang faintly false even before Eeyagoo could articulate why. “Wait,” Shardra said, lowering her voice and her massive shoulders alike. “It’s alright. What do you need?” The figure hesitated, then stepped forward just enough for the firelight to touch her skin, and she extended one narrow hand, palm up, holding a small polished stone. “We want you to have this,” she said, her voice soft and breathy. “We hear you go to see Ulkin. We need him to read it.”

Only then did Shardra truly look, and the truth landed with a quiet shock. Not a child. A gromkin. Stonefolk. Earth-fae. Creatures of the deep and loam, rarely seen aboveground and almost never so unprotected. This one was painfully thin, ribs faintly visible beneath skin that carried the muted tones of shale and clay, and there was no furred mantle, no insulating wrappings, nothing to guard against the Kadathe’ cold. Why would they send one so exposed? Shardra wondered, as the gromkin stepped closer, snow hissing off her shoulders while the flap fell shut behind her, and the absence of wind made the encounter suddenly intimate, uncomfortably so.

“We cannot go ourselves,” the gromkin said. “Ulkin is... displeased with us. He gives no answers. The elders believe we have offended the Rimekin, but we do not know how. It began when we found stones like this. We traded them. That is when...” She tried to press the stone into Shardra’s hand, and Shardra recoiled as if the thing were alive. “What is this?” she demanded. “Do you know it?” The gromkin faltered, eyes flicking away for the briefest instant, too brief, but Eeyagoo saw it, and he stepped forward. At that moment, the smell resolved. It was not that the creature smelled wrong, that would have been easy. It smelled like nothing. No loam, no mineral damp, no fungal trace, no deep-stone coolness. Gromkin carried the earth with them

always, it clung to them like a second skin, a mingling of cavern air and slow-grown stone. This one was clean. Empty.

The gromkin noticed Eeyagoo for the first time, and something in her posture changed as the stone was offered to him instead. Eeyagoo did not take it. He leaned close, eyes narrowed, studying the stone without touching it, and Mimi shrank against his neck with a low vibrating sound issuing from her throat. The firelight bent oddly across the stone's surface, colors sliding where they should not and darkening in places that resisted illumination. "Place it," Eeyagoo said carefully, "by fire. There." The gromkin obeyed, and the reflection was wrong, not merely dark, but hungry, as if the light sank into it and the shadows stretched and slithered as if alive. "Hellspire," Eeyagoo whispered, and the word struck the tent like an avalanche.

Shardra's breath caught as memory surged, Talismonde' as it once was, Corin the First, assassins in the snow, stones that ate souls as easily as flesh. "The Devil's Knife," she breathed. "The soul-eater." Her gaze snapped back to the gromkin. "Your people cannot trade this. No one can. It must be destroyed wherever it is found. Are there more? How many? Tell your elders, this is forbidden by laws older than the nation itself, from when Rimekin and dragons ruled..." The gromkin moved fast, lunging for the stone, and Eeyagoo reacted without thought. The spike drove through liver, lung, heart in one fluid motion, no flourish and no hesitation, only necessity, and the creature collapsed, fingers scraping the ground inches from the stone.

As life fled its body, the shape changed. Stone-skin softened. Bones melted. Features blurred into a pale, almost featureless mask. "Not gromkin," Eeyagoo said quietly. "Something else. Wrong smell. Trick smell." "Doppelganger," he added, certainty settling in his voice, while Shardra stood frozen, axe ready, expression stricken.

Aftermath: Ice, Silence, and Watchful Eyes

The guards came fast, and at first there were accusations, hands on weapons, the sight of the corpse alone damning. It was Bukri's arrival, his deep, steady voice cutting through the chaos, that prevented bloodshed. The Hellspire was not moved, not by anyone, and within the hour emissaries of the War Council arrived. The stone was destroyed where it lay with tongs and a rat in a small cage, a ritual as old as fear itself. The rat's essence was drawn out in an instant, its life extinguished not violently but emptied, and the stone dulled to brittle glass, then faded into nothing.

Reports followed, questions, measured suspicion. No accusations were voiced, but none were absent. That Eeyagoo had sensed the impostor became a subject of quiet debate, and he explained simply that it was not that the creature smelled wrong. It lacked what should have been there. Absence, not presence, had betrayed it. Two days passed, and permission was granted.

The Road to Ulkin

The journey north was brutal even by Kadathe' standards. Wind scoured exposed flesh and ice hid treacherous footing, and when the terrain grew cruel Shardra lifted Eeyagoo to her shoulder without comment, as though he were a part of her kit rather than a companion. Somewhere in the waiting days, she acquired a spear, a massive leaf-bladed hunting spear with a boar stop and heavy shaft, balanced, deadly, right. It pleased her immensely. Rimeheart lay across her back, present but resting, and the spear moved as she moved, an extension of her intent.

The cave appeared hours before they reached it, a gaping volcanic scar, ancient, silent, wrong in its scale. No one emerged. Then the voice came. "Shardra Shalkdottir. Eeyagoo the Mouseknife. Bukri the Earnest. Enter, and be welcome."

Ulkin the Ancient

The cave swallowed them, torchlight fighting the dark and barely winning, and carved stone revealed itself in tiles, walls, and massive architecture of a Rimekin hold long abandoned, a city for giants. Ulkin's presence was overwhelming. Over 20 feet tall, massive and terrifying he approached dressed as Bukri was, but stopped short, his brow furrowing. "You have one among you that is other," he thundered. "Destroy it. NOW."

The cavern had gone still, not quiet, still, and torchlight trembled against stone walls carved for giants as shadows stretched and collapsed in slow, uneven rhythms. The air was bitter with old frost and older magic, and Ulkin loomed near them in the vast hall, his immense frame half-lost in darkness, eyes like pits cut into glacial stone. His words did not echo. They occupied the space, pressing against bone, and when his arm lifted, immense and steady, he pointed at Mimi. For a heartbeat, no more than that, the world fractured. Eeyagoo felt it before he understood it, a sharp, cold absence where thought should be, and Mimi shrank instantly against his neck, all false bravado gone, her small claws digging into his collar as a thin, keening sound escaped her throat. She did not hiss this time. She whimpered.

"No," Eeyagoo said, the word leaving him without volume, without strength, but with absolute refusal, and his body moved even as his mind stalled. He turned sideways, instinctively placing himself between Ulkin and Mimi, shoulder hunched, weapons half-drawn without conscious command, and he knew with terrible clarity that he could not fight this. There was no angle and no weak point, no clever trick or sudden violence that could bridge the gulf between himself and the thing that stood before them. Ulkin was not merely larger, he was elsewhere, operating on a scale that rendered Eeyagoo's usual calculations meaningless. So Eeyagoo did what he had always done when the fight could not be won. He prepared to protect.

Shardra did not hesitate. The demand struck her like a blade to the chest, and rage answered, not wild, not blind, but honed and absolute. Mimi was not a thing, not an object to be weighed and discarded. She was bound, claimed, defended. Rimeheart tore free of its harness in a shriek of living ice, the red core flaring like an exposed heart, and Shardra advanced in a single stride that ate distance no creature of her size should have been able to cross so quickly. There was no warning shout and no threat. This was execution.

Ulkin moved at the same instant, his speed obscene, and Shardra's opening cut took his outstretched finger cleanly, severing it at the first joint. Frost and ancient blood sprayed across the stone in a flash of white and deep blue, and Ulkin recoiled, not in pain, but in surprise. Shardra pressed, the backswing a killing arc aimed at the giant's upper thigh, but Ulkin twisted aside with impossible agility and the edge missed flesh by inches. The force of the swing alone cracked stone where it struck, and the follow-through smashed into his ankle. Bone shattered with a sound like a glacier calving, Ulkin staggered, and Shardra surged forward, muscles screaming, intent singular. One more strike, one, would bring him down, cripple him, maybe end this before it truly began.

Then the word fell. "HOLD." In the old Tongue, ancient magic infused, empowered, irresistible, finite and terrifying.

It was not shouted. It was declared. The sound struck like a physical blow, the air hardened, thought froze mid-motion, and Shardra's body locked with the axe raised, balance barely held by sheer strength, fury burning in her eye and teeth clenched so hard her jaw ached. Eeyagoo felt the world narrow to panic and white noise as his limbs refused to respond, and Mimi went utterly still, her fear a palpable thing pressed against his throat. They could not move, could not breathe properly, could not look away.

Ulkin straightened, his shattered ankle grinding softly as rime crawled across it, sealing and stabilizing the ruin, and he stooped to pick up his severed finger from the stone floor and press it back into place. Ice formed instantly, knitting flesh and bone, and he flexed the hand once, then twice, satisfied. Then he walked closer, not threateningly, curiously, circling them slowly with his immense head tilting, eyes narrowing and

widening as though adjusting focus. His presence pressed in from all sides, and Eeyagoo felt exposed, peeled open, every secret scent and heartbeat laid bare, a rat in a trap.

“Admirable,” Ulkin murmured at last. “Decisive. Protective.” His gaze lingered on Shardra, then slid to Eeyagoo, then to Mimi. “Why, I wonder.” The question was not meant to be answered. Ulkin stopped directly before them, close enough that frost crept across the stone at his feet, and he said slowly, as though tasting the words, “You are tethered to relics of the old ones.” His attention sharpened, focusing inward rather than outward, as though seeing threads others could not. “The bonds to these two are young, still forming,” he said, gesturing vaguely at Eeyagoo and Mimi, then his eyes rose to Shardra. “But you, child of stone and storm... this is woven into your very destiny.” Shardra strained against the binding, muscles trembling, hatred burning bright and unashamed, and Eeyagoo tried to move, anything, to shield Mimi more fully, but the magic held him like iron bands.

“You are worthy of this burden,” Ulkin concluded. “All of you.” He waved his hand, and the binding shattered like cobwebs in flame. Shardra nearly fell as sensation slammed back into her body, and Eeyagoo stumbled forward instinctively, arms wrapping around Mimi as though to shield her from the world itself, while she clung to him, shaking. Ulkin stepped back and spoke mildly. “You were wise to bring them here, Bukri. They could have been calamity. But they are not.” Then, as if only now noticing their expressions of fear, rage, disbelief, he inclined his massive head. “Be at ease. A test. Nothing more. To see if your fellowship holds under strain.” He looked from one to the next. “You did well.”

The images came again, unbidden, not summoned by word or gesture and not coaxed or explained, and they peeled themselves loose from memory and spilled into the stone. The wall beside Ulkin, ancient basalt carved by hands that had shaped mountains, began to change as frost retreated in slow, reluctant rivulets and the surface darkened and smoothed, becoming a mirror not of light, but of experience. It did not glow. It absorbed. Ulkin did not look surprised. His vast head inclined slightly, eyes unfocused, as though reading script too small and too fast for lesser minds, and his fingers twitched once, idly, as the first image locked into place.

A road appeared, mud-choked and rutted, packed with the slow misery of the displaced, with refugee wagons crawling like wounded insects beneath a leaden sky and smoke rising from cookfires that burned more fuel than food. The air shimmered with exhaustion and fear, and Shardra’s own massive silhouette moved through the scene, head bowed to avoid canvas and rope, while Eeyagoo walked beside her, smaller than the children he passed, eyes always moving. Ulkin’s gaze sharpened. “They have already walked among the broken,” he murmured. “And were not untouched.” The image shifted, and the land opened into plains that were too open and too empty, grass bending under a wind that did not cool, and refugees halted there sensing something wrong before they understood it. Then the shadow moved, not cast by cloud or hill and not bound to ground or sky, sliding across the grass against the wind, coiling and uncoiling like a living absence, and horses screamed while dogs went silent. The beast rose with no fixed shape, only suggestion, limbs forming where needed and dissolving again, eyes opening where attention fell upon it, vast but never fully present, as though part of it remained elsewhere, dragging the rest behind like a reluctant thought. Ulkin’s breath stilled. “A thing between,” he said softly. “Drawn close, but not born here.”

The memory did not flinch as it showed the trap, crude in form and brilliant in intent, the giant herself the bait with her magic weapon, promise. The creature erupted from the dark, and the hook was sprung. Magic flared, old and sharp and brutal, and the beast screamed without sound as the binding took hold, light and shadow tearing at one another like animals locked in a pit. Ulkin leaned forward. “Ah,” he said. “You learned it can be lured. Important.” The image did not linger, and the wall flickered faster now to Papal’s streets slick with rain and blood, banners torn, crowds parting around violence they did not understand, to Cirksher’s gates and a skull mounted high, wrong in its make, whispering of things that should not be trophies, and to ruined shrines where prayers went unanswered, not because no god listened, but because something else did. Each scene

bled into the next with sickening ease. “These are not isolated,” Ulkin observed. “They are threads. Someone is pulling.”

Then the image slowed and the Wayfarer’s Hearth took shape, warm light, laughter stretched thin by fatigue, the bar, the tables, the sense of false safety, and then the bundle, wrapped rough and heavy in the wrong way, lying on the floor where no one wanted to look at it for long. The image drew closer and the cloth parted to show a husk, not a corpse, worse, skin intact but emptied, as if something had worn the body briefly and then discarded it when finished, the chest collapsed inward and the face frozen in a half-expression of confusion rather than pain. Ulkin’s eyes narrowed. “This one,” he said slowly, “was not killed.” The image shifted to the mark carved into the back, deep and ritualistic, surrounded by older scars that spoke of repeated use, not a signature made for pride, but for function, and Ulkin’s voice dropped. “Did he bear this mark?” The words were in the Old Tongue now, raw and unfiltered meaning bleeding through, and Shardra hesitated as her mind reached, uncertain, before Eeyagoo answered. “Yes,” he said, quiet and certain. “Carved deep. Surrounded by older cuts. Like... runes.”

The wall froze and Ulkin recoiled a single step, a thing almost no one alive had ever seen a Rimekin do. “Heginus...” The name did not echo. It hurt. Ulkin’s vast shoulders tensed, and for the first time since they had entered the cavern, the Ancient looked afraid. “This is his work,” he said, voice tight with something close to grief. “Or one who learned at his knee. A cyclopean abomination, born of titan and dragon, twisted against the world that bore him. Binder of elsewhere-things. Maker of hooks and doors.” He turned sharply toward Bukri. “Send word. To the palace. To every outer city and hamlet. If he walks again, his shadow will fall far.” His gaze returned to Shardra and Eeyagoo. “You have already crossed his path,” Ulkin said. “And survived. That alone marks you.”

The wall dimmed and the images sank back into stone as if swallowed, but the weight of them did not fade. The Ancient straightened, ancient and terrible and suddenly very, very awake. “The world wears thin,” he concluded. “And you walk where it bleeds.” In that moment, none of them doubted it.

Before they departed, Ulkin reached toward Rimeheart and Shardra pulled it back instantly. “I need only touch it,” Ulkin said, his voice gentler than before. “Not take.” Reluctantly, she allowed it, still gripping the haft with both hands, and Ulkin instructed her, “Think of your spear. Its weight. Its balance.” The axe flowed like melting ice, reshaping into a great bearspear, sleek, lethal, beautiful, and Shardra stared. “Your bond is strong,” Ulkin said softly. “It will grow stronger still, with your companions.” Then he turned away, retreating into shadow, leaving behind silence, fear, purpose, and a path that no longer allowed turning back.

They departed Ulkin and Bukri watched solemnly as they descended the snowy pass.

“Gather the others, we must speak” Ulkin said his voice deep and ardent.

What It Felt Like to Be Opened

Eeyagoo had been cut before, burned, nearly drowned, and he had known fear sharp enough to empty the stomach and turn the legs to water, but none of that prepared him for what Ulkin did. It was not pain. It was absence, the sudden, terrifying realization that there was nowhere inside himself to hide. Smell was the first thing to go, not dulled, but taken, and the comforting, grounding catalog of the world he lived by, stone, smoke, oil, blood, loam, was stripped away until he no longer knew which sensations were his and which were being read. When the images rose on the wall, he felt them leave him, not as memories recalled but as flesh peeled back, each moment re-lived without the mercy of distance. The beast on the plains still smelled wrong, the bait still tasted of lies, the husk in the inn still carried that unbearable nothing where a soul should have been, and worst of all was the certainty that Ulkin saw it all at once, every doubt, every instinct, every failure, and judged it without effort or care.

After, long after, when they were alone again, Eeyagoo found his hands would not stop shaking unless Mimi was pressed against his throat, her warmth real and immediate. He avoided looking at the ice cliffs, at the towering shapes of the Rimekin structures, at anything that might remind him of how small he had been made, and he did not speak it aloud, but the thought rooted itself deep and refused to leave: never again. Never another Rimekin. Never another place where memory could be stolen like breath. He wanted out of the north, out of the cold, out of the watching stone, out of lands where beings like Ulkin could exist at all, but when he thought of leaving, his eyes always went to Shardra first. Not without her. Fear could be endured. Abandonment could not.

When the Rage Has Nowhere to Strike

Shardra had always trusted anger, because it was clean and honest, a thing that moved the body when thought lagged behind, and in battle it sharpened her. Against Ulkin, it had carried her forward without hesitation, axe in hand, certain that if something threatened what was hers, it could be ended, and that belief had cracked in the cave not from defeat, but from futility. She had struck true and she knew it, bone had broken and ice had bled, and it had meant nothing. The binding had come down, and all the strength she had ever trusted had been reduced to a statue's pose, fury locked uselessly behind clenched teeth.

Afterward, when the danger had passed and there was nothing left to swing at, the anger remained, settling into her chest like a stone too heavy to cough up and too solid to ignore. She replayed the moment again and again, not the demand itself, but the instant she realized she couldn't stop it, that there were beings in the world for whom her strength, her skill, her will were not even obstacles. She hated Ulkin for that knowledge and hated the calm certainty with which he had taken it apart and handed it back to her changed, yet beneath the anger, quieter and harder to face, was something colder: resolve. If the world held things she could not yet kill, then she would grow until she could, not for glory and not for destiny, but for Mimi and for Eeyagoo, so that the next time something ancient pointed and demanded, the answer would not end in helplessness.

She did not speak any of this aloud, because she rarely did, and instead she walked until the cold burned, until her muscles ached and her breath fogged thick in front of her, and when she finally stopped, it was beside Eeyagoo as it always was. The anger did not fade, but it found direction, and that, she knew, was far more dangerous.

The road south did not announce itself as a choice, and Shardra simply did not turn north again. When the tracks forked, one climbing back toward the ice-cut passes they had come through and the other bending west and then south, skirting the coast, she paused only long enough to let the wind finish its argument. Salt crept into the air there, faint but unmistakable, and the cold lost its bite, becoming something that merely touched rather than punished, and she shifted her pack, set her boots toward the shoreline, and began to walk.

Eeyagoo followed without comment, and the coast road was narrow and uneven, stone pressed hard against grey water that never quite rested. Waves hissed and broke below them, steady and indifferent, filling the space where thoughts had been growing sharp, and gulls cried overhead, bold and stupid and alive. It was a different world than the north, still harsh, but honest in its dangers, and Eeyagoo found himself breathing more easily without realizing when it had started. He walked closer to Shardra than he usually did, close enough that her shadow cut the glare off the water for him, and Mimi slept against his neck, warm and solid, while he adjusted his steps without thinking so she wouldn't jostle.

Shardra noticed, and she slowed without looking back, lengthening her stride just enough to match his shorter pace. The great spear rode easily in her hand now, its weight familiar, reassuring, and Rimeheart stayed strapped across her back untouched, as if both of them had silently agreed it did not need to be part of every answer. When the wind rose sharply off the water and sprayed cold mist across the rocks, Shardra

shifted sideways, taking the brunt of it and leaving Eeyagoo in the lee of her bulk, and she did not remark on it, she simply did it again the next time.

They camped low that night tucked between stone outcrops where the firelight would not carry far, and Eeyagoo cooked without flourish, simple food heavy on warmth and fat, while Shardra ate quietly watching the horizon where the sea darkened into night. When a distant shape moved on the water, too large to be driftwood, her hand went to the spear at once, and she held there ready until the shape resolved into nothing more than shadow and swell, and only then did she relax, fraction by fraction.

Neither spoke of why, and by the third day the land began to change as the cliffs softened into long, sloping rises and grass returned in stubborn patches, bent low by wind but alive. The air warmed just enough to carry the scent of earth instead of ice, and ahead the foothills rolled back from the coast, and beyond them the Wyrllish plains waited, vast, open, dangerous in ways that could be seen coming. Eeyagoo stopped once at the rise looking out over it all, and Shardra halted beside him, looming, silent.

“Different,” he said at last, not north, not coast, just that.

Shardra nodded. “Aye.”

She did not say safer and he did not say thank you, but when they started down together, southward, the space between them stayed small, and neither looked back at the road they had chosen not to take.

A few days passed before Eeyagoo brought it up at all. When he did, it was late, the fire low, the world quiet enough that the memory had room to crawl back in. He didn’t look at Shardra when he spoke.

“Thing... when it touched,” he said slowly, carefully, like each word might snap. “Not just body. Head too. Memories. Old ones. Bad ones. All at once.” His claws curled, scraping softly against the ground. “Couldn’t move. Couldn’t *hide*. Was there. Trapped. Like already dead but still feeling it.”

Shardra shifted closer but didn’t interrupt.

“I know fear,” Eeyagoo went on, voice rough. “Fear good. Fear keeps you alive. But this, ” He shook his head. “This was wrong fear. No path out. No trick. If it wanted Eeyagoo dead... I am dead. No maybe.”

Shardra exhaled slowly through her nose. “That’s the Rimekin,” she said at last. “The old ones. When they leave the world behind, they stop obeying its rules. Thought, memory, pain, those become tools to them. They aren’t just monsters.”

Eeyagoo’s ears flattened. “Then what.”

“Closer to gods,” she said, quietly. “The kind that don’t answer prayers.”

Silence pressed in. The fire popped.

“They *test*?” Eeyagoo asked. “That thing... was looking. Feeling.”

Shardra nodded once. “Aye. And if it hadn’t been testing, ” She stopped herself, jaw tightening. “If it had meant to kill, none of us would’ve stopped it. Not me. Not luck. Not planning.”

Eeyagoo swallowed hard. “Then north...” He trailed off, shaking his head again. “North bad. Magic there not like spells. Not like traps. You can’t plan for gods.” His voice dropped lower. “No north again. Ever.”

Shardra stared into the fire for a long moment. “I’ll do my best,” she said finally. “But the north is my home.”

The word *home* hung between them, heavy and sharp.

Eeyagoo’s voice came small but certain. “We make home.”

She turned to him, eye shining despite herself. He met her gaze this time. “Not north. Not south. Just... us.”

Mimi fluttered up at once, sensing the shift, wings a blur as she bounced from one shoulder to the other. “Fam-ily,” she chimed, the word stitched together out of both their voices, proud and bright.

Shardra let out a quiet, broken laugh and reached up to steady the little mimicing. “Aye,” she said softly. “Right you are. We stay south of Kdathe’, if at all possible, yea?”

Eeyagoo nodded. “Yea. South good.”

They sat there then, the three of them, the fire low and the night holding steady, no victory claimed, no danger undone, but something fragile rebuilt. Eeyagoo still feared the north, feared the magic that ignored all the rules he lived by. But he had learned something just as important: even when survival had no answer, he wasn’t facing the impossible alone.

A Dangerous Pass

The pass should not have held water the way it did. Melt ran everywhere in thin, shining sheets, sliding over stone that should have been bare, pooling where the road narrowed and the mountain pressed in. Mimi skittered ahead of them, a low, cautious shape that flowed rather than walked, her surface dimpling as she tested the ground with exploratory pseudopods no thicker than twine. She chirred softly, a sound she’d learned meant *wait*, and retreated back toward Shardra’s boots just as Shardra moved forward out of habit, stride steady, weight assured. Eeyagoo stopped her with a sharp intake of breath and a lifted hand, but it was Mimi who pressed herself against Shardra’s calf, clinging there with surprising firmness. *Listen*. Eeyagoo crouched, ear to the ground, while Mimi flattened herself thin and spread across the slush, her body trembling as vibrations passed through her. Beneath the surface water was another sound entirely, a deeper murmur that did not belong to the pass at all.

Eeyagoo dug carefully where the thaw had softened the road’s edge, peeling back stone and mud until a hollow yawned open beneath, black and swallowing. Mimi leaned over the opening, a glossy tendril dipping down and recoiling at once, her surface rippling in visible discomfort. The ground had not thawed; it had been eaten away, water carving tunnels through old ice and loose earth. Eeyagoo slid down into the narrow space with practiced ease, Mimi following partway, anchoring herself near the lip like a living safety line. His voice came back muffled and distorted, echoing oddly. There was a safer line, he said, a narrow spine of stone where the mountain still remembered itself. Mimi pulsed twice in quick succession, the closest she came to agreement, and withdrew as Eeyagoo climbed out again, mud-smearred and shivering, pointing the way.

Shardra tested the route once, twice. Mimi stayed with her now, clinging to the back of her boot, then flowing up to her shin as if unwilling to be left behind. When Shardra stepped where she should not have, the ground answered her weight with a sickening sag, the road sighing as if relieved to finally give way. Mimi let out a sharp, keening note and tightened her grip. It held, just long enough. Shardra retreated without panic, boots slipping but not failing her, Mimi shifting to counterbalance her weight in a way that was almost instinctive. The earth collapsed a breath later, sloughing away into dark water below. Neither of them spoke for a long moment. Eeyagoo’s hands trembled as he wiped them on his cloak. Shardra reached down and tapped Mimi once with two fingers, a silent thanks. The mimicing pulsed, pleased, and flowed back to the ground. Shardra nodded to Eeyagoo after that, a quiet acknowledgment of a life saved without ceremony, and followed the path he had marked. They crossed the pass slower from then on, every step earned, the mountain reminding them that spring was not mercy, only change.

A day later, the cairn rose from the roadside like a wound that had never closed. The stones were blackened, cracked by heat long past, stacked without care and then broken again, as though someone had returned

after the fire simply to be certain nothing recognizable remained. Mimi approached it first, curious rather than afraid, her surface tasting the air and the stone. She recoiled slightly, confused, and made a low questioning sound. There was nothing, no lingering scent, not even the mineral whisper of old bone. Even death had been erased here. It was old work, Shardra decided, and wrong in a way she could not easily name. Eeyagoo circled the cairn, uneasy, eyes flicking to the tree line and back, while Mimi settled near Shardra's heel as if seeking reassurance. Should they do anything, Eeyagoo asked quietly. They did not know why it had been defaced, nor by whom.

Shardra studied the stones for a long while before answering. "The dead of the north remember slights," she said at last. "Best not to offend." Mimi shifted, mirroring the stillness in Shardra's posture. Shardra bent, lifted a stone that would have strained a lesser traveler, and set it atop the cairn with deliberate care. Mimi flowed up the stone briefly, as if inspecting it, then withdrew. Eeyagoo hesitated, then added a smaller one beside it. After a moment's consideration, Mimi nudged a pebble into place as well, small and imperfect, but chosen. The pile did not look whole, but it no longer looked abandoned.

They continued north after that, keeping to the trade road where it cut clean lines through the land. Towns and villages appeared and passed at a distance, smoke on the horizon, fences half-sunk into thawing ground, eyes that lingered too long on a tall shape moving against the sky. They did not stop. Mimi ranged wider now, curious but careful, always returning to brush against Eeyagoo's boot or climb briefly up Shardra's leg before slipping back to the road. Shardra knew the looks, knew the stories behind them. Karakan Giants were not a comfort to border folk, and history had given them reason enough. She told Eeyagoo of old claims and older bloodshed, of marches and counter-marches, of land argued over until no one remembered who had first named it theirs. Mimi listened in her own way, quiet and still, as if the tone mattered even if the words did not.

Only under King Corin II had the words finally been spoken aloud and honored, the giants' territory recognized, their borders drawn not by fear but by treaty. Since then the peace had endured. Not warm, not easy, but stable. Eeyagoo nodded as he listened, filing it away as he did all things that kept them alive. Mimi climbed briefly onto Shardra's shoulder then, peering north with interest before settling again. The road carried them on, into colder winds and longer shadows, the thaw following at their heels like something patient and unkind, and for the first time in a long while, none of them walked it entirely alone.

Interlude: Of Old Words and Older Dangers

Recorded nowhere. Spoken only where frost remembers.

The high mountains above Talismonde' lay a quiet if massive cave, its stone ribs rimed white by breath that never truly warmed the air, and below the city slept uneasily, unaware of how narrowly its future had been brushed by catastrophe. Here, in a chamber carved for voices meant to carry through glaciers, two Rime-kin stood facing one another, and Ulkin the Ancient did not pace because he did not need to, his presence alone bending the space around him, the air tasting faintly of hoarfrost and old storms. Bukri the Earnest stood opposite, posture straight, hands folded into his sleeves in the manner of those who listened more than they spoke, and for a long time Ulkin was silent.

"She spoke it," he said at last.

Bukri inclined his head. "Yes."

Not a version and not a remnant, and Ulkin's fingers flexed once, slow and deliberate. "The Old Tongue. Not recited. Not reconstructed. Spoken. With weight. With teeth." Bukri's gaze lowered, not in submission, but in acknowledgement of scale. "I felt it strike the gate-stone. The words held. They did not slide. They did not

thin." Ulkin turned slightly, looking not at Bukri but at the far wall where faint runes glimmered and faded like breath on glass. "It has been... how many winters?"

"Eight and ninety," Bukri replied. "Since it was last heard outside the halls."

"And longer," Ulkin murmured, "since it was spoken without apology."

They let that rest, and Bukri spoke again cautiously. "We have catalogued the possibilities. The axe is ruled out." Ulkin gave a sound that might once have been laughter. "It is not of our make. It answers her, yes, but it does not teach. Tools do not carry language whole. They carry echo at best." Bukri continued. "Her other adornments are recent. Trade-etched. Borrowed strength. None bear the old phonemes." Ulkin turned fully now, black eyes sharp. "Then we arrive at the bitter answer."

Bukri did not flinch. "Heritage."

"Yes." Ulkin's voice roughened, like ice grinding stone. "Unknown. Unrecorded. Her clan, lost, scattered, devoured by time or war. Yet the thread remains. Not diluted. Not softened." Bukri frowned slightly, an expression rare and meaningful among his kind. "How does such a thing persist among weaker blood?" Ulkin's gaze unfocused, turning inward. "It must have been kept. Not remembered as ceremony, but lived. Spoken where silence would have been safer. Passed not as lesson, but as breath." He paused. "Or guarded." Bukri considered this. "A line set apart. Perhaps unaware of its own value. That would explain the purity. No exchange. No correction." Ulkin nodded once. "A sealed vein."

Silence returned heavy with implication, then Ulkin spoke again and the air seemed to tighten. "And Heginus." Bukri's hands clenched within his sleeves. "If it is him." "If it is not," Ulkin countered softly, "then it is worse." Bukri exhaled, a fog that lingered too long. "A follower would mean the knowledge spread. Fragmented, yes, but fragments cut." Ulkin's eyes glinted. "We must scry. Deeply. Across thin places. Across habits, not just lairs. Heginus never hid as others do. He nested in consequences." "Yes," Bukri agreed. "He let the world make space for him."

Ulkin turned back toward the wall where faint motes of light had begun to gather, early signs of scry-work preparing itself. "We will look for hooks. Bait. Patterns of loss that feel... intentional." Bukri hesitated. "And the King?" Ulkin did not answer immediately. "To speak too much," he said finally, "is to summon panic before understanding. To speak too little is to invite blindness." Bukri inclined his head. "Then... weight without detail?" "Foundations, not architecture," Ulkin agreed. "He must know there is movement. That ancient debts may stir. Not yet names." Bukri nodded. "And the girl?" Ulkin's mouth curved faintly, not quite a smile. "She walks already where she must. We do not steer that river yet."

He turned, immense form casting long shadows across the chamber. "Attend the scrying, Bukri the Earnest. Watch for the places where language survives without permission." Bukri bowed deeply. "As you will." As Bukri departed, Ulkin remained, staring into stone that now faintly reflected a towering woman's silhouette and the shape of words that should not still exist. "Undiminished," he murmured. "After all this time." The frost along the walls thickened, listening, and elsewhere, far to the south, those who mattered most walked on, unaware that ancient eyes were now measuring the bite of their footsteps.

The twisted Path north again.

The Incident on the Papal Trail

The moment itself was, by any mundane measure, trivial. A roadside ambush, poorly chosen, poorly executed, along the trail leading back toward Papal. Heaug walked with the unhurried gait of a man following his thoughts rather than the road, wondering idly if the woman had already turned north for Talismonde', or if her path yet lingered ahead of him. When shapes peeled themselves from brush and stone, slipping into

concealment too late to matter, he smirked. Bandits. The kind that mistook size for slowness, solitude for weakness.

They loosed their arrows together, a clumsy half-dozen shafts meant to overwhelm. Against a lesser target, it might have worked. Against Heaug, bearing the Barrier Blade, it was insult. Steel rang as the blade turned aside two shafts outright; others passed through the space where he had been a heartbeat earlier, his bulk moving with deceptive certainty. He surged forward then, not charging, but advancing with the inevitability of falling stone. Great, sweeping arcs of his sword cut men down before hands could fumble new arrows from quivers. Four fell in moments measured not by time but by breath.

One arrow, ill-aimed yet unlucky, glanced across his brow. Blood welled. That was enough.

The fury that followed was not tactical. It was personal. Heaug despised being marked by the small and the unworthy. His anger found voice before thought, and that voice was the Old Tongue, used with weight, intent, and careless authenticity. He did not invoke it as spell or rite. He cursed, as giants once cursed prey.

Old Tongue:

“Kharûm vel Thraek, zul garath, zul neth.”

Translation:

“Die, pitiful ones, unmade and unremembered.”

The words struck the world harder than the blade that followed. The remaining brigands faltered, not from fear alone, but from the sudden, nameless certainty that the ground itself had turned against them. Their footing failed, their timing shattered, their wills cracked just enough. Heaug’s attacks cleaved them apart, brutal motion, as if resistance had briefly forgotten how to exist.

Heaug wiped the blood from his brow, pressed cloth to the cut until the bleeding stopped, and gave the dead no further regard. He did not loot them. He did not curse them again. The anger passed as quickly as it came. Soon he was humming, an old, contented tune with no words he cared to remember, as he resumed his walk down the trail, entirely unaware that his careless use of a forgotten language had carried far beyond the trees.

What he had done was small. What it *meant* was not.

Elsewhere, far from Papal, far from the trail, attention had already been fixed. The Rime-Kin were watching another, listening for the resonance they feared and half-expected to hear carried by her voice. Their senses were tuned, their scrying narrowed, their assumptions set. When the Old Tongue rang out, it did so *outside the frame they had prepared*, a clean, forceful utterance from a source they were not observing. The shock was not in the strength of it, but in its *location*.

To the Rime-Kin, it was like hearing a syllable spoken aloud in a sealed library, clear, living, and coming from the wrong aisle entirely. Not a summoning. Not a ritual. A curse, flung in anger and backed by blood, spoken without awareness or restraint. To Henigus, the sensation was sharper still: a pressure ripple through the Fade, answering a question he had not yet finished asking. The Old Tongue was not merely preserved. It was being *used*, by another will, unaccounted for.

The encounter itself would never be recorded among Heaug’s deeds. He would forget it before nightfall. But for those who knew what to listen for, the curse lingered like a footprint in frost, proof that while their eyes were fixed on one flame, another had sparked nearby, ancient, careless, and entirely unconcerned with the scrutiny now turning toward it.

Night settled the way it always did when Heaug chose a place, without witnesses, without complaint. The fire was little more than a suggestion now, a dull knot of embers cupped by stone, its smoke long gone. He sat

just beyond its warmth, where the dark pressed close enough to be felt, and let his shoulders sag. Then he lifted his face and tried on a smile. Not the broad one he used with merchants, nor the soft-eyed concern meant for widows and elders, but something in between. He held it, felt where it pulled too tight at the corners of his mouth, let it fade. Another followed, brows drawn, jaw set, the look of a man burdened by duty. That one lingered longer. He breathed through it, testing how it sat on his bones. In the faint glow, he practiced grief without sound, kindness without warmth, humility without yielding an inch. Each expression came and went with careful consideration, like tools laid out and returned to a kit. When he spoke, it was barely above a whisper, a rehearsal meant only for himself. A gentle tone. A measured cadence. Words chosen not for truth, but for how easily others would carry them away and repeat them. He nodded once, satisfied, and let his face go slack again. Alone, there was no need to pretend at being anything at all.

He lay down some time later, wrapped in his cloak, breathing slow and even, the picture of a traveler spent by the road. The night crept closer. Footsteps came eventually, hesitant, poorly placed, the sound of someone trying very hard not to be heard by someone they believed asleep. Heaug did not open his eyes. He counted breaths instead, measured the pause as the thief weighed risk against hunger. The knife came free of its sheath with a faint rasp, closer now, close enough that Heaug could smell old leather and fear. When the blade descended, it met nothing but empty air. Heaug moved once. The thief was on the ground before surprise could find his voice, wrist locked, weapon turned aside as if it had never truly been a threat. There was no fury in the motion, no wasted strength, only the clean certainty of a decision already made. A sharp crack marked the end of resistance, followed by a wet, final sound as breath fled where it would not return. Heaug leaned close then, close enough that his shadow swallowed the man's face. "You chose poorly," he murmured, not unkindly, as if offering advice meant only for himself.

By dawn, the road would speak plainly. The body was left bound and hung upside down from a stout limb just off the trail, boots swaying slightly in the morning wind. The knots were old, deliberate, their pattern unmistakable to anyone raised on the harsher lessons of the past, bindings meant not merely to hold, but to declare judgment. Beneath the corpse, placed with care rather than anger, lay the thief's knife, snapped clean through the tang and set point-down in the dirt. No blood marked the ground beyond what time and gravity demanded. To those who knew the old ways, the meaning was unambiguous. This was the fate of thieves. Heaug was already gone when the sun crested the horizon, his campsite erased, his passing marked only by a warning that would linger long after the body was cut down and buried, if it was buried at all.

Return to Papal

The trio entered Papal beneath a sky gone soft with evening light, welcomed by the guards in a way so unlike their first arrival that it felt almost unreal. No hands tightened on spear hafts, no wary eyes tracked every step. The long trek through Wyrllish had passed without major incident, no unseen threats boiling out of nowhere, no Tal-Shie striking without warning. It had been simple, almost gentle: they avoided the great herds, hugged the coast, and let the land breathe around them. They ate crabs pulled from tide pools and fish caught in clever nets, Eeyagoo casting from the shallows, Mimi darting like an arrow from above. They talked. They laughed. Somewhere along the way, without either of them quite noticing when it began, the road had turned kind.

Eeyagoo took to carrying a small pot of soil slung carefully at his side. Into it he pressed hellfire pepper seeds, sprinkling in the strange fertilizer he'd bought from the Verdant Menagerie, reverent as a priest with an offering. He watered it daily, sometimes twice, and in the warmer air of Wyrllish the shoots erupted upward, green and fierce, growing at a pace that bordered on the impossible. In four days the plant bore peppers. Eeyagoo stared at it in open delight. "Peppers in four days. Seed to pepper!" he crowed, scarcely believing his

own words. Shardra muttered, “Unbelievable,” half to herself. Eeyagoo took this as doubt and held the pot up between them, earnest and insistent. “No! See. Real.” Shardra laughed then, deep and surprised, while Mimi flicked her gaze back and forth between them, utterly lost in the exchange. “Amazing,” Shardra amended, still smiling. “I guess that’s the better word.”

Shardra hunted sparingly, taking only smaller game, kebucks well under two hundred pounds. She used the spear from Kadathe’, Rimeheart riding silent and heavy across her back. When she threw, the spear flew nearly as far as Eeyagoo could see, vanishing into the brush before returning with meat. Mimi began scouting on her own, and then, bold as only she could be, taking larger prey with a quick, precise sting. A hare. A black squirrel. Two very large bugs of some unpleasant sort. Shardra let Eeyagoo keep all of those. They talked about trapping, about staples and preservation, but never practiced; food was plentiful here, and hunger felt like a story from another life. It was a happy time. A peaceful one.

They passed a village that looked primitive, set low against the land. Great centaur-like folk emerged to meet them, lion bodies, powerful torsos, weapons in hand but not raised. “Book names,” Eeyagoo whispered. “Wemics.” The villagers’ eyes went first to Shardra’s armor, to the claws and teeth worked into leather and hide, the scythe-plates rising from her greatcloak. There was a murmur, then louder speech, gestures sharp and animated. At last, an older one stepped forward, dressed in marks of ceremony. He did not threaten. He only pointed, first to the teeth at Shardra’s belt, then to the plates, then to Eeyagoo’s boots and cloak. His words came slow and broken, trade-tongue bent by unfamiliar mouths. “Kill Asakii? How?”

Shardra frowned, then nodded as understanding settled. “Asakii,” she said carefully. “The beast you never see until it’s on you?” The old wemic dipped his head, reverent as if she’d named a god. Shardra showed them the scars, the rents in her cloak where claws had nearly ended her. “Close thing,” she said simply. She showed them Rimeheart, traced where the axe had bitten deep into the beast’s side, how she’d driven it off and then, at last, killed it. The old one turned and spoke to the others. Their posture changed; awe rippled through them, raw and unguarded. “Go, great hunter,” he said at last. “No fight. Go.” It sounded less like a warning than a request, born of shock at what she’d done.

Mimi, still in her dragonling form, wings tucked, scales catching the light, had gone unnoticed until then. She hopped forward and, bold as ever, punched Eeyagoo lightly on the shoulder with a small claw. At the end of the odd, tight exchange she chirped, head cocked, voice lifting in a hopeful question. “Friend?” Eeyagoo smiled and patted her head. “Not friend. Not enemy. Just... there.” Mimi tilted her head the way he did when thinking, held it for a long moment, then chirped again, satisfied. “Yes.” She settled against him, tail wrapping around his neck, and they moved on.

When they reached the refugee camp, it stood empty. Tents collapsed or neatly taken down, fire pits cold, everything of use already gone. It wasn’t a raid, no blood, no signs of struggle, just abandonment. They searched anyway, careful and thorough, but found nothing to suggest a violent end. Whatever had happened, it had driven the people away cleanly, deliberately. With no answers to be found there, the trio gathered themselves and continued on down the road.

Back in Papal

They learned of Heaug.

The name alone was enough to sour the air. Shardra nearly stopped walking when she heard it, the uncle who had killed her grandfather, the one cast out and banished. There were not many reasons a man like that would seek her out, and none of them were good. The knowledge sat heavy in her chest, sharp with old anger and something colder beneath it. Whatever comfort Papal offered was suddenly gone. They kept their stay short, thanked the guards and merchants with genuine warmth, replenished what they could, food, cordage, small necessities, and made a show of tracking south toward Voolnishart like any sensible travelers would.

But once the day wore on and the road stretched empty ahead of them, they cut back quietly, turning west instead. Toward the broken spine of land where north Mithrin, Auris, and Kadathe' all pressed together. Toward the mountains.

Eeyagoo grew tense as the miles passed, shoulders tight, eyes flicking more often to the ridgelines and scrub. It did not go unnoticed. Shardra slowed, then stopped, placing one massive hand gently on his shoulder, careful, deliberate, nothing of her usual blunt force. "This feels right," she said softly. "Are you okay scouting the foothills? If we find anything... we head straight to Voolnishart and report it." She knelt so she was closer to his level, her voice earnest, honest, leaving him room to refuse if he needed to.

Mimi, who adored Voolnishart beyond reason but lacked the words to explain why, chose that moment to screech happily, "Vuunshit!" The tension snapped like a dry twig. Shardra barked out a laugh before she could stop herself, and Eeyagoo followed, shaking his head. "Vool. Ni. SHART," he said slowly, carefully. Mimi tried again, proud and loud. "VOOLSHIT." The laughter came harder then, sharp and relieving. Eeyagoo scratched under her chin. "We work later," he said fondly.

He agreed at last, foothills only, midway to the treeline and no higher. That much felt safe. With the decision made, they angled west, moving with quiet purpose into the rising ground, intent on learning why this place tugged at them so insistently, why it felt, despite everything, like the right place to be.

Shardra had fought ogres before. They were loud, brutal things, crude strength wrapped around crude instincts. Dangerous in numbers and lethal if they caught you flat-footed, but predictable. You broke their charge, punished their overreach, and ended them before they remembered to be clever. This band, squatting along the road northwest of Papal, had remembered.

They had dug in, not well, but well enough. Trees were cut and stacked, rocks dragged into crude choke points, and the ground trampled into ruts that pulled at the feet. Four ogres waited there, one larger than the rest, with a thick neck, iron rings hammered through its skin, and a slab of wood banded in rusted steel carried like a moving wall.

Shardra felt the pull before the fight began, the same subtle wrongness tugging southward toward Henigus's long shadow. It made the air feel heavier, as if the land itself were tired of being walked on, but she stepped forward anyway. Rimeheart answered her with a low, eager hum.

The first ogre died the way they always did, too slow to understand that she was already moving when it finished roaring. She split its knee, then its spine, and let the body fall where it blocked the path for the others. That was when the second and third rushed past her.

Shardra snarled and turned, and realized Eeyagoo was no longer where he had been. The ogres found him anyway. One brought its club down in a broad, crushing arc, exactly the sort of blow that ended light fighters and left nothing worth burying. Shardra saw it connect, saw the impact land full across his shoulder and back.

Eeyagoo twisted with it. Not enough to avoid the hit, but enough to ruin it. The force bled away into motion, into ground, into nothing. He rolled once and came up inside the ogre's reach, cutter flashing low. The giant howled as tendons parted, staggering forward instead of crushing down.

Shardra felt a jolt of surprise, then another, as the shield-bearer lumbered in, using its slab to herd Eeyagoo toward a rock outcrop. It was smart. Coordinated. It slammed the shield forward and missed.

Eeyagoo was already gone, skimming sideways through a gap Shardra had not even seen. The shield clipped him anyway, caught ribs, and drove him hard into stone. That should have broken him. Shardra opened her

mouth to shout, but Eeyagoo absorbed the blow and turned with it, letting the stone take what flesh did not. He hit the ground, slid, and was moving again before the ogre could raise its shield. He struck once, precise and deep, and the shield-bearer collapsed as if its strings had been cut.

Shardra stared, then waded back into the fight. Rage and momentum carried her through the remaining ogres as Rimeheart sang, frost cracking bone and earth shuddering under her feet. She took hits she ignored, traded pain for progress, and broke them one by one. When the last ogre fled, bleeding, terrified, and suddenly alone, she let it go.

She stood there afterward, breathing hard, steam rising from her skin, while Eeyagoo was already checking himself. Blood marked him, some his, most not. His armor was torn, and a bruise darkened one side where the shield had struck. He touched it once, tested, nodded, and moved on. Alive. Fully functional. Already adapting.

Shardra leaned on Rimeheart and laughed, short and sharp. "That one should've killed you," she said. Eeyagoo looked up, puzzled, then shrugged. "No," he replied simply.

Something small moved at the edge of the camp then, too quick to focus on and gone before her eyes could fix it. The ogres had not seen it. They never did. Shardra said nothing, but looked at Eeyagoo again, really looked this time, and felt the weight of the truth settle in her chest. She could endure more than him. She could hit harder than him. But if she stood still, she could be overwhelmed. Eeyagoo would only stand still if he wanted to.

The road south lay quiet again, scarred and broken, the pull toward Henigus still faint but persistent. Whatever waited there would be worse than ogres, smarter and meaner. Shardra wiped her blade clean, understanding for the first time since leaving Kadamhe something unsettling and strangely reassuring. Whatever was coming for them would have a much harder time killing Eeyagoo than it would killing her, and that mattered more than she had ever expected.

The fleeing ogre did not get far. Shardra watched it crash through brush and low trees, panic loud in every step. It had learned the right lesson too late, run, not fight, but its bulk still carried it beyond easy pursuit. She let it go, breath steadying, the road quiet again.

Then something moved, not on the ground. A flicker, wrongly placed against the sky, darted low and fast, with no sound but the briefest whisper of displaced air. Shardra's eyes tracked it only because it wanted to be seen, just enough. The shape struck the ogre's back between one breath and the next.

Small. Scaled. Wings half-spread. A scorpion-curved tail flashed once, then again, then again. The ogre bellowed, stumbled, clawed at its neck as the thing lifted away, already gone before its mind caught up with pain. It took three steps, then fell, twitched once, and stilled. Silence reclaimed the road.

Shardra exhaled, slow and incredulous, as the small shape returned, not to the corpse, but to Eeyagoo. It landed lightly on his shoulder, talons careful, tail tucked close. Up close, Shardra could finally see it clearly, a dragonling form, compact and alert, eyes bright with focus rather than hunger. It looked pleased.

"Helped," Mimi said, the word careful and correct.

Shardra barked a laugh, loud, sharp, unstoppable, echoing off the trees. Eeyagoo nodded once, solemn as if confirming a ledger entry. "Indeed," he said. "Good. Good."

Shardra wiped her eye, still grinning, and turned back toward the fallen ogres. That was when she noticed the second body, the one that had gone down too quickly and too quietly earlier. Three puncture marks sat at the base of the neck, clean and precise. They had never seen Mimi strike it.

Shardra looked back at the small creature perched comfortably on Eeyagoo's shoulder, watching the world with borrowed patience and learned restraint. "Stars above," Shardra muttered. "She fights like you." Eeyagoo said nothing, simply reaching up to steady Mimi with two fingers, the gesture practiced and familiar. Mimicry, it seemed, was not just copying shapes. It was learning how to help, and doing so extremely well.

The wind shifted as the last echoes of the fight died. Eeyagoo knelt beside the fallen ogre, methodical now that danger had passed. He was not looking for trophies or confirmation of death, only information. His blade tip lifted matted fur aside, exposing the thick hide of the creature's upper arm.

Shardra saw him still. "What is it?" she asked, already stepping closer. Eeyagoo did not answer immediately. He wiped the blood away with two fingers, revealing the mark beneath.

A brand. Not a wound. Not a clan-sign. A deliberate burn, circular and deep, pressed into flesh that had healed around it. At its center lay a familiar shape, angular and interlocking lines forming a sigil that pulled the eye inward the longer one stared at it.

Shardra's stomach tightened. "That's the same," she said slowly, and Eeyagoo nodded. He had seen it once before, burned into living skin and inked into ritual form, on the leather bundle sealed in black wax and on the binding tattoo that had housed the Inkling. The geometry was unmistakable, too precise for coincidence and too careful for ogres acting alone.

They checked the others. Each body bore the same mark, some clearer than others, all deliberate. Shardra straightened, scanning the tree line. "So he's been here," she said. "Or someone wearing his shadow." "Yes," Eeyagoo replied. "Following."

The word sat heavy between them. Shardra exhaled through her nose. "Then we stick to the plan." "Scout only," Eeyagoo agreed. "To the steeps. Woodline. No higher." "No heroics," she added. "No," he said. "Find lair. Camp. Fortification. Where they came from." "Then we leave," Shardra finished. "Report to Voolnishart."

They both knew that part already. What neither of them said was that the land itself felt wrong now, not dangerous in the loud way of beasts or bandits, but rotted, as if something had leaned on it too long and left an impression that refused to fade.

Mimi lifted from Eeyagoo's shoulder without a word, wings beating softly as she rose just above the canopy. She circled once, then twice, keeping low enough to vanish against the leaves and high enough to see farther than either of them could safely go.

Shardra watched her go, jaw set. "Never thought I'd be glad for eyes in the sky," she muttered. Eeyagoo adjusted his pack and moved to the edge of the trees. "Today," he said, "we listen."

They advanced carefully, step by measured step, letting Mimi range ahead while they kept to shadow and cover. Whatever Henigus had left behind was not gone. It had simply learned how to wait, and that, Shardra knew, was often worse.

Heaug let the possibilities circle, each one lifted, weighed, and set back down without hurry. A friendly reunion carried obvious advantages. Family lowered guards faster than threats ever could. A shared fire, old names spoken aloud, concern worn just convincingly enough, yes, that would get him close. Close enough to measure breath and balance, close enough to feel where the weak places had been hardened and where they still gave. A request might even work, if framed correctly. People liked to believe they chose their obligations. Betrayal, on the other hand, was always reliable. Pain had a way of clarifying things. It ended arguments cleanly. Ambush sat between the two, efficient, final, but messy. Too many variables once steel was drawn, too much left to chance.

Hiring muscle tempted him for only a moment before he examined it properly. Distraction had value. Noise had value. Men who could die loudly while he moved quietly had value. But competent lackeys were expensive, and stupid ones asked questions or panicked at the wrong moment. Worse, they talked afterward, if they lived. Even the dead left stories behind, and stories attracted attention. Still, used carefully, they could thin the field, force reactions, give him the opening he needed. He rolled that thought again and again, testing its edges. The first plan, family, paired with the last, betrayal while the mask was still warm, had the cleanest lines. That felt right. That felt *him*.

The road itself was wrong for it. Too open. Too many eyes, too many mouths eager to tell what they'd seen. Violence there echoed. The mountains, though, the mountains swallowed sound. They broke sightlines, bent paths, forced travelers into narrow truths. In the high places, people watched their footing, not each other. That was where mistakes happened. That was where a smile could last just long enough before it no longer mattered.

The problem, as always, was time. He had to catch them first, or at least find where they would slow, where terrain or weather would press them into predictability. Heaug adjusted his pace, his route, shaving distance without rushing. Somewhere ahead were choices to be made, where to hire men who would obey without curiosity, where to let rumors breathe just enough to guide prey without warning it. Each option carried its own risk of failure, its own cost. He accepted that. Plans were not promises. They were tools. And like all tools, the best one would reveal itself only when it was already in his hand.

The trader he met on the road talked too much for a man who claimed to know so little. He kept glancing at the road, at the pack mule, at the purse on his own belt as if weighing each against the other, smile tight and practiced. Heaug listened without moving, hands loose at his sides, letting the words pile up until they began to repeat themselves. Prices rose with every sentence. What had been a favor became a risk, then a danger, then, inevitably, an opportunity that required compensation.

Heaug's eyes flicked once to the trader's throat. That was enough.

"I've walked a long way," Heaug said quietly, voice rough with road-dust and patience worn thin. "An I don't buy the same lie twice."

The trader laughed, nervous, mistaking calm for weakness. He leaned in, lowering his voice, fingers brushing the purse as if to emphasize the point. Gold first, he said. Then maybe names. Maybe directions. Maybe truth.

Heaug stepped closer. Close enough that the trader smelled cold iron and old leather. "Choose quick," he said softly. "I don't care for repeatin myself."

The trader opened his mouth, whether to bargain or protest never mattered. Heaug moved then, sudden and precise, a short blade appearing as if it had always been there. The cut was clean, practiced, not deep enough to spray, not shallow enough to forgive. The trader's breath left him in a wet, surprised sound as he folded, hands clawing at a wound that would not listen.

As the man sagged to his knees, eyes wide and already dimming, Heaug leaned close enough for the words to land heavy and final.

"Wrong choice."

He let the body fall where it stood, wiped the blade on the man's sleeve, and took the purse anyway, not for the gold, but to remind himself how cheaply some people valued their lives. The road was quiet again when he walked on, carrying what he needed and leaving the rest to cool in the dirt.

Heaug had always trusted the ground. Stone remembered weight. Grass remembered passage. Even water, if one knew how to read it, remembered disturbance for longer than most men believed. He was a skilled tracker, patient and methodical, accustomed to quarry that knew how to run, but these two made a mockery of habit. They were not sloppy. They were not hurried. They were clever.

In Papal he had asked his questions carefully, the way one did when answers mattered. Shopkeepers, drovers, a tired woman drawing water at dusk, every voice agreed with comforting certainty that the pair had gone south. It was neat. Too neat. Heaug followed anyway, because certainty was a thing that could only be disproven by walking it into the dirt.

After half a day the land told him the truth. There were no broken stems where there should have been, no scuffed stone, no rhythm to the prints that matched what he knew of them. He slowed, frowned, and let the quiet irritation bleed out of him before it could harden into pride. Then he backtracked, spiraled outward, widened his search the way one widened a net in dark water.

When he found the turn, it was almost elegant. They had doubled back, ghosted their own trail, then cut northwest toward the low mountains, where ridges tangled sightlines and the wind worried tracks to nothing. Heaug let out a low breath that might have been a laugh. "Tricky," he said aloud, more to the empty air than to himself. He respected that. He always had.

Heaug sat before the hearth as he always did, unmoving, the firelight washing over him while one eye remained closed, carefully preserved for the dark. In the slow rhythm of the flames he rehearsed the violence to come, playing it out again and again until it felt inevitable. The hired blades would strike first, loud and clumsy by design, meant to pull every eye and thought toward the obvious threat. Almost at once, just as the moment tipped from uncertainty into alarm, he would call out, voice raised in warning, the concerned kin at their side, slipping cleanly into the shape of family. He would hold that mask through the chaos, waiting for steel to clash and blood to draw focus elsewhere, then move, hard, fast, from the flank or the back. Not to kill. Not yet. If the rumors were true, if the axe truly answered to its bearer, striking the wielder might shatter more than bone. Why risk it, when certainty was within reach?

Then there was the little one. That would be simple. One solid stroke with the greatsword, end it cleanly, without ceremony. Afterward, the kobold. Fragile things, really, when stripped of luck and noise. If enough of the hired help still lived, he would let them be, let the night carry him forward to the campfire. Poison in the stew, antidote already in his possession, order restored without further effort. It was clean. Efficient. It would work, if the world behaved as it so often did when strength guided it. Heaug's mouth curved into a thin smile, cold and distant, like the mountains he once called home.

The Noose Tightens.

From that moment, the chase sharpened. He traveled through the night, long strides eating distance, resting only when the body demanded it and never for long. He was only a few days behind now, close enough that mistakes would begin to cost them. He knew from experience that it was hard to erase the passage of someone his size. Camps left scars. Fire told stories. Even care left residue. He would find something. It was inevitable.

Heaug turned the pieces over in his mind as he walked, fitting them together not as stories but as measures. The tales about his niece were exaggerated, most things said by frightened men were, but the shape of them held true. She did not bluster. She did not flee. She endured, and that mattered. Strength alone was common; restraint was not. She moved like someone who expected the world to test her and had already

decided it would fail. That made her dangerous in a way brute force never was. More troubling was that she had learned when *not* to use it. That kind of discipline was taught, or earned the hard way. Either path narrowed his options.

The kobold interested him more than the giantess did. Small things that survived long roads were never small inside. Heaug had heard enough to know the creature watched instead of spoke, listened instead of bargained. That was a survivor's habit. Information gathered quietly, held tightly, spent only when necessary. He recognized the type. Such companions were not loud heroes; they were the ones who noticed the moment a knife left its sheath. If he made a mistake, it would not be the giantess who punished it first. That, too, mattered.

Then there was the thing that traveled with them. Heaug disliked unknowns that learned. Instinct could be predicted. Hunger could be directed. Curiosity that adapted was another matter entirely. It watched them, they said. Chose sides. That implied judgment, however simple. Heaug did not enjoy being assessed by creatures that did not fear him.

Altogether, it was an untidy group. Capable. Alert. Bound by something that was not convenience. Heaug felt no anger at this. No pride, either. Only adjustment. He had expected to catch up to children chasing stories. Instead, he was following a moving problem that corrected itself as it went. He allowed himself a thin smile at that. Problems could be solved. They simply required patience, and the willingness to accept that when the moment came, there would be no clean outcome.

Battle remnants.

He found the ogres first. The bodies lay where they had fallen, great shapes already stiffening into the earth, armor battered, weapons uselessly scattered. Heaug circled them slowly, hands clasped behind his back, eyes narrowing as he took in the work. The wounds were clean and decisive, without hesitation. More troubling still was the lack of any sign that the group had suffered much at all.

That worried him. Five ogres, competent, armed and armored after a fashion, the sort that killed careless travelers and boasted of it later, and yet here they lay, dispatched efficiently, almost clinically. Heaug knelt, touched one ruined breastplate and then another, tracing the arc of violence backward in his mind. A day and a half, maybe less. That was how close he was now.

He found their old camp not long after and claimed it without ceremony. Familiar ground, briefly shared. He built a small cookfire and stared into its low embers while the night settled around him. The reconstruction came easily. He had done this too many times. Where they stood. Where they fell. How the fight had flowed. Where momentum shifted.

Two of the ogres troubled him. Their necks were swollen and discolored, purple and bloated in a way that did not match the others, not right for the time since death. Heaug's jaw tightened. He knew the kobold used poisons and had accounted for that long ago, but these wounds were wrong. Not darts. Not blades. The venom, because that was what it was, had kept working long after death, as if it resented the bodies for failing too soon. It was concentrated in the neck, precise.

Something else was with them.

Heaug sat back on his heels and felt a prickle of unease crawl up his spine. Unknown variables irritated him. Dangerous ones demanded respect. He dug through his pack until his fingers found old leather and worn metal, a gorget. Plain. Scarred. He rarely wore it. Too restrictive. Too cautious. He fastened it anyway. This, he decided, was a time for precautions, just in case the plan went against him.

Movement caught his eye later, shapes drifting at the edge of firelight. The brigands. His hirelings. Curious, undisciplined, and already proving more trouble than they were worth. He stood and waved them off with a sharp, economical gesture. Fools. They would tip the quarry off before the trap was even set.

He hoped, briefly, that he had not misjudged them. He needed them loud, obvious, and greedy. If he could gain their trust and place himself correctly, he could still pull this off cleanly. All eyes on the marauders he had paid, a moment of chaos, a back turned. A swift strike would end the kobold. After that, he would deal with his wayward niece.

The thought came with a familiar weight. Not doubt. Never doubt. But memory. Regret was a luxury he had buried long ago, yet it stirred anyway, unbidden, as he rolled the plan over and over in his mind. He lay down lightly, one eye half open, always tracking the direction of his possibly stupid hirelings so they did not wander too close again.

The fire sank to embers. The mountains loomed darker against the stars. Somewhere ahead, the quarry moved, unaware for now that the world was tightening around them. Heaug slept like a blade resting on a table, quiet and poised, waiting for the moment it would be lifted.

The Weight of What Is Claimed

They felt him before they saw him. It was not fear. Shardra did not know that word the way smaller folk did, but something, the way a storm pressed down on the land before the clouds arrived. Rimeheart went still at her back, the ice within its haft tightening and drawing inward like a held breath.

“Stop,” she said. Eeyagoo froze mid-step, one hand already drifting toward his belt. Mimi’s shape rippled, half uncoiled from his shoulder, sensing blood in the future.

The road had narrowed here, a cut between low stone shelves where scrub pines clung stubbornly to life. The light was wrong, too flat and too even. Shardra turned slowly, boots grinding gravel, and saw him step out from behind the stone as though he had been there all along.

Heaug smiled. Gods, he had always smiled easily. Broad-shouldered, windburned, his beard braided with a care he pretended not to possess, his eyes were bright, amused, pleased even, like this was a reunion long delayed rather than the end of a hunt.

“Shardra Shalkdottir,” he said warmly. “You walk like you expect the mountain to give way before you.” Her hand closed around the haft of Rimeheart. “And you stalk like a coward,” she replied. “So speak. Quickly.”

Heaug spread his hands, empty and harmless, the picture of honesty. “I wanted words first,” he said. “That was always my plan.” She laughed once, sharp and humorless. “Liar.” The word struck him harder than any blade. It flickered across his face, gone in an instant, replaced by something tighter.

“You know why I’m here,” he said. Shardra did not look away. “I do.” Silence stretched. Somewhere behind the stones, gravel shifted, too deliberate. Eeyagoo’s nostrils flared. He counted heartbeats without meaning to.

Heaug’s gaze slid briefly, measuring the others, then returned to the axe. “I tracked you clean,” he said, conversational. “You did well, the backtrack. I wanted you to know that. Wanted you to understand this wasn’t chance.” Shardra’s thumb brushed frost-slick leather. “You don’t get it,” she said. “It doesn’t belong to you.”

His smile finally broke. “Oh, but it does,” Heaug said softly. “Or it did. Before you.” He stepped closer. That was when Rimeheart screamed.

Not sound, rejection. Cold exploded outward, a violent pulse that shattered frost from the haft and sent a visible ripple through the air. Heaug flinched as though struck, teeth bared in sudden fury. Shardra felt it too. The axe pulled, not toward him, but away, wrenching in her grip as if offended by his nearness.

Heaug reached for it anyway. They collided. Hands slammed into the haft from opposite sides, fingers scraping ice and leather. For a heartbeat they were locked together, breath hot and mingled, eyes inches apart. "You don't know what it is," he snarled. "I know what it chose," Shardra growled back. "I know more than you think."

As she said that, the axe began to glow. Rimeheart flared. Ice surged like a living thing, lancing up his arm, flash-freezing skin, cracking muscle even his heritage didn't faze the hungry cold. Heaug screamed, a raw, furious sound, and was hurled backward as though thrown by an unseen giant. He hit stone hard enough to leave blood. The moment shattered.

"NOW!" Heaug roared.

The stones came alive. Ten mercenaries burst from cover, steel flashing, curses flying. Eeyagoo moved instantly, low and fast, blades singing. Mimi unfolded, becoming something with wings too many teeth.

Shardra did not look back. "Stay out of this!" she bellowed, already charging.

Heaug rose to meet her, blood slicking his beard, eyes alight with a savage joy she had never seen in him before. He drew the Barrier Sword in one smooth motion, its surface humming as it caught her first blow and held it, the force of Rimeheart's swing shattering stone around them instead. The impact rang like a bell struck by gods.

"It's mine!" Heaug spat, slamming the sword outward. The force of the blow hurled Shardra back off her feet. She rose laughing, blood on her teeth.

They met again, steel and ice, force and fury. Heaug fought beautifully. Too beautifully. Every movement precise, every strike layered with intent. He cursed her in three tongues, praised her strength even as he tried to break her knee, her ribs, her will. Shardra answered with silence and blows meant to end things.

Behind them, Eeyagoo cried out as a blade bit deep. Mimi took a spear through one shifting limb and kept going, jaws locking around a man's throat until bone gave way.

Heaug faltered. Not physically, emotionally. He felt it. The axe. Watching him. Judging.

"No," he hissed, voice cracking. He planted his feet and spoke words few had heard aloud in generations, Old Tongue torn from desperation rather than mastery. The air warped. The Barrier Sword flared white-hot.

Rimeheart answered. Cold so profound it stole sound itself and flooded the space between them. It was not the sharp cold of wind or the biting cold of high passes. It was absence, a stripping away. Ice crawled over Heaug's blade, through the barrier, into his hands, his arms, his chest. The light warped, dulled, as if the world itself recoiled. He knew the cold, but this, this was different, older, hungrier.

Heaug screamed again. Not rage this time. Betrayal. "No." His voice cracked, raw and disbelieving. "I carried you. I bled for you. I earned," Shardra stepped in close. She could smell him now. Blood, sweat, old iron. She saw the man she had followed as a child, the warrior who had once lifted her onto his shoulders so she could see over the shield wall, the uncle who had taught her how to brace against a charge, how to laugh after a loss, how to endure.

"You were never worthy," she said quietly.

The words did not shake. Her hands did. She ended it with a single, merciless blow crushing through his breastplate. Not wild. Not furious. Clean. Final.

Heaug fell hard, the Barrier Sword clattering from his grip, its hum faltering. He struck the ground on his side, breath leaving him in a wet rush. His eyes found hers one last time, confused, wounded, small. He rolled to his back, tried to push himself up and failed.

Then the shaking started.

Shardra stood over him, chest heaving, frost steaming from her armor, and did not move. She watched until the tremors slowed, until the last breath rattled out of him and there was nothing left to fight. Only then did the world rush back in.

The mercenaries broke. Two turned and ran outright, throwing weapons aside, shouting curses over their shoulders. The rest lay where they had fallen, some still twitching, some staring skyward with surprise frozen on their faces.

“Shardra,” Eeyagoo cried, and then his legs gave out.

He collapsed hard, one arm useless, blood soaking into the dirt beneath him. Mimi sagged beside him, her form stuttering, shifting to a stable shape, wounds closing.

Shardra did not answer at first. She did not move at first. The world had narrowed to the rise and fall of her chest, the slow creak of cooling armor, the way Rimeheart’s frost steamed faintly in the dirt where it rested. Heaug’s body lay twisted nearby, already losing definition, no longer a man, not yet a memory.

Behind her, she heard it. Not shouting. Not panic. Work.

Eeyagoo had dragged himself upright against a stone, one leg refusing to bear weight. His hands shook, slick with blood, some his, some not, but they worked anyway. A strip of leather torn from a mercenary’s harness became a tourniquet. Teeth pulled it tight when his fingers slipped. He did not curse. He breathed through it, sharp and fast, eyes never leaving Mimi.

Mimi was worse. She could not hold her wounds closed completely. They oozed ichor, dark and iridescent, spilling and then sealing imperfectly. She hissed low and constant, a sound like steam escaping cracked stone. Eeyagoo pressed his forehead briefly to her shifting mass. “Stay,” he murmured. Not a command. A plea. She did. Barely.

Shardra turned then. She saw them, not as warriors, not as survivors of this moment, but as anchors holding themselves together so she could let go. She crossed the distance in three heavy steps and knelt. Her hands hovered uselessly for a heartbeat, too large, too rough.

Eeyagoo looked up. Their eyes met. He gave the smallest nod. We have this. Shardra closed her eye once. Then she stood.

She did not speak. She reached out instead, resting two fingers briefly against Eeyagoo’s shoulder, careful, deliberate pressure. To Mimi, she laid her palm flat against the place where a spine should have been, steady and warm. No words. Just permission.

She turned away and went to Heaug. Duty took over where emotion threatened to drown her.

She stripped him methodically. No haste, no reverence. Clan tokens he should not have were removed and cast aside. The Barrier Sword was wrapped and bound without ceremony. His pack was opened, contents shaken free onto stone. Most of it was quality, hard-won, practical, the kind of gear a man accumulates when he expects to fight things that can kill him even on a good day.

One thing made her pause. A relic, old, quiet, dangerous in its restraint, sat around his wrist. A torc of darkened silver, cracked through at one point and repaired with crude gold solder. It was heavy for its size, and cold in a way that had nothing to do with temperature. No glow. No hum.

She did not put it on. She knew better. This was not power meant to be worn lightly. Whatever it did, it had a cost, and Heaug had paid it often enough to keep it close to the skin. The relic did not want a new bearer yet. She wrapped it carefully and set it with the others.

When she returned, Eeyagoo was slumped lower, color gone from his snout, but his hands were steady now. Mimi had stabilized into a rough, hunched form, breathing shallow but even. Shardra knelt again.

“You live,” she said quietly.

Eeyagoo managed something like a smile. “We... kept busy.” Mimi shifted, a weak ripple of acknowledgment. Shardra exhaled, a long, shuddering breath she had not realized she was holding. “Good,” she said. “Then I am done.”

Only then did she sit. Only then did the weight come back.

After she gathered her strength, Shardra spent the next few hours gathering pine logs and tinder, enough for a pyre, and placed Heaug, armor and all, on it. She lit it before dusk. It burned high and bright through the night. Eeyagoo showed in the trees along the edge of the field, but nothing ventured close. The fire burned furious and hot until the morning hours. They had already done what mattered most.

They dealt with the others in the morning. Not at dawn, that felt too ceremonial, but after the light had settled and the pain had dulled enough to think straight. The pyre still smoldered far downslope, a black scar against the stone.

The other bodies lay where they had fallen, eight of them. Shardra stood apart, leaning on Rimeheart, gaze distant. Her duties were done. What came next was not hers.

Eeyagoo squatted near the first corpse, one knee carefully braced, breath measured. Mimi perched beside him, smaller now, compact and watchful, her wounds sealed but tender. He worked slowly, not greedily, professionally.

“Not fools,” he said after a time, voice quiet. “Not peasants. Paid work.”

He checked boots first, always boots. Good leather, hard soles, proper wear. He nodded once. “Kept their feet alive,” he murmured. “Means they expected to walk away.” Shardra did not answer.

Eeyagoo moved on to coin. They found it spread deliberately, no single purse heavy enough to slow a run, mixed silver and copper, mostly trade-mint, worn but honest, enough between them to matter. There were a few gold crowns, clipped at the edges, pay rather than savings. Eeyagoo gathered it all into a single cloth, counted twice, then tied it off and set it aside without comment.

“No waste,” he said simply.

From there he moved to arms and gear. Most weapons were serviceable, not ornate. There were shortswords that sat well in the hand and had been sharpened recently, grips rewrapped by hand. Polearms scarred but straight, hafts oiled and maintained. Crossbows, compact, with simple spanning hooks, made for speed rather than range. Armor pieces were mismatched but intelligently chosen, reinforced leathers, mail shirts with padded underlayers, bracers meant to catch a blade rather than stop one. There was nothing magical in the flashy sense. Everything was useful.

“They knew how to stay alive,” Eeyagoo said again, quieter this time.

The minor things took longer. He tested weights, smelled oils, tapped wood and bone with a claw, and patient as a judge. He found sealed salves of identical make, still viable, good for closing cuts but not miracles. He found a faintly enchanted whetstone, nearly spent, its magic thin but real, kept blades biting

longer than they should. He found a charm-thread, knotted and greasy with age, designed to dull fear rather than banish it, cheap magic and honest magic all the same.

Mimi nudged one body with her snout, then recoiled, displeased. Eeyagoo followed her gaze. Beneath a jerkin, tucked flat against ribs, he found it.

It was a small bone-and-brass token, no larger than two fingers, etched with spirals so worn they were almost smooth. It was warm despite the air and heavier than it should have been. He did not touch it with bare skin.

“Old,” he said after a long pause. “Not strong. But stubborn.”

Shardra looked over at that. “Dangerous?”

“Don’t know,” Eeyagoo replied.

They wrapped it and set it with the rest. No one smiled.

When it was done, they stood over the bodies. Eight men. Names unknown. Choices made. Shardra spoke once. “We don’t leave them to animals.”

Eeyagoo nodded. “But we don’t have the strength.”

So they worked stones loose instead, not a grave, not a cairn, just enough weight to keep scavengers off until weather and time took over. One by one. It took hours. By the time they finished, the pyre in the distance had collapsed in on itself, glowing faintly, still burning long after it should have gone dark.

They left offerings anyway. A strip of bread. A cup of water poured out onto stone. Not because the men deserved it. Because they did.

When they turned toward Papal at last, packs heavier, steps slower, none of them looked back. The fire would finish its work, and the road would take the rest.

Ash Settles, Scars Remain

Papal took them in without questions. That alone was kindness enough. They stayed longer than they intended, longer than pride would have allowed if pride still had much say. The healers did what they could, poultices that stung, stitches that pulled, hands warm and sure. Bone knit. Flesh closed. But that was the easy work.

Shardra spent most days sitting near the river wall, Rimeheart laid across her knees like a thing asleep. She did not polish it. She did not speak to it. She watched the water instead, gaze distant, shoulders heavy in a way no wound could explain. She ate when reminded, slept when exhaustion took her, spoke little.

Eeyagoo noticed everything. He waited until the third evening, when the light went copper and the city sounds softened into something almost gentle. He eased himself down beside her, careful of his still-tender ribs.

“You know,” he said quietly, “after the warren flooded... I kept thinking if I had dug faster, yelled louder, chosen a different tunnel... maybe.”

Shardra did not look at him, but her jaw tightened.

“I knew it wasn’t true,” Eeyagoo went on. “But knowing and believing are not the same thing.”

She swallowed. “Heaug was my family,” she said at last. Her voice was flat, scraped raw. “Even after banishment. Even after everything. I told myself that meant something.”

Eeyagoo nodded slowly. “So was my clutch. Some of them made bad choices too. Some of them followed worse leaders than they should have.” He hesitated, then added, “I still miss them.”

Shardra’s breath hitched once. She bowed her head, fingers curling into the leather wrap of the axe. “I did what had to be done,” she said. “And I hate that it doesn’t make it hurt less.”

Eeyagoo leaned his head gently against her arm, small weight, deliberate trust. “It never does,” he said. “But it means you’re still you.”

Mimi, curled at Shardra’s other side, shifted. Her eyes, too many of them briefly, focused with rare clarity. “Family,” she said. The word came out stronger than before, firmer, not a question, a claim.

Shardra’s hand moved without thinking, resting on Mimi’s back. Her fingers trembled, then steadied. “Yes,” she murmured. “Family again.”

There was a pause. Then Mimi added, proudly, “Stitches.”

Eeyagoo snorted before he could stop himself, a sharp, startled sound that turned into a laugh he hadn’t expected to have. Shardra blinked, then she smiled, just a little, just enough.

“Stitches,” she repeated, shaking her head. “Yes. Very fierce.”

The days passed like that. Slow meals. Short walks. Quiet talks. Pain easing its grip one notch at a time. When they were strong enough, Eeyagoo penned letters, careful words sent south to Voolnishart, warnings and suspicions and the unease the Rime-kin felt stirring like pressure under ice. No answers came back yet. That was fine.

For now, Papal held them, gave them space to breathe and to mend. The calm settled in, not peace, not truly, but something close enough to rest in. Somewhere far away, a storm was gathering. They did not rush to meet it.

What Grows When the World Allows It

Eeyagoo healed best when his hands were busy. Once he could walk the length of Papal without wincing, he began to disappear each morning with a basket, a knife, and that quiet look that meant he had already planned three steps ahead. He learned the hedges, the fallow strips beyond the walls, the places where water lingered just long enough to coax life from stubborn ground.

Kellic Nalg learned this the hard way. The greenhouse had been an offer of kindness, warm glass, tidy rows, careful order. Kellic had expected maybe herbs, something sensible, something manageable. What he got was Eeyagoo.

The kobold worked the soil with reverence, mixing in a palm-sized pot of dark, living loam from the Verdant Menagerie, soil that smelled faintly of rain and green things and possibility. He pressed seeds into it like secrets. Then he used the fertilizer. It worked exactly as intended.

Hellfire peppers erupted from the beds in furious abundance, thick stalks heavy with waxy red-orange fruit that shimmered faintly with contained heat. They grew fast, too fast. Leaves crowded glass. Vines reached like they were looking for somewhere else to go.

Kellic stared. “I... I don’t think...” he started, and then sneezed violently as pollen caught the air.

Eeyagoo tilted his head, pleased. “Good color,” he said. “Strong.”

By the end of the week, Papal had peppers enough to trade, dry, grind, and still give away. The kitchens learned caution quickly. The healers learned uses they hadn't known before. A soldier swore one kept him awake through an entire night watch in the rain. Kellic received the soil pot in return and held it like a holy thing.

"This alone," he said in awe, "could change a season."

Eeyagoo shrugged, small and sincere. "Can get more."

But he did not. Not yet. Papal had none, and Papal had opened its gates when others might not have. That mattered.

When not in the greenhouse, Eeyagoo ranged farther, bringing back game, herbs, roots, and greens. He taught a few locals what was safe, what was dangerous, what was useful if respected. It reminded him of the refugee camp, but quieter, with less fear and fewer eyes watching the horizon. For now.

Shardra helped where she could, hauling, repairing, standing watch when asked. She spoke little, but when she did, people listened. Mimi lingered near children and animals, strange but gentle, learning which shapes made people laugh instead of recoil.

They were not heroes here. They were neighbors, and Papal was better for it, even if no one quite knew why yet.

The Cinderheart Nut

The summer had been kind to Papal.

The old greenhouse at the edge of town had stood abandoned for years before Eeyagoo arrived. Most of the villagers had long since stopped noticing it, seeing only another weathered structure slowly surrendering to age. Yet under the kobold's care it had come alive again. Broken panes had been patched, rotten timbers replaced, and every corner now overflowed with thriving green life.

Kellic stood in the doorway, staring across rows of peppers heavy with fruit.

"Well, I'll be damned."

Eeyagoo glanced up from where he knelt beside one of the beds, carefully trimming a damaged leaf.

Kellic stepped inside, turning slowly as if trying to convince himself what he was seeing was real. The peppers hung thick upon their stalks, bright reds and oranges catching the sunlight that filtered through the repaired glass above. Not only were there more than there ought to have been, they were larger, healthier, and free of the blemishes every farmer simply accepted as part of life.

The old farmer reached out and plucked one from the vine.

"I've been growing crops for fifty years," he said, weighing the pepper in his palm. "My father before me. His father before him. Never seen anything like this."

He moved farther down the row, inspecting another plant.

"No blight."

Another.

"No rot."

A third.

"Hardly any insect damage."

He turned toward Eeyagoo with an expression somewhere between suspicion and admiration.

"This ain't natural."

The kobold's crest twitched slightly.

Kellic laughed and raised both hands.

"Not saying that's a bad thing."

Eeyagoo looked around the greenhouse as though searching for whatever mystery the farmer was seeing.

"Plants want grow," he said simply. "I help."

The old farmer barked a laugh.

"That's your explanation?"

Eeyagoo nodded.

The answer was so absurdly simple that Kellic found himself laughing harder. Yet standing amidst the impossible abundance surrounding him, he could not entirely dismiss it. There was something about the way the kobold approached every living thing—not as a resource or a tool, but as something deserving of care—that made the explanation feel almost reasonable.

Eventually the laughter faded.

Kellic's gaze drifted toward the sunlight pooling in one corner of the greenhouse, and his expression grew distant. For several moments he stood in silence before giving a slow nod to himself.

"Come with me."

Eeyagoo rose and followed him from the greenhouse, across a narrow lane, and toward a modest farmhouse that had stood near the river longer than most people could remember.

Kellic disappeared inside and returned carrying a small wooden box.

It was old enough that its original color had long since faded. The hinges had been repaired more than once, and the wood had been worn smooth by generations of careful handling. The farmer sat upon a bench outside and rested the box across his knees.

For a moment he simply stared at it.

"My grandfather gave this to my father," he said quietly. "My father gave it to me."

He opened the lid.

Nestled within a bed of faded cloth rested a single dark seed.

It was no larger than a walnut, yet something about it immediately drew Eeyagoo's attention. The shell possessed a faint reddish hue beneath the dust of age, and though it appeared dormant, it did not feel dead.

Kellic watched the kobold studying it.

"Family story says it came from a Cinderheart tree."

The name meant little to Eeyagoo, but it clearly meant something to the old farmer.

"Grandfather used to tell stories about them. Said they were beautiful. Leaves like living embers in autumn. Nuts that would keep for years without spoiling."

He chuckled softly.

"Probably exaggerated half of it."

His thumb traced the edge of the box.

"Truth is, nobody's seen one in generations. My father tried planting it. So did his father before him."

A faint smile touched his weathered face.

"I tried too when I was young."

His gaze lingered on the seed.

"Nothing happened."

The summer breeze stirred the fields around them. Somewhere in town a dog barked. From the greenhouse came the faint scent of warm earth and growing things.

Kellic slowly lifted the seed from its bed of cloth.

For a moment it seemed he might place it back inside.

Instead he extended it toward the kobold.

The hand offering it trembled slightly, not from age but from the weight of hope. It was the kind of hope that had survived disappointment so many times it scarcely dared call itself hope anymore.

"You've done more with that old greenhouse in a few months than most men manage in years," Kellic said.

"So I'll ask what my father asked himself, and what his father asked before him."

His eyes met Eeyagoo's.

"Can you grow this?"

Eeyagoo accepted the seed carefully, turning it over between his claws. He studied its shell, its shape, its texture. He could feel no magic within it, no hidden secret waiting to reveal itself. It was simply a seed.

A very old seed.

Perhaps the last of its kind.

Finally he looked up.

"I try."

Kellic stared at him for a heartbeat before a laugh escaped despite himself.

"That's all?"

The kobold nodded.

"That all anybody can do."

For reasons neither of them could have explained, the answer felt right.

The old farmer smiled.

Eeyagoo rose from the bench and carried the seed back toward the greenhouse. Neither man knew they were witnessing the beginning of a story that would outlive them both. They saw only an old family heirloom and a stubborn little gardener willing to give it one more chance.

History, however, often begins in moments so small that nobody recognizes them until decades later.

What Comes When Peace Lingers Too Long

The ankheg took the pasture three nights later.

It burst up beneath a milk cow just before dawn, soil and stone exploding outward as the beast screamed and thrashed, acid spitting in wild arcs that scorched grass black. By the time the alarm bell rang, the thing had already dragged itself halfway free, chitin glistening, mandibles snapping.

Farmers came with pitchforks and stopped when Shardra walked past them.

“Stay back,” she said, not sharply, not unkindly. Just final.

Eeyagoo was already moving, Mimi flowing low and wide beside him. He took in the ground at a glance, the sinkholes, the disturbed earth, the way the pasture dipped.

“Nest,” he said, calm and certain. “More than one.”

Shardra nodded and charged. It was not even difficult. She struck the first ankheg as it surfaced, Rimeheart shearing through chitin like wet clay, frost locking joints mid-motion. Mimi slipped beneath another, tearing soft tissue where armor thinned. Eeyagoo moved with ruthless efficiency, placed strikes, acid sacs punctured at range, never standing where the ground trembled.

By the time the last of the nest surfaced, the farmers were staring in silence. When it was over, Shardra leaned on the axe, breath steady, while Eeyagoo knelt to harvest glands and plates with practiced care.

“That,” one farmer said faintly, “would have taken half the town.”

Shardra wiped her blade. “It would have taken more than that.”

They refused payment. Thanks was enough.

Mail came often after that. Every wagon from Voolnishart brought something for Eeyagoo, letters tied in neat bundles, books wrapped in oilcloth, notes scrawled in too many hands to count, and fertilizer. Gods above, fertilizer.

Eeyagoo laughed outright the first time he saw the stacks. “Too much,” he said, pleased. “Very good.”

Kellic Nalg’s greenhouse changed the town. Under Eeyagoo’s guidance, herbs and spices took root, slow-growing, patient things, thyme and saffron, peppergrass, bitterleaf for teas and poultices. Rare expensive herbs he had saved in some cases years to plant. Enough to dry and store, enough to trade, enough that Papal would not have to beg in a lean year. Kellic watched it happen with reverent disbelief. Mimi stayed in the Greenhouse with Kellic many afternoons, she kept the bugs out and sometimes, played with him.

“You don’t just grow food,” he said one evening. “You grow security.”

Eeyagoo preened slightly at that.

The profits, measured and honest, went south to Kraggenkor Forge, added to the group’s ledger. They did not touch Heaug’s things, not yet. Only the spoils of the mercenaries were sold. Coin flowed back. The weak relic, bone and brass, stubborn and quiet, was sent with careful notes.

Eeyagoo nodded at that. “Of course,” he said. “Bad idea.”

They were wealthy now. More than that, they were wanted.

Shardra felt it before she said anything. The mountains pulled at her in quiet moments, in the hush before sleep, in the way Rimeheart rested heavier against her shoulder when she faced north. She waited weeks. Finally, one evening by the river, she spoke.

"I don't think we're done," she said.

Eeyagoo did not look surprised. He looked tired, and fond, and sad. "I know," he said. After a moment, "I hoped maybe... later."

Mimi tilted her head. "Stay?" she asked hopefully.

Shardra smiled sadly. "Not yet."

The world did not wait. The first reports came with the mail, an inkling sighted near the gates of Voolnishart, missiles fired, panic. Then others, goblin raids in the northeast. Wrong raids. Wrong goblins.

"They don't move like that," a courier told Eeyagoo, voice low. "Don't leave survivors. Don't... change."

Peace, it seemed, had only been a pause. Once again, the storm gathered. Once again, they would answer it, together.

The sprouting unexpected

The seed sprouted on a rainy morning.

Eeyagoo discovered it while making his usual rounds through the greenhouse. At first he mistook the tiny shoot for a weed. Only after kneeling beside it and brushing away the damp soil with one claw did he realize what he was looking at. The small green stem emerged from the precise place where Kellic's ancient seed had been planted months before.

For a long moment he simply crouched there, studying the fragile shoot pushing stubbornly toward the filtered light above.

Then he smiled.

It had worked.

Or perhaps more accurately, the seed had decided to try.

That was how Eeyagoo often thought about such things. Plants wanted to grow. His task was merely helping them along when they struggled.

The rest of the morning passed much as any other. He tended peppers, checked moisture levels, and repaired a cracked planter box. Only after finishing his work did he seek out Kellic.

The old farmer was repairing a fence when Eeyagoo found him.

"The seed sprouted."

Nothing more.

No grand announcement.

No dramatic revelation.

Simply a statement of fact.

Kellic stared at him for several heartbeats before the hammer slowly slipped from his fingers into the grass.

"What?"

"The seed. Grow now."

The old man did not answer. Instead he turned and began striding toward the greenhouse with surprising speed for someone his age. By the time they arrived he was breathing hard.

Inside, Kellic dropped to one knee beside the tiny sapling.

The greenhouse grew quiet.

The old farmer said nothing at first. He simply looked.

Years seemed to fall from his shoulders as he studied the fragile shoot emerging from the soil. His rough hands rested upon his knees while his gaze lingered on every tiny detail—the first leaves, the thin stem, the impossible fact that it existed at all.

"My grandfather was certain it would grow someday," he said at last. "My father believed it too."

A faint laugh escaped him.

"I stopped believing a long time ago."

His eyes never left the sapling.

For a moment Eeyagoo thought the old man might cry. Instead Kellic simply smiled. It was not a broad smile nor a triumphant one. It was quieter than that. Deeper. The smile of a man finally laying down a burden he had carried his entire life.

"Welcome back," he whispered.

The words were meant for the tree.

Perhaps for the generations that had waited for it.

Perhaps for both.

News traveled quickly along the Miranathi.

Farmers mentioned it to merchants. Merchants carried the tale to river captains. River captains carried it farther still. Within days the rumor had reached Voolnishart, where it eventually found its way into the hands of an elven botanist named Elith.

He read the letter once.

Then again.

Then a third time.

A Cinderheart seed had sprouted in Papal.

Ordinarily he would have dismissed such a claim immediately. Over the years he had encountered dozens of supposed Cinderheart discoveries. Every one of them had proven false. Misidentified species, exaggerated rumors, deliberate frauds—he had seen them all.

Yet this report carried a name he recognized.

Eeyagoo.

The strange kobold who had spent years asking increasingly sophisticated questions about soil chemistry, irrigation, and plant nutrition. The same kobold who purchased fertilizer in quantities that seemed absurd for someone with a single greenhouse. The same kobold who remembered every lesson he was taught and returned months later with questions proving he had thought about them extensively.

If anyone in the world might accidentally achieve the impossible, it would be Eeyagoo.

Three days later Elith arrived in Papal.

The horse looked exhausted.

The elf looked worse.

He barely paused long enough to dismount before demanding directions to the greenhouse. Several townsfolk attempted greetings. He ignored them all.

The moment he entered the building his eyes found the sapling.

Then he stopped.

The world seemed to disappear.

The greenhouse.

The peppers.

The townsfolk.

Even Eeyagoo himself.

None of it mattered.

Only the tree.

The sapling stood perhaps a foot high, delicate and unremarkable to anyone unfamiliar with its significance. Yet Elith approached as though entering a temple.

He crouched beside it and carefully examined every visible detail. The shape of the leaves. The texture of the bark. The pattern of new growth. His hands hovered nearby but never touched.

Eventually he sat back.

"No."

Eeyagoo frowned.

"No?"

Elith laughed softly, though there was no humor in it.

"No, I am not prepared for this."

The elf stared at the tree for another long moment before finally looking at the kobold.

"Do you know what you've done?"

"It grow."

The answer was so earnest that Elith could not help smiling.

"Eeyagoo, entire libraries have been written about Cinderhearts. Scholars devoted their lives to finding surviving specimens. Kings funded expeditions searching for seeds. Some spent decades arguing whether viable examples still existed."

His gaze returned to the sapling.

"And somehow you planted one beside peppers."

Eeyagoo looked toward the peppers.

They seemed perfectly healthy.

He still wasn't entirely sure what all the fuss was about.

The sight nearly made Elith laugh again.

For him, this tiny sapling represented one of the greatest botanical discoveries of the age.

For Eeyagoo, it was simply another plant trying to grow.

The difference between those perspectives would amuse him for years.

When he finally spoke again, his voice had softened.

"I would like to stay."

The excitement was gone now.

Only sincerity remained.

"I can help keep it healthy."

Eeyagoo studied him for a moment before nodding.

"Then stay."

Neither realized how important that simple exchange would become.

Years later scholars would write that Elith came to Papal because of the Cinderheart Tree.

The people who knew them best understood otherwise.

He stayed because Eeyagoo made room for him.

Just as Papal had once made room for Eeyagoo.

And because of that, the future of the Cinderheart no longer rested upon one gardener alone.

Two months later the sapling was moved to a place where the ground was as perfect as they could make it the light was right the water was right it was in a small park in the center of Papal. This would become known as Kellic's Tree in the decades to come. A proud reminder of the man.

In the years that followed, Elith devoted himself to the tree with a level of care bordering on reverence. He measured growth, documented every new leaf, and filled journals with observations. Most of his work was visible to anyone who cared to look.

A few things were not.

On rare cloudless afternoons, when the sun stood highest and brightest above the greenhouse, Elith would ensure he was alone. A brief spell of invisibility concealed him from wandering eyes as he withdrew a small object wrapped carefully in cloth.

The Lens of the Last Orchid.

Few living souls knew it existed.

Fewer still understood what it truly was.

Holding it beneath the noon sun, Elith would carefully focus its light upon the young tree. Not enough to force growth. Not enough to alter its nature. Merely enough to strengthen what was already there.

A little healthier.

A little stronger.

A little more resilient.

The sort of encouragement a gardener might offer if given the means.
When he finished, the Lens disappeared once more beneath its wrappings.
No one ever saw.
No one ever knew.
Not Mimi.
Not Shardra.
Not even Eeyagoo.
Elith preferred it that way.
The miracle belonged to the tree. The credit belonged to the kobold who had planted it.
His role was simply ensuring that this time, the world would not lose its Cinderhearts again.

To Eeyagoo, Delivered by Forge Courier, Sealed Under Witness

We have taken time with the small bone-and-brass token you sent, not hours, days. It asked for that much, and more would have been wasteful.

Klulvm was the first to name what it is not. It is not a safeguard against failure. It does not correct error, replace skill, or strengthen weak hands. When pressed, it does nothing. When misused, it remains silent. That silence is its nature. The old alchemist has seen much in his years but I fear he cannot be trusted any longer.

Sniksnik understood it next. He set it beside a blade half-carved and worked as he always does. The difference did not appear in the cut, nor the measure, nor the finish. It appeared later, when the work was judged. What should have been merely acceptable held together as right. No edge wandered. No grain tore. No compromise lingered.

The forgemaster agrees. This token does not raise ceilings. It lowers fallout.

In difficult work, casting near tolerance, carving where one slip would force a downgrade, it allows success to stand cleanly. Where others must accept a standard grade for fear of a hidden flaw, this preserves quality when quality was already earned. It is worth little to the careless, and much to the disciplined. To the gifted, it may be priceless. To the untrained, it is nothing.

Its value, therefore, is not fixed.

We would caution this: prolonged reliance may mask how close the work came to failure. Masters should remember when to set it aside. Apprentices should not touch it at all.

This is craft-magic of the old sort, made to protect effort, not ambition. That such a thing survived the Fade does not surprise us.

We return it to you unchanged. It will do more good in hands that understand restraint.

Garbrik Kraggenkor, for the Forge, with notes by Klulvm, and witnessed by Sniksnik, who asked that you be told: "Good tool. Quiet. Does not argue."

By the River, Before Departure

The token lay between them on the table, bone dulled smooth, brass darkened to the color of old tools. It did not catch the light the way other things did. It simply was.

Eeyagoo looked at it for a long time, head tilted, claws resting lightly on the wood. "Is... good," he said at last. "Not loud. Not hungry."

Shardra leaned back on the bench, arms folded, watching him rather than the token. "But you don't like it."

He snorted softly. "No. I do not."

"Why?"

He tapped the token once with a claw. "It makes work... quiet. Mistakes vanish. Lessons too." He frowned, searching for the words. "Good for finish. Bad for learning. Bad for knowing where edge was."

Shardra nodded slowly. That made sense to her. "You'd rather feel the cut," she said.

"Yes." He glanced up at her. "You too."

She almost smiled.

They sat in silence for a moment, the river moving steadily beyond them.

"The forge could use it," Shardra said eventually. Not a question.

Eeyagoo nodded immediately. "Yes. There... it belongs." He gestured vaguely southward, toward Voolnishart, toward heat and stone and people who had never once asked more than they should.

"They do hard work," he went on. "Real hard. When craft must be right. When fail costs... much." He hesitated, then added, quieter, "They know when not to use it."

Shardra looked at the token again, seeing it now not as power, but as restraint made tangible. "And it keeps eyes off us," she said.

Eeyagoo's mouth twitched. "Yes. Many eyes. Bad eyes. Forge buys, forge trades. We stay... background."

"The forge is our anchor," she said.

"Our tether," he agreed. "They do not drift."

Shardra reached out and slid the token toward him. "Then write to them."

He picked it up carefully, as if it might bruise if mishandled. "I will write to Sniksnik," he said. "In kobold."

She raised an eyebrow.

"My Common..." He made a face. "Edges wrong. Meanings slip."

Shardra huffed a quiet laugh. "Fair."

Eeyagoo stood, already resolved. "This thing is about trust," he said. "So words must be clean."

Letter Sent to Kraggenkor Forge

To Sniksnik, Stone-Cutter, Edge-Keeper, Friend,

I send this by trusted hands, and with it, the small bone-and-brass token we discussed.

This is not a charm of strength or speed. It does not make poor work good, nor careless hands steady. It only ensures that when work is done well, barely, at the limit of tolerance, it remains clean and does not unravel

later. Because of this, its value depends entirely on who uses it. To some, it will do nothing. To masters, it may preserve days or months of effort.

I do not wish to carry it. I prefer to know where my failures lie. But I trust you, and I trust the forge. Please use it only when the work demands perfection, and the cost of error is too high to accept. Do not let it become a habit. Let it be a tool taken down only when truly needed.

We offer this not as payment, nor as a favor owed, but as friends who understand the worth of trust and discretion. The forge has always been our anchor in Voolnishart. That is not a small thing.

May your edges stay true, and your stone remember your hand.

Eeyagoo

Sniksnik Reads the Letter

Sniksnik read the letter twice. The first time, he read it as himself, a craftsman, a stone-cutter, someone who knew the feel of failure before it happened. He nodded once, slow, at the phrasing, at the care taken with the words, at the decision to write in proper kobold script rather than the clipped, serviceable Common Eeyagoo used when he must.

The second time, he read it as a keeper of the forge. That was when he stopped smiling.

He did not call anyone immediately. He set the letter aside, unwrapped the token, and placed it on the anvil, not to test it, not to invoke anything, but simply to see how it rested, how it belonged in the space. He left it there for a full day, watching how often his eyes drifted back to it while working on other things.

When he finally spoke of it, it was to Garbrik alone, and later to Kluvm. He did not describe it as magic. He called it a discipline, a thing that should not be used often, and never without consensus. His reaction was not excitement. It was respect, and a little fear of how easily it could be misused.

That reaction mattered.

A lost soul along the road.

It was around this time that the first survivor of a palehive attack was discovered. They found him at dawn, where the trade road bends south, and the wind carries the cold out of the hills. He was small for the cloak he wore, boots worn thin, one lace gone. Ten or eleven, no more. He had run until the skin of his feet split and bled into the leather, and then farther still. When the watch lifted him, he did not wake so much as break apart, breath rasping, hands clutching at nothing, lips cracked and white. They gave him water by drops, and a heel of bread softened with broth, but he swallowed without knowing why.

He spoke when the shaking eased. Not in a story, not in order. He spoke as if chased still. "Eyes! Black eyes and teeth, black teeth, pale bloody faces. clicking and grinding white skin pale and oily! Blood everywhere. Blood on doors, on walls, on hands that would not come clean. All burning, Fire! Growling spikes chasing. Tired so tired...."

They kept him warm after he passed out. They washed the road dust from his legs and found the scratch then, no longer than a fingernail, just above the ankle. By dusk the skin around it had darkened and gone soft, weeping an amber film that stung the nose. By night it crept, spreading like a bruise that breathed. He cried then, not loud, not for long, eyes wide, fixed on something only he could see. They sent for a healer, but the runner was three villages away and the road was bad.

He died before midnight.

When they came for him he was still warm. The rot had climbed, blackening the veins like ink poured beneath the skin. His eyes were open. Not empty, afraid. They closed them with coins and a prayer spoken twice because the first time would not stay. No one knew his name. They buried him by the road where he had fallen, and after, the watch burned their clothes and scrubbed their hands raw. For days, the bend in the road smelled faintly of oil and smoke, and no one went north without looking back. After a week, a foul patch of inky black and gray mushrooms and ferns grew from the grave. Orders came to burn it for 2 days with stacked wood like a pyre. They did, it left a scar on the side of the road.

Harker learns his Plans Fate

Harker read the third account in silence.

Not the silence of calm, of pressure.

The parchment trembled slightly between his fingers as he set it down atop the other two. Different hands. Different routes back from **Papal**. Different accents, even. And yet the same shape to the tale, like three cuts made by the same blade.

Heaug was dead.

Not routed. Not driven off. Not bought, bribed, or betrayed.

Dead.

Eleven to three, the stories said. Nine bodies cooling in the dust and scrub, three still breathing, and those three *victors*. A tried and true hunter was brought low. An ambush laid by competent mercenaries turned, shattered, and fed back upon itself. And at the center of it all: *them*.

The giantess.

The kobold.

The small thing with them.

Harker exhaled through his nose, slow and measured, the way a man did when restraining the urge to throw something expensive across the room.

“Heaug doesn’t lose,” he said softly, to no one. “Perhaps the tales spoke too highly of him.”

And yet.

The reports were too aligned to dismiss. Not rumor. Not tavern embroidery. The details were wrong in the *same places*, which meant they were true where it mattered. Heaug had pressed too hard. Had trusted his strength, his reputation, his blade. He had underestimated the way the party fought, not as heroes, not as duelists, but as a closed fist.

Harker’s jaw tightened.

A failed gambit was tolerable. A costly one, irritating. But this, this was *public*. Papal would talk. Merchants already whispered of the plains being “unsafe again.” Trade did not like uncertainty. Trade *remembered* names.

And his name was now tied, however obliquely, to a corpse.

He rose and paced, hands clasped behind his back, boots whispering over polished stone.

Push harder? Send more steel south? Try again for the prizes?

The **Barrier Sword**.

The axe, *Rimeheart*, they were calling it now, as if naming it made it less terrifying.

The satchel, quiet, underestimated, *dangerous*.

All three were worth fortunes. All three could reshape leverage in the east.

But the north was stirring. Too many delays. Too many closed passes. Guild complaints stacking like unpaid debts. His precious arteries of trade were beginning to constrict, and if they failed,

No. He could not abandon either front.

Harker smiled thinly, the expression of a man who had already decided to make a mistake and resented the world for forcing his hand.

“I don’t retreat,” he murmured. “I *reallocate*.”

He would protect what he had. Lock down routes. Buy silence. Apply pressure where it bent easiest.

And he would reach again, more carefully, more indirectly, for what he had failed to take.

Different agents. Longer knives. No names that could be traced back to him.

Yes.

Both.

The thought steadied him... until another, less welcome image intruded: the giantess, close enough that height no longer mattered. Eyes level. Axe humming with cold intent. The sort of meeting that did not end in negotiation.

Harker’s smile faded.

Ego bruised or not, he would not look away.

If fate insisted on placing him on a collision course with **Shardra**, then so be it.

But next time, he would make certain the cost was shared.

Harker read reports from his agents late into the night.

Not because the reports were unclear, on the contrary, they were disturbingly consistent, but because the *shape* of the story refused to settle. Each account added weight without adding certainty, like stones placed carefully atop an already cracked foundation.

The group had become... *known*.

Not famous in the grand sense, not sung yet, but spoken of with a familiarity that suggested permanence. Names were not always shared, but descriptions were unmistakable. A towering giantess with frost in her wake. A sharp-eyed kobold with too many knives and too much curiosity. A small dragon-shaped thing that watched everything. Sometimes there was mention of a fourth, something that *wasn’t* always one thing, but that detail varied enough to be set aside for now.

What mattered was that people trusted them.

And that complicated everything.

CIRKSHER , “The Town That Should Have Fallen”

Cirksher’s accounts were the costliest to extract and the least embellished.

The town still carried grief openly. The story was not told for coin so much as for the need to *say it out loud*. The plague, the desperate measures, the woman who burned herself hollow to hold back death for one more night. The chain. The hooks. The arrow fired by an old man who remembered being young for just long enough.

The group was not cast as saviors.

They were witnesses who stayed.

That distinction mattered. Cirksher spoke of them with quiet gratitude, the sort that hardened into loyalty. Harker's agents noted that questions about motives were gently deflected. No one accused. No one probed.

Which meant *someone* had taught the town to be careful.

THE PLAINS , “The Beast That Should Not Have Been Seen”

Every retelling of the plains-beast ambush aligned on one point: there was **no warning**.

Hunters described a predator that bypassed instinct, vigilance, even trained alertness. The beast struck the giantess first, *hard enough to fell her*, and still died.

That detail unsettled Harker more than the victory itself.

The creature was spoken of with fear. The giantess, with respect. The kobold, with something closer to unease

Agents marked this as a pattern.

PAPAL , FIRST SEASON & RETURN

Papal had known them once.

Now it knew them *again*.

The first season painted them as dangerous passersby. The second cast them as trusted presences. The change was abrupt and unanimous. Merchants spoke freely in their hearing. Guards relaxed. Doors opened.

Too much.

Harker's listeners reported that careful inquiry caused conversations to *end*, not sour. Smiles remained. Hospitality continued. But details dried up.

No one was protecting the group openly.

They were protecting *themselves* by not knowing too much.

THE INKLING INCIDENT

Descriptions varied wildly, shadow, eyes, tentacles, smoke, ink, god, demon, but every account placed the group between Papal and annihilation.

Crucially:

No one could say *how* it was defeated.

Only that it was *gone*.

The absence of specifics made this more dangerous, not less.

ANKHEGS, THE WAGON, AND THE ROAD

Caravan reports filled in the margins.

Ankheg infestations cleared with brutal efficiency.

HEAUG'S GRAVE

This reached Harker last, and it confirmed everything that had come before.

The grave existed.

Marked simply. Burnt bones stacked beneath fire-charred armor. His skull sits atop it all as a testament to his end. No boasting. No trophy taken. The locals spoke of **Heaug** with respect even in death, and of his killers with the same tone.

That should not have been possible.

Direct action was ill advised. The reports were unanimous on that point. The giantess, Shardra, was visibly weakened at times, her movements slower, her bearing heavy with melancholy, but the conclusion never changed. It did not matter. Even diminished, she remained beyond the capacity of any assets currently available, especially when paired with Eeyagoo and the creature called Mimi. No combination of hired steel promised an acceptable outcome.

Eavesdropping had proven equally ineffective. The group was alert even within town walls, far too alert for comfort. Listeners were noticed, not confronted, simply seen, and that alone was enough to sour the effort. Every attempt at proximity drove costs higher, not only in coin but in risk. The sense was clear that further attempts would be detected even faster.

Supply disruption was confirmed and already measurable. The kobold's foraging and persistent meddling had reduced the availability of several valuable herbs and reagents along secondary routes. Merchants complained of missed deliveries and uncertain sourcing. Prices were already fluctuating, and margins would follow. It was not sabotage in the traditional sense, but the effect was no less damaging.

As for the artifacts, there was still no reliable information on the sword. None at all. The axe and the satchel remained in the group's possession, with no attempt made to sell, trade, or hide them. They were carried, used when needed, and otherwise kept close, as if their value was understood too well to be advertised.

Harker set the last page down and stared at the table beneath it.

This would cost dearly. Coin to loosen tongues. Coin to protect those tongues afterward. Coin to ensure that even observing the group did not provoke a response. And still, success was uncertain. The numbers did not settle cleanly. The risks refused to be contained.

They were becoming something worse than enemies. They were becoming untouchable.

For the first time since building his empire, Harker felt the unfamiliar weight of doubt settle alongside his calculations. Was it worth it?

He did not yet know.

And that uncertainty, more than any blade or beast or giantess, unsettled him most of all.

In Smugglers cove, far off the coast of Mithrin.

Asmith laughed once, softly, almost indulgently, and the room went still around him.

"No," he said before anyone could offer a suggestion. The word was calm, final. "We don't touch them."

His gaze moved slowly around the table, not accusatory, merely weighing the intelligence already present, measuring how much of it his people truly understood. “You listen,” he continued. “You remember. And you do nothing else.”

One of the men drew breath to ask why. Asmith raised a single finger, not sharply, not in warning, but with the casual authority of someone long accustomed to being obeyed. The question died unfinished.

“Some powers announce themselves,” Asmith said, folding his hands loosely before him. “Some arrive quietly and let others make the noise.”

He leaned forward just enough to signal interest without urgency. “If they return, they pass clean. No interaction. No interest. They are not the problem.”

A pause followed, thin, deliberate.

“Harker’s people, however,” he went on, settling back into his chair, “you watch. Closely. Observe how they react to losing control of a story they believed they owned. Men reveal far more in panic than they ever do in confidence.”

He allowed himself a faint breath of amusement before adding, voice mild and conclusive, “And until we understand what those travelers truly are, we proceed as though the answer would make us regret acting too soon.” And so he waited for the reports to come in. When they began to arrive he read the reports alone.

That choice, more than any annotation or seal, marked their importance.

The packet was thin, too thin for the weight of disruption it described, but dense with careful phrasing and disciplined omission. Harker’s agents were competent. That, in Asmith’s experience, made their failure far more instructive than incompetence ever could.

He read once without pausing. Then again, slower.

Cirksher came first. The tone there had changed. Not fear, fear burned hot and fast, but something heavier. A sense of weight. The sort that settled into stone and memory and refused to be scrubbed away. The reports disagreed on particulars, which pleased him. Truth, when filtered through enough mouths, always arrived fractured. What mattered was that the fractures aligned.

A creature that should not have been there. A town that endured when it should not have. Aid rendered by those who neither lingered nor claimed credit.

Heroes who refused the shape.

Asmith’s fingers tapped once against the tabletop, an unconscious punctuation, and moved on.

The report from Papal followed. Unknown trouble resurfacing rather than repeating. Something that appeared and was delt with, there they had taken root: respect, and with it trust. Dangerous soil. When people stopped asking questions, they stopped noticing when the answers subtly changed. The agents noted it as a complication. Asmith marked it as a liability, one that would not break easily.

Then the margins tightened.

To the northwest: herds disrupted, trade paths altered, caravans rerouting not for profit but instinct. Hunters spoke of silence where there should have been sound. Too many small signs, all pointing the same way without ever quite touching. Something was moving. Not like an army. Not like a beast.

To the northeast: shortages. Specific ones. Herbs. Reagents. Minor goods that never mattered, until suddenly they did. Supply interference traced, cautiously and almost reluctantly, back to a kobold acting with intent rather than desperation. Materials were being sent where they were needed without contract or demand.

Traveling mercantile wagons were sourcing from Papal now, bypassing Harker's established suppliers entirely.

That detail lingered.

The kobold. Eeyagoo or the Mouseknife, Asmith chuckled a bit at that nomenclature. Everything pointed to the Kobold, as being by far the more dangerous tactically of the group. The giantess was, predictable in her way but the kobold, he adapted and changed in all the stories. Dismissing him would be a fatal error.

He planned. Perhaps even schemed, but if it was a con, Asmith could not yet see the shape of it. This was not theft for survival. This was disruption designed to *reshape outcomes*.

Asmith exhaled slowly through his nose and turned the page.

Harker's agents were growing impatient. Coin expenditures were rising. Informants were being leaned on harder. The language of the reports sharpened, becoming less observational and more defensive, the tone of men who had lost the thread and feared admitting it.

Good.

Very good.

Asmith set the papers aside and leaned back, eyes unfocused as towns and creatures dissolved into something more abstract. Avenues. Vectors. Trade points. The north itself mattered little to his immediate operations, but Harker was deeply invested there, and investment bred desperation.

Northwest uncertainty. Northeast instability. Coincidence, perhaps. Or a single unseen hand applying pressure with remarkable restraint.

Not reckless. Not loud. And worse, unseen. Asmith laughed again, quietly, without humor.

"So," he murmured to the empty room, "they are not the chaos."

That changed everything. He gathered the reports, squared their edges, and slid them into a separate drawer, not with assets, not with threats, but with matters that required patience. Orders would come. Not yet. For now, it was enough to know this: Harker was flailing. The north was shifting. And someone, some group, was walking through it all, leaving problems solved and balances unsettled behind them.

Asmith smiled thinly. "Let him pull harder," he said softly. "Let's see what snaps first."

Silent investigation followed. Quiet. Discreet. When Asmith returned to the reports, it was not from curiosity but selection. Most of it he had already weighed and set aside. Movements. Creatures. Border uncertainty. Important, certainly, but diffuse. Slow problems.

This was neither. The kobold again. He reread that section, ignoring the tavern tales and heroics, focusing instead on the accounting buried beneath the prose. Prices. Availability. Names appeared twice where once they had appeared only once.

Papal had shifted the axis.

What had once been a fringe trade in rare herbs, dangerous, unreliable, scarcely worth formal notice, had been stabilized. Protected. Grown rather than scavenged. The kobold had accomplished something merchants rarely managed and nobles almost never understood: he had created *continuity* where there had only been risk.

Something unaccounted for was at work. These herbs did not flourish even under ideal conditions. Yet here they were. All signs pointed back to an unassuming little kobold and a quiet greenhouse.

That made him dangerous.

“Harker will hate this,” Asmith murmured, and meant it as praise.

The reports confirmed it. Irritation was spreading among Harker’s people, contained, but unmistakable. Margins tightening. Exclusivity eroding. Buyers asking questions they had never learned to ask before. A new hub had entered the market.

Not large. Not loud. But clean, consistent and rare, Asmith knew, were only useful if touched lightly.

He reached for a blank order slip. “Send a shipment,” he dictated evenly. “Rare seeds only. Include a few of the rarest, sparingly. No identification. No explanation. No finished stock. Route it anonymously. Three hands. None of them mine.”

The aide hesitated. “Destination?”

Asmith did not look up. “Kellie Nalg’s greenhouse. Care of Eeyagoo.”

A pause.

“Gift,” Asmith added. “Not charity. No mark. Just enough to expand capacity and complicate accounting. I want to see what he can do, and how Harker will respond.”

The aide frowned. “That will cost,”

“Very little in the grand scheme, we already have the items,” Asmith said gently. “And it will irritate Harker far more than it enriches them.”

He finally looked up, eyes bright with quiet amusement. “Harker understands hoarding. He understands scarcity. What he cannot tolerate is someone improving the ground beneath him without asking.”

The order was written. The decision made.

“A slight cost,” Asmith said fondly to the empty room, “for a very educational gain.”

The seeds arrived in Papal without herald or explanation.

Asmith’s hand was nowhere on the invoice, only an address written in a precise, unfamiliar script. Eeyagoo studied it carefully, cross-checking each seed against his own ledgers. Several made him pause. Some were rare. Some were *wrong*, plants he knew only from marginal notes, expedition journals, or hearsay from men who never returned.

He wrote first to Sniksnik.

The reply came swiftly and carried no answers. Sniksnik did not recognize the source, nor could he account for how such seeds had been obtained. His confusion was genuine, and that troubled Eeyagoo more than ignorance should have.

Next came a letter to Elith, keeper of the Verdant Menagerie.

Elith, too, knew nothing of them, but his response carried a barely restrained urgency. Whatever these seeds were, their potential was undeniable. If they could be coaxed into life, they would change more than a single greenhouse.

Eeyagoo chose caution.

One seed of each variety was planted, no more, set into the fast-growing soil reserved for trials and mistakes. He watched them closely, recorded everything, slept little. What emerged over the following days defied expectation. Over weeks, it defied precedent.

Growth patterns were logged. Sap, leaf, and bud were tested. He cataloged tirelessly, cross-referencing his own books, old Mithrin trade records, and the fragmented wisdom of local herbalists. Elith visited often. Together they argued, corrected, and refined until each plant was named, classified, and codified.

A second wonder

One stood above all others.

A **Lestagii** variant, its buds dense with restorative potency. Not merely a healer's herb, but the finest restorative ever documented. Reliable. Potent. Scalable. A golden goose, quietly rooted in Papal soil. And it could be grown again. It alone could save hundreds of lives in a season, Eeyagoo had to wonder, who sent it? And why remain secret? Inquiries about the plant were met with blank stares, confusion and denial. No one had ever seen this type before, nor even heard of it. No this was a mystery. Eeyagoo hated unknowns.

True to his nature, He saved seeds. Not just of the Lestagii, but of *everything*. Carefully dried, sealed, and logged. Redundancy was not paranoia, it was survival. As the plants matured and were harvested dried and prepared and distributed to the peoples of Papal, then excess was packaged for shipment or sale. All the while Eeyagoo picked the finest seeds and sprouts to plant again.

In time, that small, instinctive act would prove almost prophetic.

The greenhouse grew layered, positions were adjusted, beds added and moved, determining the best conditions for each type was an exhausting chore which he enjoyed immensely. Mimi constantly patrolled the tight rows, watching for anything that might enter what she seemed to have claimed as her domain. Kellic, often walked within the greenhouse, eyes wide with joy and pride. He talked to Mimi, more than anyone other than Eeyagoo ever did, he just treated her like a person, even if she didn't talk back much or make much sense, he seemed to understand that she knew what he meant.

News of the sudden influx spread quickly, and it *vexed Harker immensely*.

What should have been impossible became undeniable: a fringe community, one he had long written off as irrelevant, was flooding the market with herbs of staggering rarity, quality and reliability. Worse, every attempt he made to seize control failed. Intermediaries were ignored. Agents were politely dismissed. Contracts were neither negotiated nor entertained.

They did not bargain.

They did not hoard.

They supplied *where needed*.

Without his cut. Without his influence. Without his **control**.

The price alone was an affront. The Papal herbs sold for far less than half of what Harker charged, collapsing his margins overnight. Plus they had supplies of Lestagii buds!? How was that even possible. His once-dominant share of the restorative market dwindled to nearly nothing in the span of two months. What profit remained bled away as healers, apothecaries, and caravan master's quietly adjusted their loyalties.

Then came the final humiliation.

The Mithrin Council, acting in concert with Papal's local officials, secured a formal allotment, small reserves of healing and therapeutic herbs set aside for the nation's armies. Not for commerce. Not for speculation. For *desperate times*. Precisely the kind of arrangement Harker had spent decades positioning himself to control.

He lost a fortune. And he blamed Eeyagoo. He had to determine how the little monster was doing it, what magic did he have that Harker could wrest from his control or turn to his own ends.

Desperation followed. He attempted replication, pouring coin and pressure into rival greenhouses. When that failed, he leaned harder, strong-arming Elith of the Verdant Menagerie for information. It availed him nothing. The horticulturalist was... odd. Calm. Almost amused. Entirely unfazed by coercion. His enforcers, however, vowed never to go to that building again, there was something dangerous there something they could not explain but felt in their bones.

Worse still, that failure did not remain quiet.

Papal noticed.

Harker's direct interest, his *need*, became visible, and with it the first stirrings of suspicion. Questions were asked. Doors closed. Friendly neutrality hardened into watchfulness.

Furious, humiliated, and bleeding coin, Harker did something foolish.

Something rash.

He gave the order to burn the greenhouse the moment the party left town, *for any reason*.

The loss came to Papal

Not as rumor, but as smoke. By dawn the greenhouse was gone, glass collapsed inward, timber blackened and warped, the fertile beds reduced to choking ash. What had been a place of careful tending and quiet promise was now a scar, and the town gathered in stunned silence, not to count coin lost, but to measure *what might never return*.

Kellic Nalg died there. The farmer who offered his greenhouse and over the months had made friends of Mimi, Eeyagoo and Elith.

He had been no merchant, no schemer, only an old man who had lent Eeyagoo his land, his labor, and his trust. A friend, in the simple way that grows between those who work the soil side by side. He was caught by the alchemical fire when it bloomed too fast, too hot, and too bright, trapped by violence never meant for him. Papal mourned him openly. Doors were left unbarred that night. Candles burned in windows. No one spoke of profit.

Eeyagoo did not weep.

Fury like none he had ever known hollowed him out and filled the space in equal measure. It sat in his chest, cold and heavy, and for the first time he wanted more than safety, more than preparation. He would find who had done this, and they would regret every moment of breath they were allowed until the end. Mimi, ah, she didn't understand, she had never lost someone and kept looking for him in the areas he walked when not with her in the greenhouse. It nearly broke Eeyagoo when she perched on his shoulder and asked plaintively, "Kellic?" He tried to explain but she kept looking in off times and asking, each time a blow to his heart.

He had always been a provider, a planner. He believed in having what was needed *before* it was demanded, in abundance without spectacle. He had dismissed the offers and the deals not from ignorance, but from intent. Papal did not need masters, only means. That was all he had ever sought: to help his adopted home endure.

Harker called it a lack of acumen.

Several weeks later, the lesson came due.

When the party left town to gather and hunt, Harker's men moved quickly and stupidly. A single alchemical fire flask was enough. Hurlled through glass, it bloomed into ruin. In their haste, they failed to ensure the greenhouse was empty.

The town paid the price.

And Papal learned, in flame and ash, that greed does not need to understand what it destroys, only that it cannot control it.

The town mourned, and Eeyagoo planned.

Asmith did not rise when the first word arrived. He did not summon anyone or demand clarification. He read the report one-handed, wine cradled in the other, the deep red catching lamplight as events unfolded exactly as he had expected.

Papal had broken.

Not shattered, that would have been clean. This was worse. Confusion. Overreach. A heavy hand where a light touch had once sufficed. Harker's people pressing too hard in a town that remembered who had stood with them when it mattered.

Asmith took a long drink. "As predictable as it is foolish," he said, smiling.

He could see it clearly: tightening faces, hurried meetings, frantic recalculations as coin ceased to smooth suspicion and instead drew it. Harker had mistaken silence for compliance, patience for fear.

A common error.

"Begin outreach," Asmith said calmly.

His people straightened.

"Legitimate only. No pressure. No threats. No haste. You are not predators, you are alternatives."

Names were already being written. Partners. Distributors. Shell firms whose loyalty had always been transactional.

"Approach those with exposure," Asmith instructed. "Offer distance. New contracts. New routes. Let them leave with their dignity intact."

That mattered. Humiliation bred resistance. Asmith offered exits that felt like choices.

"Harker will try to hold," he went on mildly. "He always does. He will promise stability. Restoration. He will speak of weathering storms."

Asmith lifted his glass. "But storms don't negotiate."

"Piece by piece," he said softly, "we take what still breathes. The rest will die on its own."

He paused, then added, almost as an afterthought, "Send riders north. Just to see. Competent, not exceptional. No risk. No investment."

He finished his wine. "Go. Time is a commodity. Keep margins fair, *in our favor*. This is a turning point."

And as his people moved, the sound of Harker's empire beginning to fracture carried pleasantly through the silence.

Back in Papal.

Elith arrived in Papal on the second evening after the fire. He had ridden harder than was sensible for a man of his years. The message that found him in Voolnishart had been brief, confused, and utterly devoid of details: the greenhouse destroyed, Kellic dead, fire. Nothing more.

From the final rise overlooking town, he saw the ruin immediately. Even at a distance the blackened scar stood out against the green. Collapsed beams jutted from the earth. Shattered glass glittered among the ashes. What had once been a place of growth and promise was now little more than a burnt skeleton. His stomach sank.

Less than a year.

Less than a single year, and yet he had never seen anything quite like what Eeyagoo had built. What began as a grieving kobold searching for purpose while wounds healed had become something extraordinary. Every visit had revealed another surprise, another experiment, another impossible success. Strange plants no scholar could identify. Forgotten herbs thought lost to history. Species that should not have existed in one place thriving side by side beneath Kellic's glass. And above all else, the Lestagii.

His breath caught. Not again. Not another extinction.

He was moving before the wagon had fully stopped.

Eeyagoo saw him first. The kobold looked exhausted, soot-stained and hollow-eyed, carrying the weight of sleepless nights and fresh grief. Elith crossed the ruined ground without greeting or explanation.

"The Lestagii."

The words came out harsher than he intended.

Eeyagoo blinked. "What?"

"The Lestagii," Elith repeated, pointing toward the wreckage. "Tell me."

Understanding dawned across the kobold's face.

"Oh."

He gestured vaguely toward the town.

"Safe."

Elith froze. "Safe?"

"Seeds."

"What seeds?"

"All seeds."

The answer was delivered with complete sincerity, as though no other possibility had ever existed. Eeyagoo frowned at his confusion and elaborated.

"I save seeds. Best seeds. Dry. Store. Label. Backups." He paused briefly. "Backups for backups."

For several heartbeats Elith simply stared at him. Then a laugh escaped, sharp and sudden. Not because anything was amusing, but because the alternative was collapsing into the ashes beside the greenhouse.

Of course he had.

For two days Elith had mourned an extinction. For two days he had imagined the last living Lestagii consumed by fire before the species could truly return to the world. All the while the seeds had been sitting safely in storage because Eeyagoo could not imagine not preserving them. Relief struck him with enough force that he

had to steady himself. They could rebuild. The plants were not lost. The work was not lost. The future was not lost.

Then his eyes drifted beyond the ruins, and the relief dulled.

Mimi sat beside a rough marker driven into the earth. She was silent. No questions. No chatter. No half-understood observations delivered at the worst possible moments. No mimicry. Only grief.

And suddenly Elith remembered the other part of the message.

Kellic.

Plants could be replanted. Greenhouses rebuilt. Seeds coaxed once more from the soil. Old farmers did not return.

Kellic had never cared about rare herbs, botanical discoveries, or the immense value growing beneath his roof. He had simply seen a kobold trying to build something worthwhile and offered his land. No schemes. No contracts. No demands. Just simple kindness given freely. The sort of kindness that quietly changed lives.

Now he was gone.

Nearby, Shardra stood with her arms folded across her chest, her expression carved from stone. She had not loved Kellic as Eeyagoo and Mimi had, yet the act itself offended her in a way Elith could almost feel. There had been no challenge, no courage, no honor in it. No warrior's risk. Only a wealthy coward destroying the work of others because he could not control it. The giantess looked ready to tear the world apart with her bare hands.

For perhaps the first time in his long life, Elith found himself understanding the impulse.

His gaze returned to the ruins. The plants had survived because Eeyagoo planned for disaster. Because he had assumed success was fragile. Because he had prepared for failure before anyone else had even considered the possibility of success.

Next time there might be no Eeyagoo.

Next time the fire might reach the seeds.

The thought lingered long after the conversation ended. It followed him through the rebuilding, through the long months that came after, through every greenhouse and every precious specimen placed into the soil.

Years later, when people asked where the idea for Jack had come from, Elith rarely answered. Most assumed the guardian was the result of experimentation, inspiration, or some new botanical breakthrough.

The truth was far simpler.

Jack was born in the ashes of Papal, on an evening when an old elf looked upon the ruin of something beautiful and realized that gardens, like people, sometimes needed teeth.

A hardness entered Elith's manner after the fire that destroyed so much of the town and the *lestagii* plant. The cinderheart lived thanks to its new place in the park had it been lost he would not have been able to bear it.

Eeyagoo moved through Papal quietly, speaking to people one by one, not as a leader, issuing commands but as a neighbor asking for help. He told them not to fear for the crops, not to grieve what could be replanted.

What mattered now were *details*. A stranger seen too long in the square. A cart that left at the wrong hour. A voice that did not belong. Anything, however small, that might point toward the hand that had thrown the fire.

Shardra took a different path.

She stood in the open streets, vast and unyielding, and questioned every face she did not recognize. There was no subtlety in it. Her size, her stillness, and the barely contained anger behind her eyes did the work for her. People spoke quickly. They spoke eagerly. And without realizing it, they revealed more in what they *didn't* say, names omitted, figures glossed over, claims of ignorance that rang hollow when laid beside one another.

By the second night, the shape of the silence was clearer than any confession.

On the third morning, a letter arrived.

No seal. No signature. Just a single line, written with deliberate care:

Look to the king of greed.

No one needed to ask who that was.

Harker's shadow reached farther than his name ever needed to. The word passed through the group without debate, without doubt. What had begun as mourning hardened into resolve. This had not been an accident. It had been a message, and messages demanded answers.

They left for Voolnishart before the ashes were cold.

There was fury in their eyes, and blood on their minds.

Harker did not sleep.

The results of his order sat with him like a stone in the gut, heavy, unmoving, impossible to ignore. The agents had to be gone, removed from anywhere they might be pressed for questions or recognized by the wrong eyes. Loose ends were dangerous things, and danger invited scrutiny. He needed quiet. Time. Control.

None of which he truly had.

The storm was already moving toward him, a thing he himself had called into being, and he did not yet know how to meet it without drawing far too much attention. Coin could silence many problems, but not this one, not cleanly. The mistake had not been the fire. Fires could be explained away, misattributed, forgotten. The mistake was that a farmer had died. An unimportant man, by any accounting that mattered to trade or power, but a man known, liked, and mourned. Death had given the act weight, and weight drew eyes.

His men had failed him.

Whether through haste, stupidity, or fear, they had broken the one rule that mattered: *no witnesses, no martyrs*. Now Harker was left to manage the consequences. Those involved were quietly reassigned, placed aboard outbound ships under false duties and thinner names, sent to distant ports to serve until the matter was resolved, or buried beneath newer troubles. It cost him dearly, but coin was preferable to exposure.

Still, the doubt lingered.

For the first time in years, Harker questioned not the world, but himself. He hated the sensation, the uncertainty, the gnawing fear that his reach had finally brushed against something that did not bend. He had always believed greed was universal, predictable, easily leveraged.

Now he wondered if he had mistaken restraint for weakness.

And that doubt, more than the loss of gold or the failure of subordinates, was what truly unsettled him.

They spoke little as they took the southern road, but what words there had come easy, quiet things, almost normal ones. Shardra remarked on the weather, how the wind had shifted overnight. Someone joked about road dust finding its way into every seam of armor no matter how well-made. It was the kind of small talk

travelers shared to remind themselves they were still people, not weapons being carried toward a target. Even Eeyagoo participated, though his voice was rough, clipped, his thoughts clearly elsewhere. Mimi remained silent, sullen, saddened.

The talk did not stay light for long.

They discussed *how*, not *if*. How to confront a man like Harker without letting him twist the moment. How to avoid being swallowed by his web of coin, contracts, and bought silence. Shardra favored directness, breaking through the problem the way she broke through shields. Eeyagoo counseled restraint, not mercy, but precision. Justice mattered. It had to be seen. It had to *hold*. This was out of character for them, all of it, leaving a trail unfinished, turning from the wilderness toward a city of stone and law, but the fire in Papal had changed something fundamental.

Need had already reached Voolnishart.

None of them knew how, only that the city had begun to whisper before their boots crossed the last ridge. Somewhere within its alleys and counting houses, information had moved faster than horses. The truth was already loose: Harker's name tied to arson, to murder, to TREASON to a dead farmer whose only crime had been standing too close to hope. And the final, damning detail, where the agent responsible had fled.

Delagrاند.

A western Auris port, distant enough to feel safe. It wasn't.

The man was taken without drama. The Knights of the Seven Pillars caught him as he disembarked, confused, sunburned, and still carrying coin meant to buy silence. He broke quickly. Names spilled. Orders were confirmed. The chain led back where everyone expected it would.

When word reached Harker, it landed like a blade between the ribs.

Beginning of the end

Elsewhere, a vellum letter crossed a desk.

Captain Alder Manse broke the seal carefully. The wax bore the mark of the Ghostwidow, no embellishment, no threat, just certainty. The message was concise and unsettling: a storm was coming, and its name was Eeyagoo. The law demanded that what followed not end as the kobold and the giantess surely intended. Blood in the streets would serve no one. But perhaps, *perhaps*, this did not need to become open conflict.

Alder moved fast.

Orders went out. Warrants were drawn. Special permissions were rushed through halls where clerks knew better than to ask questions, all while carefully avoiding Harker's eyes and ears. Guards were reassigned under mundane pretenses. Doors were quietly closed to the trader king's influence.

By the time the party reached Voolnishart's northern gate, Alder Manse was already there, flanked by seasoned guards whose hands rested easily near their weapons, but did not reach for them.

Shardra tensed anyway.

She was ready. Ready to break ranks, to tear through steel and stone alike. But no threat came.

"We are going to arrest Harker," Alder said plainly. "Would you care to assist?"

"Rather cut throat," Eeyagoo replied, his voice low, scraped raw by days of fury. He looked up at Shardra. She nodded once.

"But not here to break laws," he continued. "Want justice."

Alder studied the small kobold for a long moment, then inclined his head. “Indeed,” he said. “Let’s hope he puts up a fight.”

Eeyagoo grinned. Shardra’s smile was wider.

Behind them, Mimi tilted her head and said, perfectly, in Alder’s own voice, “Stitches.”

The guards exchanged uneasy looks.

“Stitches,” Shardra echoed, stepping forward toward the towering manse of the trader king. “Let’s hope he needs some.”

When the Trade King Fell

They moved as one through the streets, boots striking stone in a steady, deliberate cadence that carried farther than the sound itself. The city noticed. Shopkeepers paused mid-count, fingers hovering over coin. Dockhands leaned on hooks and ropes, watching with narrow eyes. Faces parted the crowd ahead of them, some pale with dread, others lit with fierce, unhidden satisfaction. Word traveled faster than footsteps ever could. People knew where Alder Manse walked with a full detachment and a council writ burning in his grasp. Some prayed justice would finally be done. Others feared what kind of reckoning might crack loose if it was.

The wealthy district rose before them like a monument to excess white stone scrubbed too clean, gardens trimmed to submission, fountains murmuring as if the city itself were trying to hush what was coming. At the highest hill squatted the Trade King’s mansion, vast, gaudy, and defiant, its gold-leaf accents catching the sun like a challenge. As they approached, a single figure stepped into the road ahead of them, smooth as a rehearsed gesture.

Geril, elderly, well-dressed, and perpetually smug in the way of men who confuse proximity to power with power itself, cleared his throat. His voice, thin but practiced, carried just far enough. He began to recite, hands trembling only slightly, something about *per the authority of Magistrate Julikess*, invoking statutes and provisional stays with the breathless confidence of a man who had never once been ignored.

Alder cut him off mid-sentence.

“Not this time, Geril.” His voice was low, rough, and utterly final. “The writ is from the council as a whole. Your order is overruled.”

He snatched the vellum from Geril’s hands and crushed it in one gauntleted fist, the parchment tearing with a soft, pitiful sound. Alder leaned in just enough that Geril could smell oil and steel. “As much as I’d love to arrest you, stand aside. We’re here for your employer. Move, or link your fate with his.”

The color fled Geril’s face as if pulled out by a tide. He swallowed, nodded too quickly, and stepped aside with all the haste dignity would allow, suddenly very interested in the safety of the curb beneath his feet.

The guards at the outer gate proved stouter, at least in posture. They barred the way with crossed halberds, jaws tight, eyes flicking between Alder’s men and the towering giantess behind him. Steel stayed sheathed, but only just. When pressed, they claimed they could not open the gates without authorization.

Shardra laughed.

It was not cruel, but it was unmistakably delighted.

“Let me,” she said, stepping forward as though invited. Her axe came up in a smooth, casual arc and drove straight through the latch. Metal shrieked, split, and burst apart. Frost raced across the shattered iron, crawling like living veins, and a pale haze spilled down into the heat of the day, hissing softly as it faded.

Alder chuckled despite himself. A few of the soldiers did too, nervous relief bleeding into the sound. Windows flew open up and down the hill as onlookers craned for a glimpse of the impossible, white stone, shattered iron, and a giantess smiling like she'd just opened a stubborn jar.

Shardra stepped aside then, sudden grace replacing brute force. She bowed, one arm sweeping inward in a formal, almost courtly gesture. An invitation. Alder shook his head once, amused despite the gravity, and led his men through the ruined gate.

Guards rushed toward the main entrance along the white stone path, boots scuffing, armor clattering, but they slowed as they saw what advanced toward them. They hesitated. They should have. They lacked the numbers, and more importantly, they lacked the will to stand against what walked up that path with purpose etched into every step. To fight meant death, they could see it plain.

Archers appeared on balconies and upper floors, crossbows cranked, bows drawn. Alder raised his golden trident, its polished tines catching the sun, and his voice boomed upward, carrying command and consequence in equal measure.

"We have a council writ for the arrest of Harker Villenci for TREASON against the nation as well as wanton acts. If you attack or impede us, your lives are forfeit. Think well before you lose an arrow against the will of the city."

Several archers went pale, hands loosening as the weight of those words sank in. Some lowered their weapons outright. Others stayed frozen in place, knuckles white, aim steady but uncertain.

"Lay down your arms," Alder continued, "and stand aside. Or suffer the consequences."

No arrow flew.

They moved forward. The guards at the entrance backed away as one, the threshold clearing without a word spoken. One unfortunate guardsman seemed to forget he still held his sword, Shardra flicked her axe, smashing the blade from his grip and sending it skittering across marble. He leapt back as if burned, staring at his empty hand.

Inside, the halls swallowed sound. Servants flattened themselves against walls, eyes wide, some fearful, some quietly, dangerously hopeful. Guards parted without orders, their expressions tight with something that looked uncomfortably like relief. Resistance hovered in the air, imagined but unrealized. None came.

They burst through the doors of Harker Villenci's personal office.

Harker looked up from his desk, annoyance already forming on his lips. Without standing, without urgency, he gestured to the man beside him. "Fire all the security immediately," he said, voice clipped, practiced.

Then he saw Shardra.

Then Eeyagoo.

The blood drained from his face so quickly it was almost comical.

"What," he shrieked, scrambling to his feet, "are they doing here?!?"

Harker Villenci stood very still behind his desk, one hand braced against its edge as if the polished wood were the only thing keeping him upright. The office that had once felt inviolable, warded, muffled, sealed against consequence, now seemed too large, too bright, its wealth suddenly garish and exposed. Gold filigree caught the light in ways that felt mocking. Every breath scraped.

Alder Manse stepped forward and stopped precisely three paces from the desk. He did not draw a weapon. He did not need to. His posture alone carried the weight of the city, broad shoulders squared, trident resting lightly in one hand, helm tucked beneath his arm like a judge's seal waiting to be struck.

“Harker Villenci,” Alder said, voice level and iron-hard, “by order of the Council of Voolnishart, you are placed under arrest for treson, conspiracy, obstruction of justice, arson, murder by proxy, and abuse of mercantile authority. You will come with us. Peacefully.”

Harker’s mouth opened. Closed. Opened again, this time with a practiced breath already drawn.

“This is, this is highly irregular,” he said quickly, words spilling into place like coins onto a counting table. “Captain Manse, surely you understand the danger of precedent here. Trade is delicate. Confidence is everything. If you drag a man of my standing through the streets on rumor, ”

“Evidence,” Alder corrected, without raising his voice.

Harker flinched, just a fraction. His eyes darted, measuring distances, angles, counting guards, exits, the giantess by the door. Shardra stood motionless, axe resting against her shoulder, her gaze fixed on him with a cold patience that promised violence without haste. She said nothing. She did not need to. The room seemed to lean away from her.

Eeyagoo, by contrast, leaned forward.

“You burned Kelllic,” the kobold snapped. “Paid fire. Paid lies. People dead.”

Harker recoiled as if struck. “You, ” He pointed, trembling. “You are not even a citizen! You are, this is exactly what I warned the council about. Vigilantes. Monsters masquerading as heroes!”

Shardra’s eye narrowed. The temperature in the room dipped, subtle but undeniable.

Eeyagoo took a step, claws flexing, and something stirred beneath his cloak. Mimi’s small form wriggled free, wings buzzing with a sharp, furious whine as she caught Harker’s scent. She launched herself forward in a flash of motion, teeth bared, stinger ready to end him.

“No,” Eeyagoo whispered urgently, catching her midair with both hands. She hissed, twisting, tiny claws scrabbling against his hands.

“Not now,” he murmured. “Not like this. He stand here. All see. Fall first.”

Mimi stilled, confused, eyes flicking between Eeyagoo and Harker. Slowly, reluctantly, she folded her wings and allowed herself to be tucked back against his chest, a low growl vibrating through her small frame.

Harker watched the exchange with naked horror.

“You see?” he said desperately, turning back to Alder. “This is exactly what I mean. Creatures. Uncontrolled. This is intimidation, Manse. You’re allowing intimidation.”

Alder finally moved closer. Each step echoed.

“You’re being arrested,” he said calmly. “Not debated. Not negotiated.”

Harker’s voice rose, silk fraying into panic. “I have enemies. Rivals. Do you have any idea how many people would benefit from my removal? This is a fabrication, an elegant one, I’ll grant you, but still a fabrication. I have contracts. Witnesses. I fund half the relief efforts in this city!”

“You fund death,” Eeyagoo spat. “Blood coin.”

“I funded infrastructure,” Harker shot back, then faltered as Alder raised a hand, not threatening, simply final.

“You will have the opportunity to make your case,” Alder said. “In court. If you can find an attorney willing to represent you.”

That landed harder than any blow.

Harker's breath hitched. His mind raced, desperate schemes blooming and dying in rapid succession. *They'll hesitate*, he told himself. *Someone always hesitates*. He imagined bribes whispered in holding cells, old favors called in, documents vanishing overnight. He imagined Julikess intervening. He imagined... something.

But Alder was already signaling his men.

The guards stepped forward, iron cuffs gleaming.

"No," Harker said, backing away until the desk pressed into his spine. "Captain, think. Think of the markets. Think of what this does to confidence. Drag me out like a common criminal and the city bleeds for it."

"The city's been bleeding for years," Alder replied. "You just made sure it wasn't you."

They took his arms.

Harker struggled then, not wildly, but with frantic dignity, twisting, protesting as they marched him down the halls he'd once ruled. Servants watched from doorways, some averting their eyes, others staring openly. A few smiled. One spat on the floor as he passed.

Outside, the sound hit him like a wave.

The street was packed.

Neighbors leaned from balconies, faces sharp with satisfaction. Dockworkers jeered. Former employees hurled curses. Merchants he had dined with, laughed with, crushed competitors beside, stood silent or sneering, their distance sudden and absolute.

"Murderer!"

"Burn with your ledgers!"

"Where's your gold now, Trade King?"

Harker's face burned hotter than any forge. Rage warred with terror, humiliation gnawing at him until his thoughts curdled.

They'll regret this, he swore silently. *Every last one of them. This isn't over. It can't be.*

Behind him, Shadra followed in silence, her presence a wall no one dared cross. Eeyagoo walked beside Alder, jaw tight, eyes never leaving Harker's hunched back.

And as the gates of the mansion fell away behind them, Harker Villenci, Trade King, powerbroker, untouchable, was swallowed by the city he thought he owned, reduced at last to a man in chains, his fall witnessed by all who had waited far too long to see it.

The Long Fall

Harker Villenci's first night in custody was nothing like the nights he had spent imagining captivity, as a distant abstraction reserved for lesser men. There were no velvet cushions, no muffled wards, no servants who knew when to avert their eyes. The cell was stone and iron, dry but unforgiving, the air cold in a way that crept rather than struck. A single lantern burned outside the bars, its light wavering just enough to make the shadows shift, never settling long enough for comfort.

They had taken his rings. His signet. Even the thin chain he wore beneath his shirt, "purely sentimental," he had protested, was gone. A fortune, tossed aside, enough to buy a mansion or a trade ship with a few of the

jewels alone. When the guards shut the door, the sound was final in a way no contract seal had ever been. The echo lingered longer than it should have.

Harker paced at first, long strides clipped short by the dimensions of the cell. He tested the walls with his hands, the bars with his fingers, searching for the familiar hum of layered defenses. There was nothing. No ward answered him. No hidden contingency flared. For the first time in decades, his power did not whisper back reassurance.

Temporary, he told himself. *This is temporary. Someone will intervene.*

Sleep refused him. When he finally slumped onto the narrow cot, he lay awake staring at the ceiling, replaying the arrest in obsessive detail. Alder's voice. The crowd's jeers. The way some faces had looked relieved. *Traitors*, he thought, jaw tight. *Ungrateful parasites*. He built schemes in his head, names to invoke, favors to call, threats to imply, only to watch them unravel as quickly as they formed. One by one, the supports he had relied on simply... weren't there. *Blackmail*, he thought, *I know so many secrets I can trade for freedom*. Yes, that was it, Blackmail.

By dawn, the city was already dissecting him.

In a secure chamber two levels above the holding cells, Alder Manse's investigators worked in silence broken only by the scratch of quills and the muted thump of ledgers being opened and closed. The confiscated books were stacked in careful order: trade manifests, shipping tallies, private account books bound in soft leather, letters sealed and resealed so many times the wax had darkened. At first glance, it all looked immaculate, precise columns, neat sums, margins filled with annotations in Harker's elegant hand.

Then they began to compare.

A grain shipment listed as lost at sea appeared again weeks later, sold through a proxy at a profit. Insurance claims matched to cargoes that had never been registered at the docks. Relief funds allocated to districts that, according to municipal records, had received nothing. Names repeated too often, always adjacent to disasters: fires, collapses, disappearances. Payments to shell companies that dissolved within days of receiving coin.

One clerk paused, frowning, then quietly slid a page toward another. "This signature," she murmured. "It's his... but not always."

Forgery layered atop forgery. False witnesses paid twice, once to speak, once to vanish. And beneath it all, a pattern began to emerge, unmistakable and damning: suffering followed profit like a shadow.

By midday, the charges had multiplied.

Conspiracy broadened into racketeering. Obstruction into systematic bribery. Arson into coordinated destruction of property for market manipulation. Murder by proxy expanded, names were added, dates aligned, bodies accounted for. Each discovery tightened the noose, each annotation another nail driven home with bureaucratic precision. But, his attack on a sanctioned, chartered and contracted military supplier of healing goods amounted to Treason, pure and simple. He would not wiggle off this hook, Alder thought, he smiled in his own manner. Years he had tried to catch this one, and finally he is squirming and won't get away.

When they brought Harker in for his first consultation, he still believed the worst was past.

His attorney, thin, exhausted, and visibly terrified of the room, sat across from him with a stack of papers that looked heavier than iron. He cleared his throat twice before speaking.

"They're moving quickly," the man said. "The council has authorized asset freezes pending trial."

Harker sneered. "Of course they have. That's standard. I expected nothing less."

The attorney hesitated.

"And... forfeiture," he continued carefully. "If convicted."

The word barely registered.

"Forfeiture?" Harker repeated. "You mean fines. Seizures. Negotiated settlements."

The attorney shook his head. "Total forfeiture, Lord Villenci. Properties. Accounts. Holdings. Trade charters. Everything. The Treason charge is the sticking point."

The silence that followed was not still, it was explosive.

"No," Harker said, "Treason!? what treason?" standing so abruptly the chair scraped backward. "No. That's not how this works. That wealth is *mine*. It's bound in law. In precedent. In blood, if necessary!"

"They cite the greenhouse as a contracted supplier to the military hence a vital asset of the nation," the attorney said weakly. "Civil restitution. The scale of the harm."

"You sniveling coward!," Harker roared, slamming his fists against the table. "Do you have any idea what you're saying? That money *is* me. That's leverage. That's survival. I know things, people in power don't want known. If they push this, I'll tear it all down with me."

He stopped, breath ragged, the implication crashing down harder than the words ever could.

Without his funds his ledgers and journals, if they found his blackmail materials, he wouldn't be able to make good on his threats. Without it all, he was nothing.

Execution was mentioned next, quietly, almost apologetically. "It's... on the table," the attorney said. "If the murder or treason charges hold."

Harker laughed then, a sharp, broken sound that startled even himself. "Execution. For me." His laughter curdled into fury. "They wouldn't dare. They need me. The markets need me. This city *runs* on what I built."

But even as he raged, a colder fear coiled in his gut. The ledgers were real. The trail was there. He had always trusted in complexity, in the belief that no one would ever have the time or will to follow it all the way down.

They were following it, if they found everything he was finished.

When the guards came to take him back to his cell, Harker did not resist. His hands trembled too much. As the door closed again, he finally screamed, raw, wordless, an impotent sound torn from a man watching his life dismantled piece by piece by people who no longer feared him.

In the corridor outside, the lantern burned steadily.

Inside the cell, Harker Villenci sat with his head in his hands, surrounded by stone, iron, and the growing certainty that the one thing he had never planned for, the loss of everything, was now not only possible, but likely.

And the city slept easier for it. By nightfall, the bravado was gone.

Harker Villenci sat on the edge of the narrow cot with his shoulders hunched, fingers locked together so tightly his knuckles ached. The cell felt smaller after dark. The stone seemed closer, the iron bars thicker, the air heavier with salt and cold drifting in from the harbor. Moonlight spilled through the barred window in a pale ribbon, silvering the floor and cutting his shadow into long, warped pieces that shifted when the lantern outside guttered.

He had spoken. Repeatedly. Loudly. Clearly.

It had done nothing.

His protests, formal at first, then frantic, had been met with indifference, then irritation. Guards passed without slowing. One laughed when Harker shouted about violations of holding protocol. Another told him to save it for the gallows if he liked speaking so much. When he demanded to see his attorney again, the answer was a shrug.

“No one listening now, Trade King.”

That words, echoed.

Harker pressed his back to the wall and slid down until he was sitting on the cold stone floor, staring at the bars. His mind clawed for leverage and found none. His wealth was frozen. His name was poison. His allies had already begun to vanish like mist under sunlight. Even the city itself felt hostile, as if the stone had finally decided to remember who had bled on it.

And beneath all of it, a worse fear stirred.

The kobold had looked at him with something sharper than anger. Something personal. And the thing that hid in his shadow, the small, clever horror with too many eyes and not enough mercy, had looked at him like prey denied only by timing.

Eeyagoo had stopped it earlier. Had *chosen* restraint. That choice could be withdrawn. The thought crept in uninvited and would not leave.

The scratch came softly, so faint he almost convinced himself it was the wind teasing the bars.

Then it came again.

Scrape.

Pause.

Scrape.

Harker’s breath slowed, every sense straining. He rose unsteadily to his feet and turned toward the window. Moonlight pooled there, cold and clean, and perched within it, balanced on the iron as if it were nothing more than a branch, sat a small shape.

Too small to be a guard.

Too still to be an animal.

It looked like a child-sized thing at first glance, hunched and winged, its outline sharp against the light. Then it shifted, subtly, like a reflection disturbed by water. Its eyes caught the moon and burned back with a knowing, feral intelligence.

Mimi.

Harker staggered back, heel catching on the cot. “No,” he whispered, the word thin and useless. “No, this isn’t allowed. You can’t be here.”

The creature tilted its head.

Then it smiled.

Its mouth moved, and when it spoke, it did so in *his* voice, perfectly matched, every inflection precise, stripped of warmth and layered with quiet malice.

“Suffer.”

The word sank into him like ice.

In the blink of an eye, the shape collapsed inward, folding impossibly small, and then it was gone, no flutter, no sound, no trace left behind except the cold.

Harker stood frozen, heart hammering so hard it hurt. Sweat broke out across his skin despite the chill, his fine clothes clinging uncomfortably. His mind raced, spiraling into panic. *Threat*. That was a threat. It had been deliberate. Controlled. A promise, not a warning.

He rushed the bars and shouted, voice cracking.

“Guards! Guards! There was something here, something inside my cell!”

Footsteps approached slowly. A lantern bobbed into view.

“What now?” a guard muttered.

“They can reach me,” Harker gasped. “That creature, the kobold’s thing, it was here. It spoke to me. My life is in danger.”

The guard laughed outright, leaning on his spear. “A mouse spoke to you?”

“Check the window!” Harker shouted. “Check the bars! You must take this seriously!”

The guard glanced up, bored, then back at Harker. “Moon’s playing tricks on you. Happens when men fall from high places.”

Another voice chimed in from down the hall. “Sleep it off, Trade King.”

They walked away.

Harker screamed after them until his throat burned, until the sound broke into hoarse, wordless noise. No one returned. The lantern light receded. The corridor went quiet again.

Alone once more, Harker collapsed onto the cot, shaking uncontrollably. His gaze kept snapping back to the window, to the pale moonlight, to the empty iron bars.

Suffer.

The word echoed again and again in his mind, no longer sounding like a threat.

It sounded like a sentence already being carried out.

The Thing That Learned to Speak

Eeyagoo did not sleep that night.

The spot beside him on the bed lay empty, its small bundle of blankets untouched, the space where Mimi usually curled warm and breathing now cold and still. He sat hunched on the edge of the mattress, elbows on knees, hands clasped tight enough to ache, listening to the city breathe around him. Harbor bells far off. Wind through shutters. Somewhere, laughter. All of it felt wrong.

Mimi was gone.

She did not wander. Not like this. She *knew* the night, knew roofs and rafters and shadows, but she always came back. Always checked in, a chirr or scrape or the soft press of herself against his shoulder. This time there had been nothing. Just absence.

Fear gnawed at him, sharp and relentless. Not fear *for* himself, never that, but fear of what she might do without him there to temper her. She remembered Kellic. She remembered blood and fire and screaming. And she was learning. Faster than he liked. Faster than he understood.

Do something can't undo, he thought. *Do something make hunt her*.

He rose and paced, whispering her name under his breath like a prayer he did not expect answered.

When she finally returned, it was without sound.

She simply *was*, perched on the beam near the ceiling, shape half-settled, wings tucked tight, eyes bright and alert. Unhurt. Clean. Calm.

Relief hit him so hard his legs nearly gave out.

"Mimi," he breathed, voice breaking despite himself.

She tilted her head. Watched him. Studied his face in a way she hadn't before, not just reading emotion, but *weighing* it.

He swallowed, steadied himself, and forced his voice level. Soft, but firm.

"You go," he said slowly. "Where go?"

She dropped down to the bed in a smooth motion, landing light as a thought. Her form shifted as she moved, edges never quite fixed, as if she were still deciding what she wanted to be. She looked up at him, eyes reflecting lamplight.

"Killer," she said.

The word came in **Harker's voice**.

Perfect. Crisp. Cold.

Eeyagoo froze.

Then she added, softer, pleased with herself, "Scare."

That voice was not Harker's.

It was not *anyone's*.

It was hers.

A rough, unfinished sound, but distinct. Claimed.

A chill ran through him.

"Killer," he echoed quietly. "You mean Harker."

She nodded once. Sharp. Certain.

"Kellic?" she asked then, head cocked, the word uncertain. Questioning.

His chest tightened.

"No, Mimi," he said gently. "Kellic gone."

Her eyes searched his face. Processing. Remembering.

"Killer pay," she said, this time in a strange blend, Harker's cadence with her own emerging tone beneath it, like a shadow learning to speak aloud.

Eeyagoo closed the distance between them and pressed his forehead to hers, breathing her in, grounding himself in the simple truth that she was here. Alive. Whole.

“We home soon,” he murmured. “No hurt Harker.”

Not yet. Not by her. Not like that.

She was still for a long moment.

Then she nodded.

Once.

Then again.

She had never done that before.

The gesture was small. Simple. And it terrified him.

Because it meant she understood.

Eeyagoo waited until morning, until the city’s noise had settled into its familiar rhythm and the sharp edge of night had dulled into gray daylight. Shardra sat near the window of their rented room, oilstone in hand, drawing it slowly along the edge of her axe. The sound was steady. Grounding. She did not look up when he entered, but she knew he was there.

He hovered a moment, then sat on the low bench opposite her, Mimi tucked close against his side. The little creature was quieter than usual, wings folded tight, eyes tracking Shardra with open curiosity but no fear.

Eeyagoo cleared his throat. Words did not come easily when they mattered.

“Mimi gone,” he said at last.

The stone stopped moving.

Shardra’s head turned, slow and deliberate. One pale brow lifted, just slightly. “Gone,” she repeated. Not a question. An invitation to continue.

“Night,” Eeyagoo said. “Wake. She not there.”

Shardra set the axe across her knees, both hands resting on it now. “How long?”

“Too long.” He swallowed. “Thought... bad thought.”

Shardra’s gaze dropped briefly to Mimi, then back to him. “She came back.”

“Yes.” Relief and dread tangled in the word. “Not hurt. Not chased.”

Shardra nodded once. “Then tell me the rest.”

Eeyagoo looked down at his hands. At the faint scratches where Mimi’s claws had dug in when she was excited. When she had *learned* something.

“She go to him,” he said quietly. “Harker.”

Shardra did not react at first. Then the room seemed to cool, as if her presence alone had drawn winter inward. “Into the holding,” she said. “Past guards.”

“Yes.”

Shardra exhaled slowly through her nose. “That should not be possible.”

Eeyagoo shook his head. “She small. Smart. Change shape. Learn fast.”

He hesitated, then forced himself onward. "She speak."

That got a reaction.

Shardra's gaze sharpened. "Speak how."

"Not just sounds." He glanced at Mimi. "Words."

Mimi perked up at that, clearly pleased, and said brightly, "Scare."

Shardra's gaze snapped to her.

Eeyagoo winced. "Not now," he murmured, then looked back up. "She say 'killer.' In Harker voice."

Shardra went very still.

"And then," Eeyagoo continued, voice lower, "she say 'scare.' Not his. Hers."

A long silence followed.

Shardra leaned back slightly, studying Mimi with a new intensity, not hostility, but assessment. Like a warrior reevaluating a blade that had begun to change shape in the hand.

"She is growing," Shardra said at last. "Not just stronger. Wider."

"Yes." Eeyagoo's shoulders hunched. "Too fast."

Mimi crawled up onto his knee and looked between them. "Kellic?" she asked again, softer this time.

Shardra's jaw tightened.

Ah. So that was the center of it.

"She liked him," Shardra said, more statement than question. "He was kind. Patient."

"He give her bread," Eeyagoo said. "Sing bad songs. She sit on beam watch him cook."

Shardra snorted despite herself, then sobered. "And now she does not understand why he is gone."

"No," Eeyagoo said. "She know killer. She know scare. But not... after."

Shardra leaned forward, forearms resting on her thighs. "Revenge is simple," she said carefully. "Grief is not."

Mimi watched her mouth move, eyes intent.

Shardra reached out, slowly, deliberately, and placed one large finger on the floor between them. "Mimi," she said, voice low and steady. "Listen."

Mimi leaned closer.

"What you did," Shardra continued, "was not wrong."

Eeyagoo stiffened, but Shardra held up a hand.

"But," she said, "it was dangerous. For you. For him." She glanced briefly toward the window, toward the city beyond. "And for us."

Mimi's wings twitched.

Shardra softened her tone. "You felt hurt. You wanted him to feel it too."

Mimi nodded. Once.

Eeyagoo's stomach dropped again.

Shardra sighed. "That is... very mortal of you."

She looked back at Eeyagoo. "You did right to stop her before it went further."

"I didn't," he said quietly.

Shardra met his eyes. "You brought her back."

That mattered.

Mimi climbed higher onto Eeyagoo's chest and pressed her forehead against his chin, mimicking him without realizing it. He closed his eyes briefly.

"We keep close now," he said. "Teach slow. Words slow."

Shardra nodded. "And we watch."

She reached out and, very carefully, rested her massive hand on Mimi's back. Mimi did not flinch.

"Papal changed all of us," Shardra said. "It gave her something she did not have before."

"What?" Eeyagoo asked.

Shardra looked at the small, clever creature in his arms.

"A voice," she said. "And a reason to use it."

The room fell quiet again, filled only by the distant sounds of the city and the soft, uncertain breathing of something no longer content to be just a shadow.

The Weight of Waiting

Voolnishart did not celebrate.

The city *never* celebrated endings, only continuations. Coins still rang. Ships still came and went. Ink still dried in ledgers that would outlive everyone who touched them. But for the party, time had thickened into something inert and stubborn, refusing to move with the decisiveness they understood.

They had expected a reckoning.

Instead, they were given *procedure*.

Shardra discovered the problem first.

They sat in the upper gallery of Elith's conservatory, glass panes arching overhead like the ribs of a great beast. Warm air breathed across them, heavy with damp soil and leaf rot. Shardra had positioned herself carefully, shoulders angled away from the railing so she would not crack it by accident.

She had been silent for a long time.

Then she asked, plainly and without ceremony:

"So. When does he fight?"

The question did not sound foolish. It sounded *certain*. Like asking when the sun would rise.

Eeyagoo froze.

"Fight?" he said, ears twitching.

Shardra nodded once. "Trial. Who stands against him? Champion? Judge?" Her brow furrowed. "If none will, I can. That is... acceptable, yes?"

She made a small, uncertain gesture, two fingers raised, palm inward. A ritual sign among her people. *I am willing.*

Eeyagoo opened his mouth.

Closed it.

His tail curled tight against his ankle, an unconscious tell. He had *assumed* many things since arriving in Mithrin. That law meant judgment. That judgment meant consequence. That consequence meant an ending.

He realized now that he had never once asked *how*.

Mimi shifted on his shoulder, skin dimpling faintly with unease.

"Fight?" she echoed, hopeful. "End?"

"No," Eeyagoo said too quickly. Then steadied himself. "No fight."

Shardra frowned. "Then how guilt proven?"

Eeyagoo looked at the floor.

"...I do not know."

The words tasted wrong in his mouth.

Mimi's texture went smooth and cool.

"Wait?" she asked.

Eeyagoo swallowed. "Yes."

Shardra leaned back, shoulders brushing the stone wall. "Waiting is not justice," she said quietly.

That was when Eeyagoo realized he had no answer at all.

He sought Elith that same hour.

Elith listened without interruption as Eeyagoo explained, short sentences, clipped phrasing, frustration leaking through pauses he did not know how to fill.

"He kill. He burn. City bleed. He wait?" Eeyagoo asked.

Elith's pace slowed. His hands folded behind his back.

"You are not wrong to feel this way," he said carefully. "Mithrin law is not built for immediacy. It is built to survive corruption."

"How long?" Eeyagoo pressed.

Elith stopped walking.

"Months," he said. "If uncontested. Longer if Harker resists."

Shardra stared at him. "He lives that long?"

"Yes," Elith said. "Confined. Watched. But alive."

"Unacceptable," Shardra said flatly.

Eeyagoo nodded. "Too slow. Justice rot."

Elith did not argue. "Justice here is *exhaustive*. Judges will be appointed by the council, trade, civic order, faith, public welfare. They will weigh evidence. Ledgers. Contracts. Intent."

Shardra's jaw tightened. "Steel weighs faster."

"Yes," Elith said softly. "But steel cannot be appealed."

Mimi blinked.

"Paper beats fire?" she asked.

Elith smiled thinly. "Sometimes."

Shardra exhaled sharply. "This city buries its dead under ink."

Eeyagoo felt the truth of it settle like grit in his teeth.

The Plan for Papal

The thought lingered long after the conversation ended. It followed Elith through the rebuilding, through the long months that followed, and through every decision made as Papal slowly rose from the ashes.

Jack already existed.

For decades the ancient guardian had watched over the Verdant Menagerie. Silent among the foliage, patient as stone, the ironwood sentinel had protected Elith's life's work from vandals, thieves, and creatures foolish enough to mistake a garden for undefended prey. He was a fixture of the Menagerie, as familiar to Elith as the trees themselves.

Yet as the new greenhouse took shape, Elith found his thoughts returning again and again to the burned foundations.

The Lestagii had survived, but only because Eeyagoo had planned for disaster. Had the seeds been stored elsewhere, had one small precaution been overlooked, the species might have vanished before it truly returned to the world. The lesson was impossible to ignore.

Some things were too valuable to trust to locks and walls alone.

When the new greenhouse was finally completed, Jack left the Menagerie.

No ceremony marked the departure. No speeches were given. One morning the ancient guardian simply walked north from Voolnishart and took up residence among the new Lestagii beds. There he remained, motionless for days at a time, listening to the plants, watching the shadows, and learning every corner of the greenhouse he had been entrusted to defend.

Few understood the significance of the change.

To most, Jack was merely a guardian assigned to a new post.

To Elith, it was something else.

A promise.

The fire had taken Kellic. It had scarred Papal and nearly erased a miracle from the world. He could not undo what had happened.

But he could ensure that if anyone ever came for the Lestagii again, they would find that the garden was no longer defenseless.

They made preparations, because waiting did not excuse neglect.

Momma Toki received them in the outer yard of her menagerie, boots sunk deep into churned earth. A half-grown manticore cub dozed nearby, tail twitching with dream-hunts.

“Papal’s farms won’t hold without teeth,” she said bluntly. “Predators smell weakness. Poachers smell opportunity.”

She outlined her recommendations with ruthless clarity, guard breeds chosen for endurance and restraint, not bloodlust. Handlers who understood when *not* to interfere.

“You’ll need kennels. Raised. Dry,” she added. “And don’t cheap out on feed.”

“And someone manage,” Eeyagoo said.

Momma Toki grinned. “Good. You learn fast.”

Mimi watched a hound pup tumble over its sibling.

“Protect,” she said solemnly.

“Yes,” Eeyagoo agreed. “Protect.”

The last meeting was the most deliberate.

After he left, she counted the payment, fair and well worth the effort; she saw potential in the Kobold. She hurriedly began writing a complete list of items, people, and animals from the scribbled notes. She squinted at the charcoal scrawls and measured lines as if they might lie to her. Kennels always did if you trusted the paper more than the smell of them. She ran a claw along the margin where the birds would go, *iron strikes*, the note said in her own cramped hand, because the birds would hear it if she wrote the name too large. Clever things. Too clever to be penned like pigeons, too stubborn to be loosed like hawks. A nest, not cages. A place they could claim and defend, or they would never learn the roads properly. She pictured the rafters pitched shallow, iron hooks wrapped in leather so talons didn’t crack, perches staggered so the young could bicker and settle their order without breaking wings. Shade enough to cool the feathers, sun enough to keep the shine. Always the balance.

Feed first, always feed. Grain wasn’t enough; iron strikes needed protein and grit, small bones crushed fine, river sand washed clean. But they also liked to hunt, so the handlers would have to find a place for that. She’d need two tenders just for the birds, one to talk, one to listen. Talking mattered. You didn’t train an iron strike by shouting messages at it like a fool. You spoke places. You walked the route with it once, twice, three times until the bird learned the taste of wind between hills and the stink of tanneries near the river bend. Then you gave it a word and let it decide how to get there. They remembered voices better than faces, but faces better than gloves. New handlers would need the same coats every day, same rhythm to their steps, no jingling keys. She wrote that down and underlined it hard.

Guard animals next. Wealth drew thieves and fools both. A pack of five or so dusk-hounds at the base outside the roost near the orchards and groves, quiet, patient, trained to sit through flapping and shrieks without snapping. No wolves; too nervous. A horned ram for presence, tethered where it could see the gate and nothing else. She made a note to rotate guards so no creature grew bored. Boredom killed as surely as hunger.

Handlers. Three at minimum, four if the city swelled again. One senior to break the young birds, one to map and remap routes as roads changed, one to mind health and molt, and an extra pair of hands for storms and sickness. Pay them well. She’d learned that lesson the hard way. Cheap hands dropped birds. Dropped birds

forgot. And forgetting spread. She counted coppers in her head, frowned, and shaved a corner from the enclosure plan instead. Wood was dear; knowledge was dearer.

Materials followed like a litany. Pitch for sealing seams. Ash for lice. Copper wire thin enough to bend, thick enough not to snap. A bell, not rung, never rung, hung only so the birds learned its place and ignored it. Water troughs were shallow and moving; still water soured feathers. She paused, listening to the menagerie breathe around her, and imagined the ironshrikes repeating a message clean as a blade, turning it over and over until it fit the mouth. *North gate. Dawn.* Or longer, if you were patient. They could learn longer. And they got better and better with age, one could attach a note if the birds were agreeable, but they would tear it away if they didn't like it. Early training on chicks and fledglings was most effective when rewards were provided each time they allowed it to remain.

Momma Toki set the charcoal down and flexed her hand. This would work, she decided, not because the plan was perfect, but because she knew where it would fail. That was the real work. Plans failed. Creatures adapted. If she gave the birds a place worth returning to, and people worth listening to, the rest would follow the roads they chose.

The blood price

The Ghostwidow received Eeyagoo alone.

He did not bow deeply. He did not posture. He stood with his hands visible and his voice steady.

"I know what you are," he said simply.

Her eyes lifted.

"I know what you *do*," he continued. "Law. Balance. No mercy. No bias."

He paused, then added in soft Drow, "**Valm'rak dos.**" *The knife that cuts clean.*

A flicker of interest crossed her face.

"I come because steel not allowed," Eeyagoo said. "If no flesh, then gold. Much gold."

He slid his notes across the table, losses, buildings, produce, harvests, herbs, projections, and the annihilation of the Lestagii plant. Kellic was listed at the top, loss of friend...

"Papal bled," he said. "You make him bleed back."

She read in silence.

"You seek restitution," she said at last.

"Yes." Eeyagoo inclined his head. "Your word. Want all law allows, hurt him"

Her lips curved faintly. "Payment by share of settlement."

"Fair."

She leaned back. "I warned him," she said quietly. "Greed always devours itself."

Mimi, perched on the chair arm, whispered:

"Suffer..Gone. And then in Harker's voice....Stitches"

"Yes," Shinazazi agreed softly. "Soon."

When Eeyagoo rose, she did not stop him.

She *liked* the kobold. He understood limits, and consequences.

They left Voolnishart at dawn.

No cheers. No satisfaction.

Only preparation.

Mimi looked back once.

“Home?” she asked.

“Yes,” Eeyagoo said. “Soon.”

Shardra adjusted her stride to match his, expression hard and thoughtful.

Justice would come.

But not quickly.

And until it did, they would endure the waiting, and make it *hurt*.

They went Home to Papal. They would have to wait for justice.

Road North to Papal

The Road, the Axe, and the Ledger

The road North was wide and well kept, built for wagons and steady traffic, but Shardra walked it as though the ground might give way beneath her. Her stride was controlled, deliberate, the kind of restraint that carried its own tension. Eeyagoo noticed almost at once.

“You angry,” he said.

Shardra did not answer. She kept moving, looking forward, jaw set, until the words forced themselves out of her.

“They cage him,” she said finally. “And call it justice.”

“They break him slow,” Eeyagoo replied.

“Slow means time to scheme.”

“Yes,” he said after a moment. “But steel not allowed.”

Shardra stopped. The halt was sudden enough that Eeyagoo froze as well, Mimi clinging tighter as the world lurched beneath her wings. Shardra turned, her voice dropping, rough with something older than anger.

“In my lands,” she said, “a wrong like his would be answered before the blood cooled.”

Eeyagoo’s ears dipped. “If we do, must leave.”

She looked at him sharply. He met her gaze without blinking, small against the road and the open sky, but steady.

“Your justice ends fast,” he said. “But law chase US.”

Shardra’s jaw clenched. “And yours leaves monsters alive.”

The road stretched on in silence after that. Wind moved through the grass, and nothing else spoke until Mimi did, her voice soft, uncertain.

“Both... hurt?”

Shardra let out a long breath, the tightness easing from her shoulders. “Yes.”

Eeyagoo nodded. "Different."

Shardra knelt then, carefully, deliberately, lowering herself until they were eye to eye. The movement cost her something, and she did not hide it.

"I do not like this way," she said. "But I trust you."

That mattered more than agreement, and they rose and continued on together toward Papal.

Return to Papal

Papal, Memory, and the Shape of Return

Papal did not greet them with cheers or relief. It greeted them with work awaiting completion. Fires had gutted several buildings and shops, not only the greenhouse, though everyone knew that loss cut deepest both in coin and in spirit. Charred beams lay stacked for reuse. Stone foundations had been scraped clean. The air still carried the faint bite of smoke mixed with damp soil, turned and turned again, ready but not yet planted. People moved with purpose, hammering frames into place, hauling water, measuring rows. Some smiled when they saw Shardra and Eeyagoo return, not from joy but because smiling had become a habit of survival.

Mimi grew quieter as they walked among it all. She clung close, her usual restless motion subdued, her form smoothing and then rippling again as if unable to settle. When she saw the memorial tree she stopped entirely. Kellic's tree stood marked and tended, its base cleared, small tokens pressed into the soil around it. Mimi stared, her surface shifting with something heavy and unfamiliar.

"Gone," she whispered.

"Yes," Eeyagoo said softly, kneeling beside her. "But roots stay."

She watched the tree for a long moment longer, then allowed herself to be guided away.

That evening they gathered near the fields, lanterns hung low against the coming dark. Elith moved among the farmers, listening more than speaking, his hands already stained with soil. Word passed quietly from person to person, Momma Toki's recommendations shared and weighed, who needed guards, who needed handlers, who had space and who had skill. Plans formed without speeches or ceremony. They were not heroic and they were not grand, but they were real, and they held.

Shardra stood apart for a time, arms folded, watching the motion of it all with an expression that gave nothing away. Finally she spoke, almost to herself. "They rebuild."

"Yes," Eeyagoo said. "Because must."

Mimi tugged at his collar, insistent now, eyes flicking back toward the tree. "Friend... seed?"

He nodded. "Seed."

Something in her eased at that. The confusion did not vanish, but it shifted into something steadier. Not understanding, not yet, but acceptance.

Later, when the lanterns were dimmed and the fire burned low, Shardra spoke again. "I still wish he would face us."

Eeyagoo stared into the embers, watching sparks rise and die. "He will," he said. "Just not with axe."

Shardra considered that, the tension in her shoulders easing only slightly. "Then we stay ready."

"Yes," he replied. "For next storm."

They sat together in the quiet, not triumphant and not whole, but aligned. Around them Papal worked, rested, and endured. The world had not ended because justice slowed. It had simply demanded patience instead. And patience, they were learning, carried its own weight, its own cost, and its own kind of strength.

Papal , The Tree

What the Tree Knows

Mimi took the tending seriously.

She climbed the cinderheart tree with careful, methodical precision, testing each handhold before trusting it. Her small fingers brushed every leaf, traced each knot in the bark. She paused often, nose close to the surface, listening in the way she listened to sleeping things. When she found a beetle nestled too near the roots, she lifted it gently and carried it away, setting it down beyond the reach of the shade.

“No hurt,” she murmured. “Not here. This place stay.”

Eeyagoo watched from below, kneeling in the dirt with his hands resting on his thighs. He did not speak. This was not instruction or play. This was care, and care had its own rules.

Mimi paused on a branch and looked down at him, head tilted in that way she used when she was building a thought rather than asking a question.

“Why grow,” she asked. “After gone.”

Eeyagoo hesitated. He searched for words that would not break what she was holding. “Because life try again. Even when hurt. Even when wrong.”

Mimi considered that, then said quietly, “Kellic.”

“Yes,” Eeyagoo replied. “Kellic.”

She went still. Not frozen, but listening inward. Her grip on the branch tightened slightly, as if anchoring herself.

“Gone,” she said at last. “But stay. Like this.” She tapped the wood beneath her hand. “He fix. He feed. He make safe. Tree do same.”

Eeyagoo closed his eyes. The air felt thinner for a moment. “That right,” he said. “Stay in soil. In shade. In fruit. Help people after.”

Mimi slid down the trunk and pressed her palm flat against the bark. Her surface shifted, warming to match it, steady and deliberate. She leaned in, cheek against the wood.

“I remember,” she said slowly. “Not words. Place. Hands here. Work here. Good here.” She looked back at Eeyagoo. “If tree strong, Kellic strong.”

Eeyagoo swallowed. “Yes,” he said. “You help him.”

Mimi nodded once, firmly. “I help. I watch. I keep hurt away. He liked that.”

“That enough,” Eeyagoo said, though his voice wavered. “More than enough.”

They stood together then, neither of them understanding everything, neither of them needing to. Above them, the young tree rustled softly, leaves catching the light and holding it.

It did not know grief.

It knew tending.

It knew staying.

And it grew.

Papal , Kellic's Grave

Interlude: What Grows After

Eeyagoo went alone.

The path to the memorial was not marked by stone or sign. It existed because people kept walking it, because grief has a way of shaping the land without ever asking permission. Grass had been pressed flat and never quite risen again. The soil held the memory of careful steps, of pauses, of knees bending where words failed.

The tree stood at the center of a shallow rise, young and stubborn in equal measure. Its leaves were dark and glossy, catching what little light remained and holding it as if reluctant to let go. The cinderheart nut tree had been planted with ceremony but had grown without indulgence. The ground here was poor. The air still carried ash some mornings. It lived anyway.

Someone else was already there.

The man stood with his hands folded behind his back, coat buttoned neatly to the throat despite the mild evening. He faced the tree as though it were an altar, posture careful in the way of someone who had learned early how not to take up space. He did not turn when Eeyagoo approached. He did not need to. Grief sharpens awareness.

Eeyagoo slowed and stopped several paces away. His chest tightened in the familiar way this place demanded.

"I sorry," he said. The words came out flat, polished too many times, carried for days like a coin meant to be paid.

The man exhaled slowly before answering. "No. You do not owe that."

He turned then. Welsen's eyes were red but not raw, the fire already passed through them and cooled into something heavier. Eeyagoo's ears dipped, his tail curling close to his leg.

"I led him here," Eeyagoo said. "I asked for help. He died."

Welsen looked at him for a long moment, then back at the tree. "Kellic chose. For once in his life he chose. He was happy here, happier than I had seen him in years. The greenhouse suited him. The work had rules. Things grew when you cared for them and broke when you did not. He liked fixing things that stayed fixed. He liked that the city needed him for gentle things."

Eeyagoo swallowed. "Still. End is same."

"Yes," Welsen replied quietly. "The end is tragic. I will never argue that. But the middle mattered."

Silence settled between them. Wind moved through the young branches, setting the leaves whispering. The sound was soft and persistent, alive.

After a time, Eeyagoo asked, "Why this tree?"

Welsen's gaze softened. "Our family harvested forests once. Ancient ones. Carefully, we told ourselves. With permits and plans and assurances that the land would recover. Then came the fire. Not lightning. Not war. Neglect. One season too dry. One spark too careless. The old trees were gone, contracts failed, credit vanished, and we never recovered. Kellic said that if something begins in fire, it should end in shelter."

Eeyagoo knelt. The earth was cool beneath his hands, damp and living. “He wanted start again.”

“Yes,” Welsen said. “From ash.”

The apology rose again in Eeyagoo’s throat, heavier now, pressing until breathing hurt. He let it pass unspoken. “I rebuild,” he said instead. “Fields. Greenhouses. What taken. I swear.”

Welsen studied him, measuring not the promise but the weight behind it. “I believe you. But I will not follow. My family is in Voolnishart. The city fits me. The noise, the compromises, the consequences. I like knowing who profits when something breaks. Farm life was never mine.” He hesitated, then added, “But I can help. From there.”

“That enough,” Eeyagoo said, and meant it.

They stood together a while longer, neither ready to leave, neither certain what leaving would mean. When Eeyagoo finally rose, Mimi stirred against his collar and peered at the tree with bright, intent eyes.

“Grow,” she whispered.

“Yes,” Eeyagoo said softly. “Grow.”

He turned away without looking back. The tree did not need him watching. It had already taken root.

Papal , By the Fire

The fire was small.

Not a watchfire. There was no ring of stones, no effort to make it tall or proud. It was a careful flame coaxed from dry wood and patience, the kind meant to warm hands without announcing itself to the dark. Shardra sat with her back against a fallen log, long legs stretched out, boots close enough to dry but not scorch. The firelight caught the edge of her armor and softened it, turning steel into something almost gentle.

Eeyagoo sat opposite her, cross-legged, tail wrapped around his ankle. Mimi dozed against his collarbone, her surface shifting slowly, like breath passing through sleep.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. The fire worked at the wood. Night pressed close.

“You stood at his grave a long time,” Shardra said at last. There was no accusation in it. Only noticing. “You came back carrying more than you left with.”

Eeyagoo nodded, eyes fixed on the flame. “Failed. He died. City burned. I alive.”

Shardra reached for a stick and nudged a coal back into place. Sparks flared, then settled. “No,” she said. “You survived. That is not the same thing.”

“That not same,” Eeyagoo replied quietly. “He dead. I still here.”

Shardra snapped the stick in two without seeming to notice. “In the north we have a word for that thinking,” she said. “It means confusing the storm with the mountain. You think standing means you caused the fall. But storms choose where they strike. Mountains choose whether they remain. You stayed.”

Eeyagoo looked down at his hands. Small. Scarred. Good for careful work, not for stopping floods or firestorms or men like Harker. “I should have seen more,” he said. “Should have known. Should have stopped it sooner.”

Shardra exhaled through her nose, almost a laugh, but there was no humor in it. “If should were enough,” she said, “my people would still have their valleys.”

The fire cracked softly. They both knew where her thoughts had gone. North, always north. Toward old stone and older wrongs. Toward Henigus.

“He pulls, he calls to giant blood,” Shardra continued, staring into the flames. “Even when he is not present. Even when his hands are hidden. Then the matter of the Palehive raids feel wrong. Too coordinated. Too bold. Not hunger. Not panic.”

“Symptom,” Eeyagoo said. “Or test.”

“Yes,” she replied. “Or bait.”

Mimi stirred, one eye opening. “North?” she murmured.

Shardra’s expression softened. “Yes, little one. North.”

Eeyagoo hugged his knees closer. “Henigus greater danger,” he said. “But we small. Very small.”

Shardra did not argue. “Even giants do not face mountains alone.”

Silence settled again, heavier than before, but not hopeless.

“What do,” Eeyagoo asked at last.

Shardra did not answer immediately. She thought with her whole body. Her shoulders squared. Her spine straightened as if aligning with something unseen. “We confirm,” she said. “Not rumor. Not fear. Proof. Then we call.”

“Yes,” Eeyagoo said. “Call.”

“The clans who know my name,” she continued. “The Knights of Taurdain, who still remember what duty costs. The Guard of Voolnishart, if their leaders can be convinced that waiting will kill more than acting.”

“And Papal,” Eeyagoo asked. “What of Papal.”

Shardra looked at him then. Really looked. “Papal will stand. Not at the front. But they will endure. That matters more than people think.”

Eeyagoo swallowed. “Enough.”

Shardra stared into the dark beyond the firelight, where the trees pressed close like listening witnesses. “I do not know,” she said honestly. “It may never be enough. But doing nothing guarantees failure.”

Mimi shifted, pressing closer to Eeyagoo’s chest. “Together,” she said sleepily.

“Yes,” Shardra agreed. “Together.”

Something loosened in Eeyagoo’s chest. Not relief. Permission. “Responsibility,” he said slowly, testing the word. “Not blame.”

Shardra smiled then, just a little. “No. Responsibility means you choose what happens next.”

The fire burned low. Above them, the stars watched, silent and indifferent, waiting to see which way the world would lean.

North.

When the City Stops Pretending

Voolnishart did not panic.

But it stopped pretending that what was happening could be managed quietly.

The truth emerged the way it always did in the city, piecemeal, through incident reports, whispered testimony, and the sudden absence of people who had once been reliably present.

It began with the **hosts**.

They were not random. They were not chosen for weakness. They were chosen because they could *carry* something.

Each host bore a bound seal, pressed into wax and leather, worn on their person never out of reach, like a talisman or concealed beneath robes. It confirmed what the tale from Papal said: the seal held power over the host, and they gave in and opened it. Constant. Patient. It pushed, and tested, and it *waited*.

Most resisted. For a time, a week, 2? Maybe a month at most.

When resistance failed, it failed completely.

Witnesses described the moment with the same helpless precision: a sudden stillness, breath caught mid-word, then collapse. The body would convulse once, twice, never long. Bending and twisting, often screaming without sound, what remained was a husk: drained, gray, emptied of anything that could be called will. Across the host's back, burned into the flesh as if tattooed from the inside out, was the seal itself, perfectly rendered, cold, intact.

And the bundle did not remain inert. When failure came, the wax-sealed package ruptured.

Blackness poured out, not smoke, not liquid, but something between, thick with movement and intent. The **Inkling**, the name residents of Papal had given them, that emerged did not flee. It did not hide. It attacked immediately, feeding as it fought, striking until it was destroyed or nothing living remained nearby.

Guards learned quickly that steel alone was often insufficient. The creatures absorbed punishment with disturbing indifference. Only coordinated effort, fire, repeated strikes, or the presence of a seasoned hero, ended them decisively, or, divine will.

Those slain by the Inkling did not leave bodies. They were consumed. Pulled into the inky mass and gone, leaving behind scorched stone, warped wood, and the unbearable uncertainty of absence. Families demanded answers no one could give. Were the dead truly dead, or taken somewhere else?

No one knew. The thing itself disappeared as if pulled back through the opening it came from, leaving nothing tangible but bile and slime. As fear spread inward, worse news came from the north.

The Palehive raids were no longer rumors. Scouts confirmed what merchants had whispered: settlements erased with methodical cruelty. Farms stripped bare. Villages left standing only enough to show intent. No corpses. No animals. Everything portable taken. Everything else was destroyed.

And always, the same corruption.

Where blood had spilled, especially that of long-using Palehive goblins, something *grew*. Twisted plants with blackened stems and dusty, gray-coated leaves clawed their way up from soaked soil. Alchemists identified it with dread certainty: a **Ktala variant**, altered by prolonged use and violence, rooting itself wherever the Palehive bled.

This detail appeared again and again in the reports.

Contaminated land.

Unnatural regrowth.

Raiding patterns that suggested not hunger, but preparation.

The Herakal Calamity: The Surge of the Black Root

The night Herakal vanished was moonless and still. Farmers had just begun harvesting the late barley and root vegetables. Children played by the river, and the town's modest watch, barely a dozen men, paced lazily along the stockade walls. Herakal was not fortified in any real sense; it had never needed to be. Nestled between low hills and fertile fields in the northeast of Mithrin, it was a peaceful hamlet, notable only for its steady grain yields and a stubborn breed of woolly goat.

But peace is a stranger to the Pale-Hive Clutches, and it was they who came for Herakal.

News reached Mithrin not with fanfare, but with absence.

The caravan from Voolnishart had been expected in Herakal three days prior. Its master, an old trader named Pelloren who had walked the eastern routes for nearly forty years, knew the road well enough to follow it blind. When he crested the last rise and saw the town below, he did not at first understand what he was looking at. The homes were nothing but burnt ruins. The fields were torn and scorched. No livestock was seen dead or otherwise. Nothing moved that possessed will.

He ordered the guards forward.

They found no bodies. No wounded. No survivors hiding in cellars or wells. The smashed and burnt. And in the center of the town square, driven into the packed earth before the hall, stood the totem.

It had been carved from something that had once been living bone.

It still dripped.

One of the guards, a veteran who had seen the slave pits of Innarlith and lived to speak of them, refused to approach it. He pointed instead to the ground surrounding its base. The soil had blackened there, as though burned without flame. From that dead earth, thin tendrils had begun to push upward, wet and glistening, no thicker than a quill, but growing even as they watched.

Black vines and fungal mats. They left at once.

The report reached Mithrin within the week.

The High Council convened in the eastern chamber, the one reserved for matters of war and state preservation. The chamber itself had stood since before the Fade, its stone columns carved in the old elven manner, their surfaces bearing names of victories no living voice could fully recall. Those present took their places beneath that long memory, and for a time, none spoke.

At last Councilor Thalenir rose. His voice carried the formal cadence of Mithrin's elder bloodlines, precise and controlled.

"This is not a raid," he said. "This is extermination. An answer must be rendered with equal certainty."

Others agreed at once. Calls rose for the mobilization of the eastern legions, for the sealing of the mountain roads, for retaliation that would remind the goblin clutches of the limits of their reach.

But dissent came swiftly.

"Goblins do not do this," said Marrec of the Trade Houses, a man whose experience lay in coin and treaties rather than blood. "They steal. They ambush. They flee. They do not erase."

His words might have carried the day, had the skins not arrived.

They had been delivered by courier from the caravan master, wrapped in oilcloth and sealed against decay. When the wrappings were removed, several councilors recoiled despite themselves.

Human skin. Removed with care. Stretched flat.

And upon each surface, carved with obsessive precision, were runes.

The Flay-Scribes' work.

High Scholar Eryndor examined them in silence for some time. When he finished, he did not look up at once.

"It is a harvest," he said.

The word settled over the chamber like frost.

"They name it a gift," he continued. "Offered to the Clutch-Mother. And they name us also. Not as enemy. Not as prey. As food."

No one spoke after that.

The truth, once voiced, could not be softened. The Black Root had risen from its depths. It no longer contented itself with tunnel wars and isolated killings. It had begun to consume the surface itself, not merely flesh, but memory, identity, presence. Herakal had not been conquered. It had been erased.

In the Undermarket in Voolnishart, the news spread faster than any official proclamation.

Men and women who dealt in secrets spoke of disappearances within the noble districts. Servants vanished between rooms. Messengers failed to arrive at destinations only streets apart. A courier swore he had seen goblins near the Veil Gates, standing upright and unafraid beneath the wards that had barred them for centuries.

Others spoke of stranger things.

Of graves disturbed from below. Of black growths pushing through burial shrouds. Of Ktala vines blooming in the chests of the dead.

Whether truth or invention, the effect was the same. Fear moved where the goblins themselves had not yet walked.

In answer, the Council issued its decree.

The proclamation was read aloud in every guildhall, every mercenary court, every tavern where coin might purchase violence.

"For each verified Pale-Hive or Black Root goblin slain and presented before Mithrin's appointed authorities," the herald intoned, his voice steady beneath the Council's seal, "a bounty of ten gold crowns shall be rendered in full measure, without delay or diminution."

The crowd stirred at that.

The herald continued.

"Those who bear distinctive trophies, the bone piercings worn by Chain-Berserkers, the hornpipes carried by Screech-Kin, or the blood-veiled fetishes of their Root-Speakers, shall receive compensation in excess of the base bounty, according to the rarity and confirmation of the item."

A murmur rose now, quieter, more intent.

"And those rare few who deliver sigils of the Clutch-Mothers themselves, carved in bone or living bark, shall receive no less than one hundred crowns, and the recorded honor of their deed within Mithrin's Hall of Deeds."

He paused then, allowing the weight of that sum to settle fully.

“And further,” he said, “by authority of the High Council, any citizen who undertakes this labor in service to Mithrin shall be granted clemency for minor transgressions recorded against their name, access to state alchemical treatment for injuries sustained through Ktala exposure, and lawful writ to cross all provincial and national borders without impediment, for the duration of their service.”

It was not an invitation.

It was permission.

Permission for violence. Permission for survival.

Mithrin would not invade the Pale-Hive depths. It would not commit its legions to die in tunnels that devoured armies whole. But it would pay, and pay well, for those willing to ensure the rot did not spread.

Its generals had advised no other course.

They knew the nature of the enemy. The Pale-Hive clutches did not build cities that could be besieged. They did not hold ground that could be conquered. Their domain was a labyrinth of tunnels and alchemical warrens beneath the Wytherfold Mountains, passages that shifted and collapsed at will, where walls bled and the air itself could drive men mad.

Veterans who had entered those depths spoke of hatch-wards where goblin young fed upon one another beneath the watch of Root-Speakers. Of murals painted not upon stone, but upon living flesh. Of chanting that did not cease.

No army could survive there.

So Mithrin chose containment.

At the Pass of Larrenhollow, where the Wytherfolds opened at last into the fertile eastern plains, three bastions rose in haste. Dwarven engineers oversaw their construction, their hands steady even beneath the urgency of Mithrin’s coin. The fortifications bristled with engines of war, scorpions and ballistae, flame-belchers designed not to repel armies, but to scour infiltration parties before they could reach the lowlands.

Within those walls, alchemists prepared incendiaries and anti-Ktala compounds in constant rotation. Rangers stood watch day and night, trained not only to detect goblin movement, but to recognize the first signs of madness in their own comrades.

Rumors persisted that the goblins were already digging beneath them.

Still, the line held.

Beyond it lay Mithrin’s heartland. Its farms. Its children.

The bounty drew others.

Mercenaries arrived in steady numbers, drawn by coin, by vengeance, by hunger.

The Ash-Fangs came first, veterans of Kadathe’s wars, their armor scarred and their expressions harder still. They accepted their writs without ceremony.

Black Belva arrived soon after, her immense form hauling a cart filled with traps blackened by age and use. When asked why she had come, she answered simply, “I owe them pain.”

From across the sea came the Mourn-Dagger Company, their crusade long since failed, their faith replaced by pragmatism. They bowed when they received Mithrin’s writ, though none pretended loyalty.

They hunted.

They killed.

They brought back heads.

And with them came darker consequences. False trophies. Innocents slain in error or convenience. And in the Undermarket, the first whispers of Ktala sold in secret, its terrible promise traded for coin by those who did not understand what they carried.

The Council knew.

But they did not stop it, Shinazazi did, for the laws of the undermarket were absolute under the judgment of Yazed's daughter the Ghostwidow.

The Pale-Hive clutches had endured for centuries. Their roots ran deeper than any blade could reach. Every death fed their growth. Every failure strengthened their resolve.

Still, Mithrin endured.

The bounties tally rose. The bastions stood. The mercenaries hunted.

And beneath it all, the earth listened.

One evening, near the walls of Larrenhollow, a mercenary captain stood beside the fire, his teeth broken from older wars, his hands steady as he counted coin.

"Let them come," he said to those gathered near him. "Every head they raise is another crown in our purse."

He smiled as he said it.

Far beyond the firelight, in the dark wind that flowed down from the mountains, a horn answered.

It was not sounded by men.

Council briefings hardened in tone.

"This is not random violence," one marshal stated flatly. "They are encroaching and taking land, settlements, even a town. And wherever they retreat to, those places must be found."

Orders followed swiftly. Border populations were urged to relocate inward. Mercenary companies were contracted for long-term service. Scouts were dispatched not to chase, but to *map retreat routes*. Counterstrikes were discussed in terms of containment, not victory.

And for the first time in centuries, the Mithrin Council issued open bounties.

By the time word of all this reached Papal, through official notices, merchant anxiety, and the strained voices of guards rotating south, the facts were no longer in dispute.

More hosts had appeared.

The Inkling were feeding.

The Palehive were clearing ground.

And the seal, the mark, the brand, the tattoo, they all pointed to Henigus or an acolyte of old rising again to plague the world.

What They Chose to Hold

The decision had already been made once. They would go northeast, trace the devastation to its source, confirm Henigus' hand, and, if it came to it, call the weight of the world down upon him. That resolve did not

falter. What changed was the way the reports arrived. Not as distant accounts or tidy summaries, but as collapsing area, farms erased, villages hollowed out, fires seen where no fires should burn. Papal, still raw and rebuilding, lay squarely in the center of it all, far from borders that once meant safety and now meant nothing at all.

Eeyagoo stood in the square with the others as the last message was read aloud. His hands were clenched so tightly that his claws bit into his palms, pain he did not seem to notice. "If we go," he said quietly, almost to himself, "we leave them." Shardra did not answer at first. Her gaze had gone distant, measuring roads and time, weighing loss against loss. When she finally spoke, it was not as an argument or hesitation. "No," she said. "We do not." It was said as a responsibility, settled and immovable.

So, they sent word instead. To Cirksher first, urgent, blunt, unadorned. Guard the northwest. Seal the roads. Light the fires wide and clear so no goblin could test the dark without dying for it. Cirksher's reply came back steady and confident. Its walls were old stone, thick and proven, its towers already bristling with ballista and disciplined crossbow lines. *We will hold*. Papal had no such walls.

They sent next to Taurdain, where rebuilding still dragged like a wounded limb. The Knights of Ukko answered with regret and resolve. Men would come, but weeks were needed. Steel and faith could not outrun distance. Then came the mountain signal, and with it a different weight entirely. The ring Shardra had earned still mattered. The reply came at dawn, carried by runner and echo both: *Old Speaker, we will come. Look for us on the morn, three days hence*. Shardra smiled, truly smiled, for the first time any of them had seen in weeks.

Voolnishart's response was quieter but immediate. A squad arrived before dusk on the second day, disciplined and grim, already familiar with what fear smelled like. Shardra recognized several faces from the arrest. One guard broke formation and approached her openly, a thing some would have called bold and others foolish. "I wanted you to know," he said, voice steady but tight, "it was just work. Honest work. I had nothing to do with his schemes. I fed my family. That's all." Shardra looked him over, his armor, his stance, the sword she had once knocked clean from his hand, and nodded once. "Good," she said. "Glad to have you." Relief struck him like a blow. He returned to his unit lighter than when he had approached.

Papal moved with a purpose born of fear and practice learned too late. Those living beyond the fields were brought inside. Livestock was driven into hastily raised pens. Watchtowers went up almost overnight, simple, ugly things, but solid. The guards worked with the ease of men who had built defenses before and wished they had done so sooner.

When the giants arrived, panic rippled through the town until Shardra stepped forward. Over a dozen of them came, more than Papal had ever seen together. Their leader was **Krelik Greerson**, eldest son of the new chieftain, the same who had faced Shardra in the final ring bout. No words were spoken of who did *not* stand among them. No questions were asked. Pride was a powerful thing, and it held its silence well. Shardra made no mention of the absence. Neither did Krelik.

The greeting looked violent. Shardra set her weapon aside, and Krelik did the same. They clashed, shoulder to shoulder, forearm to forearm, ritual combat, brief and thunderous. Dust flew. Laughter followed. When they broke apart, it was with grins and clasped arms. Introductions were made, explanations offered. The giants took their positions without complaint. More would have weakened the clan hold. This alone was a statement.

A mercenary company out of Voolnishart arrived on the third night.

They came hard and fast, hooves muffled, armor darkened, banners furled until the last moment. The Night Hooves were known along the eastern roads and feared on them, cavalry bred for speed and silence, for decisive violence delivered before an enemy could properly understand what was happening. Their warhorses were trained to charge without scream or panic, to run with heads low and breath controlled, iron-

shod hooves striking earth like measured drumbeats rather than thunder. Even before they dismounted, Papal felt the shift their presence brought. Here was motion. Here was the offense.

Their leader, Arietta Westwind, dismounted in the square with a confidence that bordered on theatrical. She was young, but there was nothing soft about her; her armor bore the wear of use rather than parade, and the way she moved spoke of long hours in the saddle and longer nights spent riding blind. She listened as reports were relayed, as scouts spoke of fires and numbers and movement too disciplined to be a coincidence. She nodded, once or twice, but impatience showed through in the tightening of her jaw.

“Hundreds,” she repeated when the estimate was given. “Goblin hundreds.”

There was no fear in her voice. If anything, there was relief.

She laid out her intent plainly. The Night Hooves did not exist to stand behind lines or wait for a siege. Their strength was momentum. Shock. Speed weaponized. A night charge, silent until the moment of impact, armored cavalry punching straight through the heart of whatever mass dared to gather. Mounted archers would harry the flanks, scatter anything that broke, and ride them down before cohesion could be reformed. It was what they had done before. It was what they had always done.

Warnings were offered, measured, restrained, and more than once.

These were not raiding bands driven by hunger or fear. The movements were wrong. Too clean. Too patient. Eeyagoo spoke of things he had seen before, of goblins shaped by something else entirely, disciplined past instinct. One of the Voolnishart guards mentioned the mercenaries who had already vanished farther north, not in battle but in absence. Even Shardra spoke, briefly, of numbers meaning less than purpose, of enemies who did not break the way others did.

Arietta listened.

Then she smiled, slow and certain.

“There is no goblin menace,” she said, “that can stand against armored cavalry moving at full charge. Not in daylight. Not at night. Not ever.”

Pride was a powerful thing. It filled the gaps where doubt might have lived.

By dawn, they were gone.

They rode north under the cover of darkness, hooves wrapped, armor dulled, voices kept low. No horns sounded. No banners were raised. The Night Hooves vanished into the tree line as they always did, swift and silent, confident in the violence they carried with them.

They were not seen again.

No bodies were found. No broken tack. No bloodied ground churned by hooves or trampled grass marked a place where a stand had been made. There were no survivors, no stragglers, no wounded riders limping back under the cover of shame or luck. The Night Hooves rode out, and the land closed behind them as if they had never passed through it at all.

That knowledge settled over Papal like frost.

The loss of the Night Hooves did not bring panic. It brought quiet. Their absence was not argued over or embellished; it was simply accounted for, another fact added to a growing list of things that no longer required debate. Confidence bled out of Papal in small, practical ways. Boasts ceased. Plans were pared back and rewritten. Men who had spoken earlier of decisive blows and meeting the enemy in open ground now spoke only of angles, distances, and fields of fire.

Discipline replaced hope.

Watch rotations doubled, not from fear, but from acceptance. Shifts ran long and no one complained. Sleep was taken where it could be found rather than where it was comfortable. Orders were repeated back, not out of habit, but to ensure nothing had been misunderstood. Each instruction was treated as though it might be the last one given before blood was shed.

The fires changed. What had first been meant as a warning became a measurement. Each torch was placed with care, the spaces between them checked, and then checked again until shadow fell only where it was meant to fall. White stones were moved and moved again until every archer knew the exact distance to the line beyond which arrows were loosed without hesitation. Children learned to recognize the markers, and even those with no training understood where safety ended.

The giants changed as well. Laughter faded from them, replaced by stillness. They crouched lower to the ground, watching the dark with patience that was no longer ceremonial. Krelik Greerson spoke little, but when he did, it was to ask about sightlines, ground firmness, and how far a body could be thrown without breaking formation. No one remarked on his brother's absence. The question did not need to be asked.

Eeyagoo stopped offering warnings. He no longer needed to. The loss had taught the lesson more cleanly than words ever could. Instead, he walked the line, checking knots, testing spear hafts, counting arrows, and then counting them again. When he spoke, it was only to correct a stance or quietly redirect someone half a step to the left or right. Mimi stayed close, unusually still, her attention fixed outward rather than inward.

Shardra watched it all without comment. That silence was not indecision; it was trust. She had seen armies break and had seen them hold, and she recognized the difference in the way Papal now moved. No one spoke of riding out. No one suggested meeting the enemy beyond the line. The town had learned its shape, and it would not abandon it again.

When scouts reported movement too close to the northwest, there was no argument over numbers. When refugees arrived, hollow-eyed, shaking, they were taken in without question and placed away from the line, their stories listened to but not debated. And when the first shapes finally reached the dim edge of the fire-marked line, too quiet and too many, no horn sounded.

There was no need.

Everyone already knew what came next.

Eeyagoo worked almost ceaselessly, resting only long enough to ensure his hands remained steady and his work flawless. Every weapon was checked and then checked again, edges tested, grips adjusted, balance confirmed by feel rather than sight. At last he took out the bandolier of throwing spikes. This might be when he needed them. He had nearly used them during the ambush, but the time it would have taken to position the bandolier properly might have been his downfall. This time, it would already be where it needed to be.

He coated every blade with venom and poison, carefully and methodically, then let them dry before coating them again with wax to seal and protect the mixtures until the moment they found their mark. The work was slow, deliberate, and unforgiving of distraction. When it was done, he turned his attention to Mimi.

He spoke slowly and carefully, choosing each word with intent. "Battle comes," he told her. "Fight. These sting, kill. Quick in, out. No stay. Avoid. Hide. Strike again. Stay close. Work with. Protect home." Mimi nodded at certain parts, her attention catching and holding on some meanings more easily than others. Where she did not nod, he repeated himself, saying the same thing in different ways, reshaping the idea until he hoped it would settle. At last, she said, "Protect tree," in his own voice. He did not correct her.

Nearby, Shardra unwrapped the Barrier Blade and tested its feel. She picked up the Torc of the Unyielding, considered it for a long moment, and then set it back into the pack. When she rose, she held the sword in her left hand and Rimeheart in her right, and began to move.

The practice that followed was brutal.

She swung in massive, sweeping arcs, cuts meant to break lines rather than duel individuals, each movement controlled despite its violence. The sight of it drew attention without effort. Giants stopped what they were doing and watched in silence, respect and awe plain in their stillness. After a time, she stopped, gathered thick, tough leather, and wrapped her wrists tightly. Then she began again.

This time, the movements were more specific, more deliberate. Each attack was committed fully to a single weapon, but she favored the sword as protection, intercepting, redirecting, and guarding space, while Rimeheart delivered the killing force. It was exhausting to watch; a style built not for elegance but for survival amid overwhelming hordes.

Shardra stopped long enough for Eeyagoo to see the strain in her wrists before she finished binding them. The leather was thick and stiff, pulled tight with practiced force, not to brace a wound but to prevent one. He watched the way she flexed her hands afterward, testing range and pressure, and understood enough to ask.

“You change style,” he said. “Different fight.”

She nodded. “The Barrier Blade is defense,” she said, lifting the sword slightly so he could see how naturally it settled into her left hand. “It holds. Turns blows. Stops arrows that would gut someone smaller.” Her right hand tightened around Rimeheart. “I can wield this one-handed when I need to. My size allows it. But the weight is wrong when the movement is unfamiliar. Fighting a horde is not the same as breaking a small group.” She tapped the bindings. “The strain will tear muscle before the battle is done if I don’t reinforce. An injured wrist ends me faster than any blade.”

Eeyagoo followed her gaze as she looked toward the line where archers and spearmen waited. “Arrows,” he said.

“Yes,” Shardra answered. “Mass fire. Not skill shots, volume. It’s the one thing even giants can’t ignore.” She turned then, raising her voice so the nearby giants could hear without shouting. They had already begun to gather, drawn by tone more than words.

“We do not charge blind,” she told them. “You are not here to drown in bodies. Leaders first. Break the will, break the shape. Let the soldiers and town clear the rest.” Krelik Greerson listened without interruption, his arms folded, his expression set. When she spoke of unknown enemies, his jaw tightened.

“Unknowns draw you in,” she continued. “They want you surrounded. Don’t let them. Stay together. Move together. If one of you steps forward, the rest follow. If one of you falls back, the rest close ranks.” She glanced back to Eeyagoo. “Ranged troops thin the lines. We wait. We don’t engage until it’s reasonable.”

No one argued. Not now.

The talk turned next to fire. Shardra did not soften her voice. “They burn what they can’t take,” she said. “So we prepare for that.” A fire brigade was assigned before the sentence finished. Buckets were gathered from every home, wells marked and guarded, cisterns cleared of clutter. Oil and pitch were brought up from stores and broken into smaller caches, placed where arrows could reach them quickly. Crossbowmen were positioned with clear lanes and orders to wait, not to hurry, but to ignite. Whole stretches of approach were mapped not for killing, but for denial.

By the time the first goblins entered the field of fire, nothing was left to chance.

The Battle of Papal

They came at first light, as Palehive forces so often did, when the ground was cold, the mind dulled by fatigue, and watchfires burned low. From the hedgerows and shallow folds of the land east of Papal, the goblins emerged in loose waves, not yet screaming, not yet running. Their banners were low, their chains slack, their war-callers silent. To an untrained eye, it might have looked like caution. It was not. It was confidence born of habit. Papal was a market town, not a fortress. It had no great walls, no towers worth naming. The Palehive had broken harder places.

What they did not know, what they could not know, was that Papal had been waiting.

The fields before the town had been measured in advance. Stones had been stacked and marked. Range posts driven low into the soil had been blackened with pitch, so they vanished at a distance but were known to every archer and thrower by heart. Oil trenches lay hidden beneath straw and frost-silvered grass. Crossbow slits had been cut into hastily reinforced barns and stone outbuildings. The wells were guarded. Buckets stood ready. Fires were banked, not bright. And behind the first line, out of sight, giants waited with their shoulders hunched and hands resting on weapons meant for siege, not skirmish.

The Palehive advanced.

When they crossed the first range marker, the horns sounded, not from the goblins, but from Papal. Low. Measured. One call only. The archers rose as one, Mithrin longbows and heavy crossbows snapping upright, their strings already waxed against the cold. The first volley was fast, dense, and deadly.

Goblins died before they understood they were under fire. Bloodvine-maddened berserkers pitched forward with shafts through eye and throat, momentum carrying them another step or two before they collapsed into the mud. Chain-bearers went down tangled in their own weapons, links biting into flesh as they fell. The Palehive answered as they always did, by surging forward, howling now, pain and loss only feeding the frenzy seeded by Ktala and Bloodroot alike.

The second volley burned.

Pitch-soaked arrows arced low and struck the forward ranks just as they reached the hidden trenches. Fire took the straw, then the oil beneath. Flame raced along the prepared lines, a sudden wall that did not stop the goblins so much as consume them. Those who stumbled into the burning cuts flailed and screamed, dragging others down with them. The smoke was thick and foul, carrying the bitter-sweet reek of alchemy and rot. Still, they came on.

They crossed the marker for where the giants could land their stones. Then the giants rose up and dropped tons of stone on them before they could reach the Papal lines.

From behind the low ridge north of the field, massive figures stood to their full height, silhouettes against the pale morning sky. Stones the size of barrels were hurled with crushing force, each impact a brutal erasure. Goblins vanished under them, bodies broken so completely that there was nothing left to scream. Great spears followed, tree-length shafts tipped with iron, cast end over end into the densest knots of attackers. Where they struck, lines ceased to exist. The Palehive war-callers finally found their voices then, shrieking commands through bone horns and chain-rattles, driving the survivors onward toward the defensive line before the throwing could finish them.

The Giant Who Held the Line

They followed **Krelik Greerson** without question.

He was not the tallest of the giants present, nor the strongest, but he was the one who had fought men before, real armies, drilled and stubborn, not the howling masses that now broke themselves against Papal's fields. Krelik moved with economy, his orders given by gesture as much as voice. A raised fist halted the stone-throwers. A downward sweep sent them casting again. When goblins pressed too close, he stepped forward alone, planting his feet, becoming an anchor others could move around.

His weapon was a slab-faced maul, its haft wrapped and rewrapped until it fit his hands perfectly. He did not swing wildly. Each blow was measured, angled to shatter bodies and clear space. When the goblins surged, he met them with shoulder and steel, breaking their momentum so the pikes could do their work. Twice he took arrows, once in the thigh, once skidding along his ribs, and twice he tore them free without slowing, blood darkening the frost at his feet.

It was Krelik who spotted the first chain-lord forcing its way through the press, dragging others forward with it. He did not shout. He simply turned, pointed, and the heroes moved.

They had learned from the Night Hooves, though poorly. Some bore shields scavenged and reinforced, others advanced in tighter packs, heads low. Here and there, a goblin moved with a limp too stiff to be fresh, or with armor dented inward by a blow no foot soldier should have survived. The memory of hooves and lances clung to them like a bruise that would never fade.

When they reached the pikes, the sound of battle changed.

Steel met flesh in a grinding, intimate way. The town guard held in disciplined ranks, shields locked, pikes braced and leveled. Goblins impaled themselves in their frenzy, crawling up the shafts even as they died, snapping and clawing until shield-bearers crushed their skulls with rim and boss. The line bent but did not break. Behind it, giants waded in, each step a commitment, each swing of club or axe clearing space with terrifying finality.

The heroes moved where the fighting was thickest.

They did not waste themselves on the endless press of fodder. They hunted shapes that mattered, goblins with iron collars heavy with chain, those with bone masks etched in Bloodroot sigils, the war-callers whose shrieks cut through the din. One by one, those voices fell silent. A chain-lord was torn from his footing and dashed into the ground so hard the earth shuddered. A war-caller died with his horn still between his teeth, throat crushed before he could sound retreat that would never come.

The Palehive did not rout. That was their doom.

Driven by Ktala and bound by Bloodroot, they surged again and again into killing ground that any rational force would have abandoned. Fire lines were reignited as needed, archers shifted targets with practiced ease, and stones continued to fall until the giants' throwing arms were slick with blood and sweat. When goblin climbers tried to flank through ditches and hedges, they were met by waiting blades and close-quartered volleys at ranges too short to miss.

Shardra at the Breach

Shardra did not charge. She stepped forward. Her advance was deliberate, timed to the moment the shield wall flexed but did not fail. Rimeheart rested in her hands like a tool meant for this work, its edge already rimed white. Her other arm bore the Barrier Sword, angled not to strike but to receive. When arrows fell, they shattered or skidded aside, their force bleeding harmlessly into the enchantment.

When she swung, it was not at individuals.

The axe moved in broad, murderous arcs, each cleave calculated to pass through one body and into the next. Goblins came apart under it, torsos split, spines severed, heads torn free by momentum alone. The frost followed the blade, stiffening flesh mid-motion so those not fully struck still stumbled, slowed, and became targets for the line behind her.

She shifted constantly, using her size not as blunt dominance but as control, stepping into gaps, forcing enemies into narrow lanes where numbers counted for nothing. When a berserker leapt for her face, she caught it on the Barrier Sword and drove it down, pinning it long enough for the axe to end it cleanly.

Behind her, the line held.

By the second hour, the field was a ruin. The dead lay thick enough to change the footing, and mud churned into a slick red paste. Wounded goblins crawled or writhed, some still fighting, others too broken to do more than twitch. The defenders did not yet advance. They held, killed, and conserved their strength, knowing better than to overreach against an enemy that did not know fear.

Eeyagoo Learns What Distance Means

Eeyagoo did not stand in the line.

He moved just behind it, small and precise, eyes never stopping. This was the first time he had thrown the spikes in battle, not as traps or tools, but as weapons meant to thin a crowd before it reached killing range. He tested them once, then adjusted.

The spikes flew low and fast, skipping through legs and bellies, punching into joints already weakened by Bloodroot and poor armor. He did not aim to kill. He aimed to cripple, hamstrings severed, knees shattered, hands ruined so weapons fell uselessly into the mud. A wounded goblin slowed three others. A fallen one tripped five. He ran and tumbled, struck, and retreated. He managed to kill a palehive before they even saw him.

When chain-bearers surged, he shifted targets, planting spikes into links and collars so weight and momentum became enemies. He darted forward under Shardra's shadow, retrieved spent spikes from corpses, and was gone again before arrows could find him.

It was efficient. It was unemotional. It worked.

Mimi Between Shadows

Mimi was never where the enemy thought she was, if they saw her at all.

She moved constantly, clinging to Shardra's back when arrows fell thickest, then vanishing to Eeyagoo's shoulder, then into the churned ground itself. Her stinger struck from blind angles, always at exposed flesh: the base of the skull, the soft places under the arm, the back of the thigh.

She did not linger. Sting, vanish. Sting, vanish.

When a goblin tried to flank, Mimi was there first, her venom dropping it into spasms that Eeyagoo finished without breaking stride. When Shardra's focus narrowed under pressure, Mimi struck at what Shardra could not see, a quiet correction that kept the giantess moving and alive.

Once, a volley came in low and fast. Mimi flattened herself against the Barrier Sword beside Shardra, wings tucked tight, trusting the steel and the woman who held it. When the arrows passed, she was already moving again.

Steel of Papal

Not all the stories belonged to giants and heroes.

Captain Narik Hesst held the center with his pike captains, his voice raw by the second hour but unbroken. Sergeant Ilwen Marr lost two fingers to a chain blade and kept fighting one-handed until she collapsed from blood loss. Old Jorrik, a cooper by trade, stood in the fire brigade and smothered flames even as arrows thudded into the dirt around him, refusing to abandon the well.

Archers like Lysa Fen and Corren Bale counted their shots aloud, passing fresh quivers without looking, never breaking rhythm. When the order came to shift fire left, they did so as one, trusting the range markers they had memorized days earlier.

They were not glorious.

They were necessary.

The Thing at the Line

It was the first of the Bloodroot horrors to reach the pikes.

Two had already been brought down at distance, slowed by stones, broken by massed fire, finished only when giants closed and crushed them apart with weapons meant for walls. Those deaths had been loud, unmistakable, and costly. The third came differently.

It emerged from the smoke and bodies not as a charge, but as an irresistible force.

The pike wall bowed before it, shields grinding together as men leaned back with everything they had. The thing was ogre-sized once, perhaps larger, but now its proportions were wrong. Its chest had been split and re-knit with vine and knot, ribs bridged by woody growth that flexed instead of breaking. One arm ended in something like a club of root and bone fused, the other dragged a length of chain grown into its flesh, links swallowed by bark and blackened sap.

Pikes struck it, thudded, bit shallow, stuck, and snapped. Where steel should have found tendon or joint, it met dense, fibrous resistance. The thing did not roar. It made a wet, grinding sound, like branches being twisted under strain.

A shield captain went down under its first blow. Not killed, thrown. The impact folded shield and arm together and hurled the man back into the second rank. The line shuddered.

Shardra saw it and moved.

She was already moving before the call went up, shouldering past the rear ranks, Barrier Sword angled forward to catch the first wild swing as she entered the breach. The impact rang like a bell struck. The enchantment flared, white light skidding along the blade as the force bled off into the ground beneath her boots.

She did not try to match its strength.

She stepped inside it.

Rimeheart came around in a brutal, lateral sweep that struck the creature's torso with enough force to stagger it half a step. Frost bloomed across bark and flesh alike, cracking sap channels, slowing the flex of vine-muscle. The blow mattered. It was the first thing that did.

Eeyagoo was already at her side, low and fast. He hurled a spike into what should have been the back of the knee. The weapon buried itself, but the limb did not buckle. There was no tendon to sever, no joint to fail. The spike was swallowed, wood knitting around it even as he watched.

“Wrong,” he hissed, more to himself than anyone else.

Mimi struck next, darting in under the creature’s arm, stinger driving deep. The venom did nothing. No spasm. No falter. The thing turned too fast for something its size, sap oozing where the sting had pierced, already thickening.

It swung again.

Shardra took it on the Barrier Sword, boots digging furrows in the churned earth as she absorbed the force. Eeyagoo ducked under her arm, retrieving his spike from the creature’s leg with a wrench that tore free splinters instead of blood. He shifted targets, throwing not at limbs but at the thick knots where vine met bone, testing for weakness that wasn’t there.

The pike wall behind them was folding back, men retreating step by step as the Bloodroot horror forced its bulk forward. Shields cracked. One pike shattered outright, the splintered haft whipping back into a guard’s face. Another man was dragged screaming into the thing’s mass, crushed, and lost.

Shardra roared then, not in rage, but command.

She advanced, forcing the creature to focus on her alone. Rimeheart rose and fell in heavy, committed blows. Not cuts, chops. Each strike landed with the full weight of her body behind it, biting into the woody lattice that passed for flesh. The axe stuck once, buried deep, and for a heartbeat, she was exposed as the thing’s clubbed arm came around.

The blow landed like a hammer, ribs flexed and some broke it was enough to stagger her, but not stop her.

Shardra ripped the axe free, breath steaming, arms burning. The creature was slower now. Not wounded in any way that resembled mortality, but compromised. The frost had spread, stiffening vines, making the unnatural joints grind instead of flow.

She pressed the advantage.

Blow after blow landed in the same place, shoulder, neck, chest, each one widening cracks, tearing loose chunks of bark-flesh that fell away twitching. Where sap spilled, it froze, locking movement. The thing tried to compensate, tried to raise its root-club again.

Eeyagoo leapt onto its back.

It was reckless, and he knew it, but distance had failed them. He drove the Bonespike deep into the thick growth along its spine, not to kill, but to anchor, to limit movement, to give Shardra time. His Cutter hacked away at the woody armor to the softer vines beneath. Mimi clung to him, then sprang, stinging again and again at exposed seams, distracting, blinding.

The Bloodroot horror staggered.

Shardra did not hesitate.

She planted her feet and brought Rimeheart down in a final, two-handed overhand strike that split the creature’s fibrous root core. The axe bit through vine, through bone, through whatever else had been layered there, and this time the frost went deep. The mass shuddered, sagged, and collapsed inward, its structure finally failing.

It fell forward, dead weight, tearing free of the spikes that had pinned it, crashing into the mud just short of the pike line.

No cheer went up. One pikeman produced oil and poured it into the gaping wound then set it alight. Shardra nodded.

Men stared at it in silence, chests heaving, weapons dripping sap and blood. Shardra stood over the ruin of it, shoulders rising and falling, axe resting against the ground as she steadied herself. Eeyagoo slid down from its back, hands shaking as he wiped them clean. Mimi perched on Shardra's shoulder, wings tight, watching the corpse as if expecting it to rise again.

It did not.

The pike wall reformed behind them. Orders were shouted. The line closed.

And the battle went on.

It ended not with a trumpet, but with a silence.

The last Palehive leader, a Bloodroot-bearer swollen and black-veined, fell beneath concentrated fire and steel. When it died, something went out of the horde. The Bloodroot that remained were burned readily, without guidance, its flames bright and short-lived. Berserkers continued to charge until they were cut down to the last, but the cohesion was gone. A handful of elite goblins broke and fled, sprinting into fields already marked by archers who had never stopped watching.

Three hours after the first horn, the fighting was done.

Papal still stood. Smoke rose from a few scattered fires, quickly smothered by the waiting brigades. The wounded were gathered methodically, defenders first, then enemies, where mercy was still possible, though it was seldom asked for and never given lightly. Archers remained on the line, strings taut, eyes scanning for movement. Giants knelt or sat where they stood, armor dented, skin cut and bruised, tending wounds with grim efficiency.

The field beyond the town was something else entirely.

Those who examined the Palehive dead later spoke little of it. Bodies bore signs of long abuse, bones warped by alchemy, flesh scarred by ritual, eyes clouded by substances no healer would name. Ktala had hollowed them out, leaving only hunger and obedience behind. It was not an army so much as a contagion given weapons.

But that was for later reckoning.

For that day, the chronicle records only this: Papal endured. A major Palehive raid was broken utterly. Skill, preparation, and disciplined violence had prevailed over numbers and madness. It was the first true victory against a force many had believed unstoppable.

And it would not be the last.

After the battle, the field could not be cleared for two full days. What remained could not be treated as a simple charnel ground. The dead did not lie as men or beasts ordinarily do. Bodies were knotted together by chain, vine, and collapsed mass. Limbs rested at unnatural angles, suggesting they had stiffened before death. Many corpses continued to twitch for hours, not from lingering life but from residual alchemical and fungal reaction. Fires were kept low and tightly controlled while examinations were conducted. Scavengers were barred, and no burials were begun.

Elith of the Verdant Menagerie and Eeyagoo of Papal took charge of the first examinations, assisted by three alchemists from Mithrin and a rotating cordon of guards. Precautions were observed as a matter of judgment

rather than certainty: treated wraps over mouth and eyes, minimal skin contact, tools cleaned often and destroyed when doubt arose. Even at the outset, the work was framed as provisional. What was present on the field resisted easy naming, and no conclusion was offered without reservation.

The bodies suggested prolonged distress before death, but the causes could not be cleanly separated. Discoloration and veining did not follow familiar patterns. Joints showed swelling and irregular growth that might indicate cycles of injury and repair, though whether from regimen, exposure, or something else remained unclear. Teeth and gums were compromised in many cases, scars were poorly healed, and bone sometimes reknitted around foreign material. Internally, organs appeared altered, enlarged or stiffened, marked by nodules and filamentous structures, but the extent to which this reflected disease, alchemical saturation, or post-mortem change could not be determined in the field. Several stomachs contained pale mats threaded with darker lines that reacted faintly hours after death; whether this represented active growth or residual chemistry was left open.

Examination of the skulls prompted a halt. Patterns were observed, regions darkened or diminished, fine strands present where healthy tissue might be expected, but the interpretations varied. Some strands appeared integrated rather than superficial, yet no claim was made that function could be inferred from form alone. Memory, pain, and fear were discussed cautiously as possible loci of change, but no consensus was recorded. Elith noted only that the alterations did not resemble intoxication as commonly understood. A working supposition was entered, that prolonged exposure to Bloodroot, Ktala, or derivatives might act as a shaping influence rather than a simple poison, but it was marked for further study. Samples were sealed and prepared for transport to Mithrin.

During the first days, several minor wounds among the living began to fester in ways that defied ordinary treatment. Antiseptics slowed progression in some cases and failed in others. Filaments were observed extending from the wounds into surrounding tissue, though whether these were fungal, alchemical, or an interaction of both was uncertain. Eeyagoo exhausted much of his stock, cycling salves and antitoxins while outcomes were recorded. Fire proved decisive but destructive. Trials conducted later on isolated tissue suggested that a compound of refined salt, distilled resin, and a bitter extract might inhibit spread without killing the soil entirely. The finding was preliminary. The formulation was enclosed with the samples, not as an instruction but as a line of inquiry.

One incident sharpened the sense of risk. While preparing a body for burning, a corpse ruptured along the sternum as a mass forced outward, swelling briefly before being destroyed by flame. Whether this was a unique reaction, a late-stage development, or an artifact of saturation could not be said. From that point on, all remaining items were treated as potentially active. Burning proceeded under supervision. Ash pits were sealed and treated, and scouts were sent to observe for further signs.

Additional observations were noted without firm attribution. Several large bodies, initially thought to be beasts, bore signs consistent with ogres altered by means unknown, bone reinforced by growth, muscle interwoven with hardened fibers. These accounted for a disproportionate share of injuries among the defenders. Counts of the dead were estimates only; burning and fragmentation made precision impossible. The absence of Night Hoof bodies was recorded, with possibilities listed rather than conclusions drawn.

The report closed without a verdict. What occurred did not resemble a simple raid, but neither could it be named with confidence. The working assumption, that cultivation and alteration were underway, was advanced to justify urgency, not certainty. Samples were sent to Mithrin for a controlled study. Elith and Eeyagoo began corresponding with local druids to explore ways of clearing contaminated ground without compounding the harm, efforts that would later inform requests for land and crop management. The council was advised that delaying action favored whatever processes had taken root, but that action should proceed, guided by evidence yet to be gathered.

After the defense of Papal, further improvements were made, a great warning belltower constructed to call the outlying people to the town in times of crisis. Walls were erected, quickly but well made. The giants helped with this for several weeks before returning to their clan. They made agreements to mutual defense is needed and some trade.

The hunt for Henigus

And so, they left Papal to find Henigus.

They had been searching for days before Shardra understood the sporadic haphazard pattern. Not what was moving, but more about how and why. The signs were everywhere, harvesting wood and food on a massive scale. Somewhere near was a camp a massive camp.

She walked ahead of them always, where the ground still clear enough for individual tracks. The others followed in the spaces she chose, stepping where she stepped, trusting her reading of the land more than their own sight. She paused often, not because she was uncertain, but because there was too much to read. The first clear sign came when she crouched beside a pine stump cut clean across its width. The break was rough but deliberate, the fibers torn and crushed where enormous force had parted the trunk. She placed her fingers against the exposed grain and felt the direction of the tearing.

“Not felled by a storm,” she said. “Cut and taken.”

Eeyagoo stepped closer and studied the stump, his narrow eyes tracing the uneven fracture.

Shardra shook her head. “Too large for ogres.” She rose and gestured ahead through the thinning stand. “Giant tools or giant hands, they are building.”

Mimi tilted her small head from Shardra’s shoulder, her claws tightening slightly in the weave of cloak. “Build?” she asked.

She nodded once. “They do not pass through. They are making a camp or settlement.”

They moved forward, and the forest told the rest of the story without concealment. Whole stands of trees had been felled in overlapping lines, trunks dragged downhill, branches stripped clean. The ground bore the marks of that labor. Deep grooves carved into soil and stone where weight had been hauled. Flattened stretches where timber had rested before being moved again. They followed those signs without hesitation, her gaze moving from drag marks to compressed earth, assembling the unseen actions into certainty.

“Taken downhill,” she said. “To the north, probably the Garassine Valley or near there.”

Eeyagoo frowned slightly. “For fuel?”

Shardra replied. “For shelter. Giants do not sleep exposed unless forced.”

The farther they went, the quieter the forest became. Not still, but empty. The first carcass lay near a frozen creek bed, a great Riekmoose reduced to bone and stripped hide. Its flesh had been removed in long, efficient sections. The ribs had been cracked and opened, the marrow taken. The skull was shattered, the antlers gone. Nothing of use remained. They found another beyond it, and another. A bear dismantled to its skeleton. A Spineback with its tusks removed and flesh taken entirely. Another Riekmoose reduced to a spill of pale bone and dark stains pressed into the dirt. Dozens of them, scattered across the land in widening intervals.

Mimi dropped lightly from Shardra’s shoulder and walked beside one of the remains, her small form dwarfed by what had once been a creature larger than a horse. She looked up, her voice soft. “They ate everything.”

Shardra nodded. "They hunt constantly. This many mouths cannot wait long, they must have brought stores with them. They strip what they kill. They waste nothing."

Eeyagoo crouched beside the bones and ran his fingers along the scoring marks left behind. He studied their depth and spacing, the angle of entry, the repetition. "Not frenzy," he said. "Work."

"Yes," Shardra said. "They prepare to remain."

She rose and turned slowly, studying the direction of the fallen trees, the drag marks, the paths worn into the earth by repeated passage. She did not guess. She read. "They clear forest to build," she said. "They hunt to sustain. They gather in numbers large enough to hold ground."

Eeyagoo looked past her, into the thinning line of trees and the rising slope beyond. "How many," he asked.

Shardra did not answer immediately. She walked several paces farther and stopped beside an impression in the earth so deep it had cracked the underlying stone. She placed her boot within it. Her entire foot fit easily inside the outline of a single toe. She lifted her gaze and found more of them, spaced with deliberate regularity, converging toward the same destination. She followed their pattern outward, measuring spacing, frequency, and direction, building the number not from assumption, but from accumulation.

"A thousand," she said.

Eeyagoo exhaled quietly. "Not warband."

"No," Shardra replied. "An army."

Mimi climbed back onto her shoulder, her voice quieter now. "They are not hiding."

Shardra shook her head. "They do not need to."

They climbed the final ridge beneath the cover of broken volcanic stone. The forest ended behind them, replaced by blackened earth and hardened flows of ancient magma. Shardra reached the crest first and lowered herself just enough to see. The basin beyond was crowded with hulking forms. Giants stood shoulder to shoulder in loose ranks across the valley floor, their massive silhouettes filling the space between crude structures built from freshly cut timber. Ogres moved among them, hauling stripped trunks into place, raising shelters large enough to house creatures that could not have entered any mortal dwelling. Smoke rose in steady columns from cooking fires. Nothing burned uncontrolled. Nothing moved without purpose. This was not a marching force. This was a preparation ground.

Eeyagoo crawled forward beside her and looked. He watched the giants lift timbers heavier than siege beams and set them into place with practiced ease. He watched the ogres move between them, carrying tools, supplies, and the stripped remains of hunted animals.

"They make camp," he said.

Shardra nodded. "They build staging ground. They will not move until ready."

Mimi leaned forward, her small voice barely more than breath. "So many."

Shardra's gaze swept across the valley, measuring distances, density, structure. "They believe themselves unchallenged here," she said.

At the center of it all stood Henigus. He did not move. He did not need to. Even surrounded by hundreds of his kind, he dominated the valley simply by existing within it.

Henigus was not shaped as giants are shaped. Even before one measured his height, the eye understood something had gone wrong in the making. His frame was immense, but it was not merely size that unsettled. It was density. He was shaped thicker, squat for the height. He seemed carved from something older than

bone, layered in growth that did not follow muscle or sinew but rather accretion, as though each wound, each season, each act of violence had hardened and remained.

His shoulders rose in jagged ridges, plates of flesh thickened and fused like cooled slag. Spines jutted from his back and arms, not ornamental, not symmetrical, but grown as scar tissue grows. His arms, knotted and swollen with corded strength, the forearm thick as a siege pillar. Veins stood dark beneath skin the color of burnt iron, traced with cracks that glowed faintly from within, like embers buried under ash.

His tusks were long, more akin to the trophies of some ancient beast than the natural growth of giant-kin. They framed a mouth built for tearing rather than speech. His beard, if it could still be called that, was a matted cascade of ash-dark strands braided with fragments of iron and bone. Nothing about him suggested adornment. Everything suggested endurance.

Where a cyclops bears a single eye, Henigus bore something else.

The socket was wrong.

It was not empty. It was not scarred.

It had been hollowed and made ready.

Set deep within that ruin of bone and flesh burned the Tyrant Ruby.

It was enormous.

Not a jewel worn or mounted, but a presence forced into the architecture of his skull. The stone was the size of a noble's serving plate, broad and round, its faceted surface spanning nearly the full width of his brow and cheek. It dominated his face completely. There was no seeing Henigus without seeing it. Flesh had drawn back from its edges, stretched and hardened where it met the gem, as though his body had been compelled to reshape itself to accommodate its authority.

The Ruby did not merely reflect light. It generated it.

A deep, arterial red radiance pulsed from within the stone, slow and deliberate, like the beat of a colossal heart buried in crystal. Its glow did not flicker with uncertainty or shift with the movement of flame. It remained steady, controlled, sovereign. When one looked upon it, the rest of his features became secondary. Tusks, scars, bone, and iron were reduced to framing elements around that single, overwhelming center.

The bone of his brow had thickened and curved around it, gripping the gem in a permanent cradle. Veins of darker red spread outward from its edges, threading through flesh and disappearing into his skull, as though the Ruby had grown roots within him. The skin surrounding it bore no sign of healing. It had not recovered from the act of its placement. It had submitted to it.

When the light intensified, it did so without heat.

When it dimmed, it did so without weakness.

It did not behave as fire behaves. It behaved as judgment behaves.

To meet it was to understand immediately that whatever Henigus had once seen with mortal sight had been replaced by something far older and far less forgiving. The Ruby did not sit within his face as an ornament or a wound.

It sat there as the final authority.

And it made the rest of him appear, unmistakably, as its vessel.

In his hand he bore a weapon, massive and terrifying.

The Worldbreaker was not forged. It had been assembled from the remains of something that had once ruled the sky.

Its haft was the length of a ballista beam, wrapped tightly in strips of ancient dragonhide. The hide had blackened with age and use, hardened into a surface that no blade had ever fully pierced. It bore scales still, flattened and cracked, their edges worn smooth where his grip had rested over years beyond counting. Iron bindings reinforced it at intervals, not decorative, but necessary, for without them the weapon might have split under the forces it was made to deliver.

The head of the mace was a massive core of dark metal, misshapen by repeated impact, its surface dented and scarred by collisions with armor, stone, and bone alike. Driven through it, fused into its mass, were teeth.

Dragon teeth.

Not carved. Not shaped.

Whole.

Each one nearly the length of a man, yellowed with age but unbroken, their points still holding the geometry of natural killing. They protruded at uneven angles, some cracked at their bases, others pristine, all fixed in place with a permanence that suggested no mortal smith had set them there. The spaces between them were filled with old blood turned black, packed deep where it had dried and hardened over centuries of violence.

The weapon was too large to be lifted by anything that lived.

Yet he held it easily, dragon and titan borne. A monstrous fusion of forms and powers beyond mortal ken.

It did not hang in his grip as a burden. It rested there as an extension of him, balanced without effort, its immense weight accounted for in the structure of his arm and shoulder. When it moved, it did not swing loosely. It traveled in deliberate arcs, controlled and final.

The dragonhide wrapping bore scorch marks in places. Deep gouges in others. Scars left by attempts to destroy it, all of them failed.

It had endured as he had endured.

Together they formed a single silhouette: the crowned ruin of a Titan and the remains of a dragon shaped into certainty.

Eeyagoo swallowed once, his eyes fixed on the colossal figure. "Enough," he said. "Enough to break anything."

Shardra did not disagree. She withdrew from the ridge, turning back the way they had come. "We return," she said.

Mimi looked back once more before following. "They ready."

Shardra's voice remained steady as she descended. "They are becoming ready."

A quick return

They left the ridge without further word, silent but quick, descending through the broken volcanic stone and back into the dead forest below. There was no need for discussion. They had seen enough. What remained was distance, and distance alone was the enemy now.

Shardra set the pace. She did not run, but neither did she slow. Her strides were long and efficient, chosen to preserve strength across miles that could not be wasted. Eeyagoo followed precisely in her wake, stepping

where she stepped, leaving no additional sign beyond what her passage had already disturbed. Mimi clung close against Shardra's shoulder, her eye turned backward more often than forward, watching the ridge until it vanished behind terrain and distance.

"They follow?" Mimi asked quietly after some time.

Shardra did not turn. "They do not need to," she replied. "They believe themselves secure."

Eeyagoo glanced once over his shoulder as well, his voice low. "We move faster."

Shardra nodded once. "We will."

They reached the outer tree line before nightfall and did not stop. They moved through darkness as they had through daylight, guided by memory, by instinct, and by urgency that required no voice to enforce it. When at last the lights of the nearest town appeared through the trees, they did not slow until they stood within its walls.

Word was sent immediately, not rumor, not speculation, but solid confirmation.

The warnings carried the weight of certainty. Cyclops nearly a hundred, giants double that, and ogres more than five hundred. Timber harvested. Shelters raised. Game stripped from the land. A permanent staging ground established. Henigus present at its center.

This was not a raid. This was preparation for war. There would be no waiting now.

Messengers departed that same hour, riding under seal and command authority that overrode all lesser obligations. Garrisons assigned to Palehive containment were divided at once, their strongest elements withdrawn and reassigned. Frontier watches were thinned. Internal security was risked deliberately, knowingly, because the alternative was annihilation in detail.

Pleas went out to every allied nation. Not simple requests or negotiations. These were calls to obligation, treaty and mutual defense.

Urgent and direct.

This required the whole of the alliance.

Kadathe answered first. Giants of their own blood came south, moving with solemn purpose beside disciplined ranks of human infantry and Dwarves with a smattering of the Kadathe' elves, all hardened by mountain war. Thylor answered with iron certainty. Their ships made landfall bearing master gunners, siege engineers, and artillery crews accompanied by weapons that replaced spells long lost to the Fade. Auris answered in faith and steel. Priests and Knights of the Platinum Throne marched beneath banners marked with the Seven Pillars, their presence alone enough to steady those who saw them arrive. Taurdain answered with speed. Cavalry, knights, and disciplined foot formations assembled and rode north without delay, their commanders understanding fully what waited. Mithrin mustered everything it could send. Wizards whose strength remained in a diminished age, veteran warriors who had survived prior catastrophes, and those rare individuals whose deeds had already entered spoken history.

They gathered outside Papal, where the boats could offload supplies and men easily along the Great Mirathi River. The army formed in less than a week. It was not large enough to be called unstoppable. It was simply everything they had.

The Lord Marshal of Mithrin stood at its center.

His name was **Lord Marshal Kernik Gravlane.**

He was not a young man. His hair had turned to iron gray years before, his face marked by weather and worry rather than age alone. He wore no ceremonial armor, only the practical steel of a field commander who expected to stand within reach of the enemy. He had studied war not as theory, but as consequence. He understood terrain, momentum, supply, morale. He understood loss.

When he spoke, he did not speak of honor. He spoke of need. He stood before the assembled formations where all could see him, human and dwarf, giant and elf alike, and his voice carried not through volume, but because of the stillness of those assembled.

“This enemy gathers not for plunder, but for ending,” he said. “It builds not for defense, but for certainty of victory. If we do not meet it now, it will meet us later, divided and unprepared.”

He made no promises of glory or even survival.

“Many who stand here will not return,” he continued plainly. “You know this. I know this. We stand because there is no one else who can.” The truth settled among them, unsoftened. “This is not asked of you for honor. Honor does not preserve nations. This is asked of you because it is required.” He looked across the gathered host, meeting their eyes without flinching. “And because you are the ones capable of giving it.”

He did not shout, there was no need. The army began to move that same day. Columns formed and advanced northward toward the valley where Henigus waited. Cavalry rode at the flanks. Artillery moved at the center. Infantry advanced in disciplined ranks, their armor and weapons catching the dim northern light.

They marched not with celebration, but with acceptance. They understood what lay ahead. They understood what it would cost. And still, they marched.

He had watched them assemble.

Not in weeks, but mere days, across the slow convergence of necessity that drew distant powers into temporary alignment. Columns that would never otherwise march side by side now shared the same roads, the same mud, the same cold mornings beneath a diminished sun. Mithrin banners moved beside those of Auris. Taurdain steel advanced beside Kadathe’ giants. Even smaller powers, nations whose names held little weight beyond their own borders, had committed what they could.

They came because the alternative was extinction.

An ancient eye

Azhraikar, the first flame, observed from beyond sight, beyond sound, beyond the perception of anything bound to flesh. He saw them clearly.

Knights in articulated plate, their armor scarred from earlier wars that had never fully ended. Footmen wrapped in wool and iron, shoulders stooped beneath the weight of shields and expectation. Archers with hands already blistered from the long march. Northern Giants moving among them like walking towers, each step measured to avoid crushing those they had chosen, for now, to stand beside.

And among them, the few who were different. The ones who had seen enough to understand what stood before them. Heroes, mortals named so by others who needed such names to exist. And even some touched and favored by diminished gods.

They were all going to die. Not because they lacked courage. Because courage was insufficient. The dragon’s attention shifted to the opposing force.

Henigus did not stand at its center.

He did not need to.

His will radiated outward through those who served him, shaping them, hardening them, refining them into something beyond what they had once been. Vast tribes of ogres stood in disciplined ranks that no ogre mind should have been able to maintain. Giants, their bloodlines fractured long ago by time and decline, now stood unified beneath a single purpose. Cyclops, creatures of singular perception and stubborn autonomy, moved in coordinated formations, their massive limbs bearing armor forged not for their protection, but to enhance their function as instruments of annihilation.

This was not an army assembled. It was an army remade.

When the battle began, the cavalry struck just after the first volleys of arrows rained down. The enemy hurled rocks as big as a mans chest, and fired bolts the size of ballista.

Heavy cavalry struck their flanks early. Azhlkar observed the impact with clinical precision. The charge was perfect, disciplined and true. The timing correct and the momentum sufficient to break any conventional force. It failed.

The Cyclops absorbed the impact without collapsing. Their mass alone halted the charge. Horses shattered themselves against bodies too dense to yield. Riders fell beneath the answering counterforce, crushed by weapons that weighed more than the men who were struck. The cavalry did not retreat, the fighting was to dire to crushing to allow it. They died where they stood, fighting to the last.

Archers let fly volleys in disciplined succession, blackening the sky with their effort. The arrows struck. They penetrated flesh. They caused injury. They did not collapse. The ogres advanced through it, despite a few casualties.

Footmen engaged next, pikes and spears first, then swords axes and hammers. The dragon did not watch their deaths individually. There were too many.

Giants from Kadathe' entered the line where it threatened to break, their massive weapons buying moments of stability, nothing more. Even they were forced backward, step by step, beneath the relentless pressure of something that did not tire, did not hesitate, did not doubt its own inevitability. The dragon calculated the outcome. Without intervention, the allied force would collapse within hours. Not days, mere hours.

Henigus himself remained distant, elevated beyond the immediate violence, observing in the same manner as the dragon. Each death fed the pattern he was constructing, each minute of delay pushed him closer to completion. Each collapse of resistance taught him what this diminished world could no longer sustain. Azhraikar understood the implication.

If this force fell, there would be nothing left capable of delaying Henigus's ascent. Nothing left to slow the unraveling. Intervention became necessary. Not to preserve the mortals. To preserve the chance they represented.

Intervention

Azhraikar, the First Flame, shifted. His immense form crossed from absence into presence. At first, nothing below understood what had changed. The Henigus sensed his father's unparalleled power. Then the shadow formed. It passed across the battlefield like the onset of night, swallowing banners, swallowing armies, swallowing the last fragile certainty that the world behaved according to known laws.

He became visible. Fully. Impossibly vast against the sky. There was no roar, no herald of the doom approaching, he allowed them to see. Allowed comprehension to begin. Allowed terror to form.

Then he roared. Not merely a sound but a release of primal energy that was not so much experienced, as it was, endured.

Every living thing within miles felt it inside their bones, inside their blood, inside the deepest structures of instinct that had once governed survival when dragons ruled the surface of the world openly.

Some men dropped their weapons. Ogres faltered. Giants froze. Cyclops turned their massive heads upward. Even the earth itself seemed to hesitate.

And he descended.

Its wings displaced entire currents of air, flattening grass, toppling the already wounded, forcing both sides to confront something older than their conflict.

He did not choose targets by allegiance. He chose by necessity. He swept across the rear ranks of Henigus's forces.

Unleashing his fiery breath upon them. This was not the fire mortals knew.

Not simply combustion. Not heat alone. This was creation inverted. The same force that had once shaped the earliest structures of the world now unmade what stood before it.

Stone flowed like liquid, and boiled away. Metal softened, then vanished.

Bone and flesh ceased to maintain coherence, dissolving into particulate ash before the bodies could register the erasure.

hundreds died with each breath.

Entire formations ceased to exist.

The dragon did not linger.

It climbed, circled, and descended again.

The second pass cut deeper.

Cyclops collapsed mid-stride, their massive forms reduced to collapsing outlines of ash. Ogres vanished in clusters, their cohesion erased. The disciplined formations Henigus had crafted disintegrated beneath a force they could not withstand.

The third pass was decisive.

It targeted the concentration of the command structure.

Where Henigus's influence was strongest, the dragon's fire fell with absolute precision. When, it ended, more than seventy percent of Henigus's assembled force no longer existed.

Not broken, not routed, reduced to ash, simply gone.

The battlefield fell into stunned silence, broken only by the crackling remains of heat that had no fuel and required none.

The dragon did not remain. He had not come to win their war. He came to restore uncertainty.

Azhraikor turned westward and climbed, its immense form diminishing against the sky until it vanished once more beyond perception. Below, the allied forces remained where they stood. They did not cheer or celebrate. Somewhere within the vast army a small head nodded in appreciation, then returned to the fight.

They did not understand why this had happened and they still lived. But they understood what remained before them.

Henigus's forces still stood. Reduced greatly, shaken to be sure, but not eliminated.

The mortals resumed their advance.

Knights lifted Halberds and Bardish. Footmen tightened their grip on blood-slick weapons. Archers reached for arrows with hands that trembled not from fear, but from exhaustion beyond exhaustion. Giants stepped forward again, their massive forms interposing themselves between the fragile and the inevitable.

They fought because they had no choice.

Above them, to the mountains west, unseen once more, the First Flame observed. It had preserved the delay nothing more, nothing less. The outcome was now in mortal hands, and it was again uncertain.

Henigus felt the shift before he saw it.

It was not sound. Not the thunder of artillery or the distant crack of collapsing bodies. It was absence. A subtraction where certainty had been. A thinning of inevitability he had carried within himself since the first moment he understood what he was becoming.

The Thunder of Thylor Guns

Then the motars and cannons of Thylor spoke.

The sound was unlike any weapon carried by mortal hands. It was deeper. Final. A concussive declaration that did not simply travel across the field but passed through it, through flesh and soil and bone alike. These were not siege engines shaped for walls or gates. They had been forged to kill ships, to end vessels that carried entire nations across the sea. Their barrels were thick as ancient tree trunks, their charges measured with obsessive precision by crews who understood that error was death.

The mortars had been emplaced hours before, hauled into position under cover of terrain and sacrifice. Their crews had waited. Calculated. Adjusted.

Now they fired in disciplined succession.

The first shells fell into the rear concentrations of Henigus's remaining forces.

Impact did not resemble mortal violence.

It resembled erasure.

The explosive charges detonated with such force that ogres ceased to exist.. Cyclops were lifted from their feet and broken apart mid-motion, their immense mass offering no resistance to pressures they had never been meant to endure. Giantkin staggered as concussive force crushed organs within bodies that outwardly remained standing for a moment longer, their deaths delayed only by scale.

Dozens fell with each impact. Then dozens more. The carefully rebuilt structure of Henigus's army fractured again, not under fear, but under physics. Henigus turned his attention fully toward the source.

He saw them. Thylor's artillery. They stood apart from the other mortal forces. Not braver. Not stronger. More precise.

Their artillery crews worked with cold efficiency, swabbing barrels, resetting angles, adjusting elevation with fractional corrections measured in degrees that determined life or annihilation. Their officers did not shout. They observed and issued commands in calm tones that carried through discipline rather than volume.

Another volley landed. Another section of his rear ranks collapsed into burning ruin.

Henigus felt each loss not as pain, but as interruption. These creatures were extensions of his will, stabilized through his presence, their structure reinforced by proximity to his evolving form. As they died, the pattern he had imposed upon them dissolved, returning them to the inert matter from which they had been shaped.

Then he understood.

Between his father's intervention and these unconsidered forces new to him in this age, failure was possible. The realization arrived with anger, a fury of the ages, betrayed AGAIN, this time by his own father the march of time.

His father, Azhraikar, had judged and acted.

Not to destroy Henigus, but to weaken him.

Betrayal was a mortal word. But the structure matched.

After all this time. After his ascension had begun. After he had surpassed the limits imposed upon all lesser beings.

His father had chosen the mortals. Had chosen preservation over transcendence. Henigus did not rage. Rage was inefficient. He recalculated. Another mortar volley struck.

The artillery ceased only when proximity to the allied advance rendered further fire untenable. Thylor's crews did not waste ammunition. They did not risk friendly annihilation. Their role had been fulfilled.

They transitioned immediately. Ranks of Thylor infantry advanced from behind the artillery lines, their movements synchronized with mechanical precision. They carried multishot muskets of exceptional construction, their barrels etched with runes that stabilized and amplified the projectiles they fired.

Their ammunition was not conventional lead. Each bullet had been prepared individually. Imbued. Balanced between material and arcane function. They did not fire at mass.

They fired at Officers, Coordinators. Points of cohesion within Henigus's remaining forces.

Their first volley cracked across the battlefield in unified release. Cyclops lost eyes.

Not by chance, but design.

The bullets penetrated precisely at the point where perception anchored their coordination, collapsing their ability to function as extensions of Henigus's will.

Giantkin fell as rounds penetrated frontal bone, disrupting the neural integrity required to sustain motion at their scale. Ogres collapsed in clusters as leaders were eliminated, their imposed discipline dissolving instantly without central reinforcement.

Each shot was deliberate. Each death purposeful. Their volleys were murderous. Not chaotic. Not desperate, not yet.

Henigus observed the degradation of his forces with perfect clarity.

This was not defeat. Not yet, it was a deviation, and with it, uncertainty.

He adjusted his attention again, reaching outward, reinforcing what remained, strengthening the structure of those still bound to him.

Henigus did not hesitate once the calculus resolved.

The open field had become hostile to him.

Not in spirit. In function.

The mortars had demonstrated their reach. The muskets their precision. The archers their discipline. Even diminished, even fragile, the mortal forces had been shaped into instruments capable of imposing attrition upon something that should have stood beyond attrition.

He could endure much.

He could not endure indefinitely under exposure.

Another mortar shell would not need to strike him directly. The concussive force alone, properly placed, could disrupt the cohesion of his evolving structure. Not destroy him. Not yet. But weaken him. Interrupt the ascent. Introduce instability at a stage where instability could not be tolerated.

No.

The field no longer served his purpose. He withdrew. Not in panic. Not in flight.

In transition.

His remaining forces responded instantly, their movement tightening around him in concentric layers of protection and function. The Cyclops that still possessed vision formed the outer perimeter, their massive frames interlocking to obstruct lines of fire. Giantkin repositioned with deliberate purpose, shielding the hosts that mattered most. The ogres, diminished but still numerous, absorbed the harassment of advancing mortal forces without hesitation, their existence reduced to a single imperative.

Delay.

Henigus turned toward the broken escarpment that marked the entrance to the deeper earth.

He had prepared this place long before the mortals understood its significance.

The stone itself had been weakened in advance, not visibly, not in ways mortal engineers would recognize, but through careful application of pressure and word and presence. What appeared to be natural fault lines were, in truth, thresholds.

He crossed them, heading to the fragile hosts below that offered salvation in this dire time.

They were the most important component of what remained.

They moved in silence, their bodies altered by proximity to Henigus's expanding influence. Their flesh bore markings that had not been carved, nor burned, nor inscribed, but formed from within. Lines that shifted slowly across their skin, patterns that corresponded not to mortal language but to structural instructions older than speech.

They took their positions as the tunnels narrowed. This was where the balance shifted again. The mortars would be useless here. The muskets constrained. The archers blind.

The tunnels forced compression. Forced proximity. Forced the mortals to abandon their advantages and enter a domain where mass and inevitability regained dominance.

Henigus descended. The air grew cooler, denser, older..

His forces filled the passage behind and beside him, their movement sealing the entrance by obstruction. Those who followed would not find open ground. They would find corridors of death measured in inches and heartbeats.

He reached the first chamber. It was vast by mortal standards. Insignificant by his own.

The hosts formed a circle without instruction. They did not look at him. They did not need to. They had already begun. Their voices rose in unison. Not chanting, really but aligning to purpose.

Each syllable was a structural correction, a reinforcement of pressure against the thinning boundary between what was and what had once been. The air thickened visibly as they spoke, bending inward toward a center point that did not yet exist but soon would.

Henigus extended his will into them, strengthening, clarifying, and perfecting the intonation and cadence.

The mortals would follow. They had no choice. They would pursue him into the earth because they could not allow him to remain. Every step would cost them.

The tunnels would slow them. Exhaust them. Break their formations. Reduce their numbers. The ogres would meet them in constricted passages where numbers mattered more than precision. The giantkin would collapse entire sections of tunnel once the mortals committed, isolating segments of their force to be destroyed in detail.

And deeper still, the hosts would complete their work.

This summoning would not produce a servant. It would produce a breach. Something that did not belong within the diminished equilibrium of this world.

Something that would not need to defeat the mortals. Only exist.

Its existence alone would accelerate the transformation already underway. Henigus felt the pressure building. Felt the resistance of the world itself. It strained against him now.

Tried to contain him. To deny him.

He spoke. Not loudly. Not emotionally. Precisely. The old words. Words of creation that had not been designed for communication. Words designed for imposition. Stone cracked along the chamber walls.

Blood vessels burst within the bodies of advancing mortals still far above, their lives ending before they understood the cause. Weapons fractured in their hands as structural integrity failed under imposed contradiction.

He did not need to see them.

He needed only to know they existed.

He would smite them down.

Crush them.

Drown them in the consequence of their resistance.

He had surpassed the limitations that bound their kind.

He had surpassed the limitations that bound his father.

He had surpassed the equilibrium itself.

He would not be denied.

Not by mortals.

Not by dragons.

Not by the structure of the world.

If the world could not contain what he had become,

Then the world would change.

He stopped using the old tongue only when the resistance of the world itself wore his throat ragged. Now he would wait, and they would come and meet their end.

The Hungering Cold

The battle had already slipped beyond the reach of strategy.

Across the valley floor, the alliance lines bent beneath the relentless advance of Henigus and his Worldbreakers. The dragon Azhraikar, the First Flame, had descended upon the rear of the giant host in a storm of living fire, turning ranks of warriors to ash and leaving great scars of molten earth across the battlefield. Yet even that devastation had not been enough. Through the smoke and ruin they continued to come.

Ogres lumbered forward over the bodies of their burning kin. Cyclopes strode through curtains of flame. Giants advanced shoulder to shoulder in ranks so deep they seemed to stretch beyond the horizon itself. Every creature slain was replaced by another. Every gap closed. Every victory swallowed by sheer weight of numbers.

The allied line was beginning to fail.

Standards disappeared. Commanders vanished into the chaos. Men and women who had held their ground through hours of slaughter found themselves stealing glances toward the rear, searching for some avenue of escape. There was none. Before them stood the Worldbreakers. Behind them lay everything worth protecting.

Into that moment stepped Shardra Skalkdottir.

The giantess moved through the confusion with the slow certainty of an approaching glacier, Rimeheart resting in her hands. Few noticed her at first. Later, many would struggle to explain why. Some claimed the sounds of battle seemed to recede around her. Others swore the wind itself had fallen silent. What all agreed upon was that something changed as she passed.

She reached the shattered center of the line and stopped.

Before her stretched the vast host of Henigus. Behind her stood what remained of the alliance.

There would be no retreat.

Shardra raised Rimeheart.

The ancient axe caught the light of distant fires and gleamed with a pale brilliance. Older than kingdoms, older than the Fade itself, the dragon-forged relic seemed almost alive in her hands. Frost crept across its haft and edge as though eager for what was to come.

Then Shardra spoke.

The words were not Giant, nor Common, nor any tongue known to the scholars who would later study the event. They were words from the Old Tongue, preserved by her clan through countless generations and spoken now by the last living bearer of that tradition.

The first word rolled across the battlefield like cracking ice.

The second carried a weight that made warriors falter where they stood.

The third seemed to awaken something ancient within the world itself.

Veterans who survived the battle would later admit that hearing those words filled them with a fear unlike any they had known before or since. It was not the fear of an enemy or a weapon. It was the instinctive terror of witnessing something that did not belong to the age of mortals.

Rimeheart answered.

A pale blue radiance erupted from the axe, bright enough to drown the glow of fires throughout the valley. Warmth fled the battlefield in an instant. Flames guttered and died. Moisture froze in the air. Frost spread across armor, stone, and flesh with impossible speed.

Then came the storm.

Not a blizzard as men understood the word, but the Hungering Cold itself.

White consumed the battlefield. The sky vanished. Wind screamed across the valley with such force that many could neither hear nor see. The cold struck first. Ogres froze where they stood, transformed in moments into statues of rime and ice. Cyclopes staggered as their breath crystallized within their lungs. Giants, creatures who had endured northern winters and mountain storms, found their bodies locked in place beneath a cold beyond nature.

The storm showed no mercy.

It tore heat from flesh, strength from muscle, and motion from every living thing caught within its grasp. Frozen bodies toppled beneath the force of the gale and shattered upon the earth. Entire formations disappeared into the white.

For several impossible minutes the advance of Henigus simply ceased.

The Worldbreakers could not move.

The vast tide that had threatened to overwhelm the alliance stood trapped beneath the wrath of an ancient winter.

Across the allied lines, disbelief gave way to realization. Standards rose once more. Officers found their voices. Broken formations reformed. Warriors who moments earlier had believed themselves doomed tightened their grips upon shield and spear.

The storm had given them time.

Nothing more.

But time was enough.

As suddenly as it had begun, the blizzard faded. The winds diminished. Snow settled from the air. The battlefield slowly emerged from beneath the veil of white.

Where Henigus's vanguard had stood, there remained only a frozen graveyard.

Thousands of bodies stood locked in their final moments, entombed in ice. Others lay shattered where the storm had cast them down. The once unstoppable advance had become a field of silent monuments.

At the center of that devastation lay Shardra.

Rimeheart remained frozen within her grasp. Ice coated the ancient axe. Ice coated her armor. Even the great icebear cloak draped across her shoulders had become rigid with frost.

She did not move.

Those who reached her first believed her dead.

Yet beneath the ice there remained the faintest breath.

She had survived.

Barely.

In the years that followed, scholars from Voolnishart would travel great distances to question her. They studied the battlefield. They examined Rimeheart. They spoke with witnesses and companions. They learned that the axe was a relic forged by dragons in an age so distant that even the oldest records spoke of it only in fragments. They learned that it was somehow bound to Shardra's bloodline, a lineage of which she was the final survivor. They learned that she alone remained among the living as a true speaker of the Old Tongue.

Every discovery convinced them further that the Winter of Rimeheart had not been a spell, nor a feat that could be taught or repeated. It had been the convergence of ancient powers, forgotten traditions, and a singular moment of desperate necessity.

Eventually one scholar asked the question all of them had come seeking to answer.

Could she do it again?

Shardra sat in silence for a long while before replying.

“Only in death.”

Those present described her voice as sombre and weary, carrying a certainty that discouraged further inquiry.

No one asked a second time.

Whatever price had been demanded by the Hungering Cold, Shardra Skalkdottir knew it well. The alliance had survived because she paid it.

And by her own reckoning, the world would not allow her to pay it twice.

Into the lair of the worldbreaker.

The pursuit did not begin immediately.

It could not.

The open field had been a contest of scale. What lay beneath the earth would be a contest of skill and determination, ability and perseverance.

The commanders knew it. The survivors knew it. The wounded knew it most of all.

This was no place for mass formations or cavalry charges. No place for banners or horns or the visible symbols of mortal confidence. The tunnels would strip those things away, reduce armies to individuals, reduce individuals to decisions measured in heartbeats and inches of stone.

Already, plans were forming.

Tal-Shie spell stone weapons were brought forward under careful guard. Their handlers carried them with both reverence and unease. Each orb was no larger than a clenched fist, smooth and faintly iridescent, their surfaces shifting with internal motion that was not light but pressure. Hellish effium, the Tal-Shie called them, though the translation was imperfect. When broken, the orbs released heat so intense that even stone surrendered to it. The fire did not spread outward in conventional flame but expanded in sudden, catastrophic volume, filling enclosed spaces with annihilating force.

Others bore the damnable effium, their coloration darker, their surfaces clouded. These did not burn. They poisoned. When ruptured, they released gas so dense and so virulent that lungs failed before breath could complete itself. In confined tunnels, their effect would be absolute.

They were one-shot weapons.

Their handlers did not waste motion. They distributed them among those chosen to descend. Careful explanation of what they did, proximity was dangerous these were area weapons.

Not everyone could go.

Shardra lay against a shattered supply cart at the edge of the field, her immense frame wrapped in layers of fur, bandage and splint. Even still, blood seeped through in dark patches where the bindings could not contain the damage beneath. Her right arm remained secured in a rigid brace of wood and steel, her left leg bound from thigh to ankle. Her breathing was controlled, but shallow. Her eye was open.

She watched them prepare. She did not speak, she watched as her friends prepared.

Nearby, Eeyagoo sat propped against a broken shield, his smaller body bearing its own catalog of injury. Deep cuts crossed his chest and side, one shoulder held in place by careful wrapping that limited movement to preserve what function remained. His hands, those careful, capable hands, rested motionless in his lap.

He understood.

He did not protest.

Mimi refused to leave them.

The small mimicking clung to Eeyagoo's side, her form shifting restlessly, unable to settle into any single shape. Her eyes tracked every movement of the departing forces, every weapon lifted, every figure chosen to continue where her family could not. She hissed at anyone who came too close, her instincts overriding reason.

She would remain, because they would remain.

Others stepped forward.

The heroes.

The elites.

Those whose skill and nature made them suited to the work ahead.

From Taurdain came the veteran shield-bearers of Ukko, their armor stripped of ornament to reduce sound and weight. From Kadathe' came the giants who could still walk, their immense weapons exchanged for shorter implements suited to tunnel fighting. From Auris came clerics and wardens whose connection to divine structure had not diminished entirely beneath the long centuries of the Fade. And from Thylor came the Kingsgard.

They wore gilded armor not for display, but because its composition resisted corrosion from alchemical and magical assault. Each carried a close-quarters hand cannon, their shortened barrels designed for devastating discharge at minimal distance, and heavy war hammers whose heads bore containment sigils meant to transfer force through armor and into the structures beneath.

They formed without wasted motion.

They knew what this was.

Far behind the forming incursion line, beyond the immediate chaos of preparation, two figures stood apart.

Roakland, the Darkarrow and Shinazazi, the Ghostwidow.

They did not speak loudly.

They did not need to.

“The breach will complete soon,” Shinazazi said quietly.

Roakland nodded.

“I know.”

They had both felt it.

Not as sound.

But as pressure against the weave of the world.

A distortion in the underlying structure of the world itself.

They waited.

Because there was one answer that mattered.

It came.

Not as a voice spoken through air, but as certainty imposed upon their awareness.

Azhraikar answered.

His judgment was clear.

The words did not cross distance. They did not pass through air or arrive as sound. They emerged instead within the oldest place each of them possessed, where thought and knowing were not separate things, where meaning existed before language was required to carry it. They knew the presence at once. It did not announce itself or intrude. It simply was, vast and absolute, recognized in the same way one recognizes gravity or fire or the turning of the world beneath one’s feet. The Old Ways had not been used so purely in ages beyond counting. Through them, Azhraikar the First Flame regarded his chosen conduits, not as flesh, but as continuances of the order he had shaped at the beginning.

End him.

The command settled without echo, without force, because none was required. End the life of the renewed son. His span has been concluded. His purpose has failed. What remains persists beyond its rightful boundary. The world has endured the prolonging of his defiance. It has borne what was never intended to be borne. The knowing deepened, vast and patient, filling the space within them without weight. Let the world breathe again. Its continuance is neither accident nor mercy. It is the result of endurance. It has suffered sufficiently. It has proven its claim to remain.

There was no anger within him. No grief. No satisfaction. Only certainty. No retribution shall follow this act. No vengeance shall be taken. No hand shall rise to answer necessity fulfilled. The scales require no balancing. They were never disturbed.

The presence receded then, not withdrawn, but no longer imposed, leaving behind only the final truth he had given them, as immovable as the foundations of creation itself.

Do what must now be done.

But there would be no further assistance.

The First Flame had intervened once.

It would not intervene again.

The outcome now belonged to mortals.

And to those who stood between mortal and divine.

Roakland exhaled slowly, the breath leaving him without tremor or hesitation. Shinazazi met his gaze, and nothing passed between them that required words. Neither showed fear. They had expected no less. He reached over his shoulder and withdrew an arrow unlike any other he carried. Its form was familiar, but nothing else about it was. The shaft was venomwood, darker even than black ironwood, its surface drinking the light rather than reflecting it. The tip was black eog, forged in a shape that resisted simple description, its runes cut so deeply they no longer appeared carved, but inherent, as though the metal had grown around their meaning rather than received it. The air near it thickened, pressed inward by its presence. It was not an arrow meant to wound. It was an ending given shape.

Beside him, Shinazazi drew her blades. They never matched. One curved pale and thin, its edge nearly lost in the light, while the other was darker, its lines subtly imperfect, its balance wrong to any hand but hers. Together they formed a completeness neither possessed alone, two halves of a design that could not exist in singular form. They did not rush. They began to walk with the steady pace of those who had already accepted the outcome, whatever shape it would take. They walked toward the incursion line, toward the tunnels, toward the place where Henigus waited beneath the earth.

They could feel him now. Not as sound or motion, but as a rasp against the structure of existence itself. A pull that did not command but invited. A promise of transformation beyond mortality, beyond the frailty of flesh and the limitation of time. It would have been easy to yield. Easy to accept elevation. Easy to become something greater than what they had been. They did not. Their ties to the divine did not control them, nor did they demand obedience. They aligned them. They clarified what had always been theirs to choose.

They might die. Henigus possessed that kind of power, old world power, that kind of inevitability, the terrible certainty of a force that had already reshaped the world once before. But inevitability had fractured. It had bled. It had been brought low. The gods did not wish his ascension to complete itself, and now mortals, heroes, and demigods alike walked into the deep places of the earth to end what had begun there.

Not because victory was certain, but because failure was unacceptable.

The tunnels ran red long before they reached the ritual chamber.

Blood did not flow freely in such confined space. It coated. It layered. It turned stone slick beneath boots and bare feet alike, forcing every step to be deliberate or fatal. The air thickened with heat, with breath, with the metallic saturation of violence prolonged beyond endurance.

Both sides gave as well as they received.

The ogres fought with the certainty of things already surrendered to a greater will. They did not break. They did not flee. They pressed forward even as Tal-Shie effium orbs shattered among them, releasing catastrophic bursts of heat that filled entire corridors with white, devouring flame. Flesh blackened and peeled from bone in an instant. Massive bodies collapsed into the passageways they had sought to defend, becoming new obstacles to those behind them.

The damnable effium proved equally decisive.

When released, its gas did not rise. It sank. It pooled low against the ground where the heavier defenders drew breath deepest. Cyclops staggered, their singular eyes widening in confusion before their lungs failed them. Giantkin clawed at their own throats, their immense strength rendered meaningless against poison that did not care for size.

The attackers advanced.

Men and dwarves of Kadathe' moved with practiced efficiency. They had fought giants before. They knew where to strike. Tendons behind the knee. The vulnerable junctions beneath armor plates. The precise angle required to drive steel into structures that appeared invulnerable to less informed hands. They did not waste effort on strength contests they could not win. They used leverage. Position. Knowledge.

Knights of Auris and Thylor absorbed blows that would have shattered lesser warriors, their heavy armor ringing with impact as enormous weapons struck them. Some fell regardless, bones breaking within armor that remained outwardly intact. Others endured long enough to close distance, their hammers and short blades delivering lethal retaliation into exposed joints and faces.

Every step forward cost lives. But they moved forward. Slowly. Relentlessly.

At the rear of the advancing formation stood the elven mage.

A Critical Decision.

Vaelithraen Cael'Thir had waited his entire life for a moment he had never believed would come. He saw the hosts clearly now, not as men, not as vessels, but as anchors. Every instinct, every discipline, every year of study told him the same truth with cold and absolute certainty. If they completed the ritual, nothing the mortals had done would matter. Not the dragon's intervention. Not the cannons of Thylor. Not the blood already given in these tunnels. This was the fulcrum. This was the point upon which the world now balanced. And the Fade stood in his way.

For two thousand years it had enforced its limits. It had reduced magic to something survivable, something stable, something small enough that the world could endure its own existence. Sixth circle evocation belonged to an age that no longer existed. The structure required to sustain it could not be drawn safely from the diminished lattice that remained. Not safely. But safety had already been abandoned.

Vaelithraen stepped forward into the chamber, and the air resisted him, not metaphorically, but physically. Magic itself pressed inward, denying access to depths that had once been open to every archmage of his lineage. He forced his hand upward anyway. His fingers trembled, not from fear, but from resistance. He did not speak at first. He remembered. His home in Voolnishart. The narrow stone balcony where his daughter had first learned to walk, her hands gripping his fingers with absolute trust. His wife seated beside the window in the late evenings, her voice filling their home with quiet certainty that tomorrow would come and they would still be together when it did. If the ritual completed, tomorrow would not exist. Not for them. Not for anyone.

He understood the cost. He accepted it.

He reached deeper, beyond what the Fade allowed, beyond what the world would willingly give. He reached into himself. The first sensation was pain. Not sharp, but structural. His heart faltered as its rhythm was redirected, its electrical precision diverted from sustaining flesh to sustaining something far greater. His lungs struggled to draw breath as the energy that allowed them to function was drawn away and repurposed. He spoke the words, and they did not emerge as sound alone. They emerged as command. The Fade resisted him. He forced through it, not by drawing power from the world, but by replacing the power the world refused to provide.

His lifeforce surged outward, not metaphorically, but literally. It flowed through him, through his arm, through his hand, into the structure of the spell he was imposing upon existence. The air detonated into light. Chains of lightning erupted from his outstretched hand, not a single bolt, but a lattice of pure electrical annihilation that leapt instantly from one host to the next. It did not behave as natural lightning behaved. It sought structure. It sought cohesion. It sought the precise points where the ritual anchored itself into reality. The

first host convulsed violently, its body arching as flesh ruptured and peeled from bone under currents too intense for mortal tissue to survive. The lightning did not dissipate. Vaelithraen held it. Forced it. Directed it.

It jumped to the second host, then the third, then the fourth, chaining through them in rapid succession, each impact rupturing muscle, shattering bone, stopping hearts mid beat. The ritual structure collapsed with each anchor destroyed, its integrity failing faster than it could compensate. His vision darkened. His legs trembled beneath him. Still he held it. He fed more of himself into the spell. His heart misfired once, then twice. He tasted blood. Still he held it.

Lightning continued to course through the remaining hosts, stripping flesh from bone, reducing them to charred remnants incapable of sustaining the breach. Tendrils lashed blindly, their structure unraveling as the ritual collapsed, their connection to the forming threshold severed before it could stabilize. He could feel himself dying, not slowly, but immediately, his lifeforce burning itself away in service of the spell. He did not release it. Not until the last host fell. Not until the ritual collapsed completely. Not until the possibility itself ended.

Only then did his hand fall. The lightning vanished. The chamber plunged back into the dim, blood soaked reality of mortal war. Vaelithraen swayed. He expected darkness. He expected the final absence that followed the expenditure of everything he was. It did not come. His heart stuttered, struggled, then beat, weakly, impossibly. He collapsed to one knee, breath ragged, vision fractured, but alive. He did not understand how. He did not need to. Without him, they would have failed. That truth remained. That he lived was nothing short of a miracle.

Vaelithraen did not fall alone. When the lightning first erupted from his hand, when the air itself split and bent around the impossible structure of a sixth circle spell forced into existence by mortal defiance, another presence had moved behind him. Sir Halveth Ardan Korr, Knight of Ukko, had acted without announcement. He had recognized the signs immediately. The trembling limbs. The change in breath. The stillness, that was not calm but preparation. He had seen men burn themselves out before, priests and warriors alike who reached beyond their limits and paid for it in moments measured by heartbeats. He would not allow the wizard to die alone if there was strength left in him to prevent it.

His gauntleted hand closed around Vaelithraen's shoulder just as the first chains of lightning erupted outward. The force of it nearly threw him backward. His armor rang with the passage of energy that did not belong to flesh or steel. His muscles locked against the strain, his teeth clenched as he felt the wizard's life begin to tear itself free from its mortal foundation. He spoke no words. He simply gave.

Ukko's blessing did not manifest as light or sound. It manifested as endurance. The knight poured everything he possessed into the fragile structure that held the wizard upright. Not power to cast the spell. That belonged to Vaelithraen alone. But strength to endure its casting. Strength to keep his body intact long enough for the work to finish. He divided himself willingly. Every reserve he had built through faith, through battle, through survival, he surrendered into the failing frame before him. His own breath grew shallow. His own limbs weakened as he transferred stability where stability had been abandoned.

The wizard's heart faltered. The knight steadied it. The wizard's legs began to collapse. The knight held him upright. The lightning continued. Host after host ruptured under its passage, their flesh stripped away, their connection to the forming breach severed before it could stabilize. The chamber shook with the violence of imposed contradiction as mortal will denied something that should have been inevitable. The knight felt himself fading. His grip tightened anyway. He would not release him. Not until it was done. Not until the ritual died with its anchors.

When at last the lightning ceased, when Vaelithraen's arm fell and the impossible structure collapsed back into absence, the knight remained standing behind him for one final moment. He felt the wizard's heart beat. Weak, but real. Alive.

Only then did he release his grip.

The knight staggered backward as the strength left him all at once. His legs failed beneath him, and he fell heavily to one knee, his sword's tip striking the stone beside him to keep him from collapsing entirely. His vision blurred. His armor felt impossibly heavy. Each breath was an effort that required conscious will. He had nothing left. Not strength. Not blessing. Not reserve. Only presence.

He remained kneeling there, barely able to lift his head, his hand still resting weakly against the hilt of his sword as the battle continued around him.

The wizard lived.

That was enough.

Then Henigus roared.

The sound shook the chamber.

Not merely anger.

Violation.

He spoke in the old tongue again, the true tongue, words that imposed themselves upon existence. Flecks of blood sprayed from his mouth as he pushed further than the world would allow.

Interference. "**Vael'thrynn**"

Defiance. "**Kaeroth-Vael**"

Insignificance. "**Threnn'kai**"

He cursed them all.

He stepped forward from the ruin of his fallen hosts, and the earth did not welcome him. It endured him.

The last of his servants lay broken behind him, their forms scattered across stone and glass and blackened soil, their purpose spent, their devotion concluded in silence. He did not look upon them. He did not grant them witness. Their ending had already been accounted for. Their extinction had been required. Only his remained.

When he spoke, it did not come as voice alone. It came as pressure, as fracture, as the grinding of forces too vast to reconcile within mortal form.

"I promised your extinction."

A casual swing crushed a Knight.

The words struck outward, not loud, but absolute, each one landing with the weight of something long ago decided.

"I gave warning. I gave interval. I gave you the mercy of foresight, that you might kneel and preserve what little of yourselves was worthy of continuance. You were shown the boundary of your relevance. You were shown the horizon beyond which you were not permitted to remain."

Another backhand blow threw an armored form across the room and into the wall, broken.

The Tyrant eye burned, and the light that escaped it was not flame, but assertion.

“You refused.”

The word lingered, heavier than the others, shaped by something older than dragonkind, older than the ordering of sky and sea. The titan blood within him did not temper itself. It did not refine. It declared.

Energies from the eye swept across the advancing allies and burned them whole. Lord Marshal Kernik Gravlane fell then, his metal armor heated cherry red, almost melting.

“You refused the inevitable. You refused correction. You refused the hand extended not in cruelty, but in conclusion. You mistook endurance for authority. You mistook survival for entitlement.”

His massive foot settled forward, onto a crawling mortal still clinging to life, and the stone beneath it gave way, cracking as the blood filled the fissures.

“I promised this world would pay for its refusal.”

A deliberate swing tore through a line of pikemen sending three of them flying into crumpled heaps, none moved.

The cadence faltered then, not in weakness, but in magnitude, as though the vessel that carried his will struggled to contain its full expression.

“And it shall.”

The air tightened. Again the tyrant ruby pulsed a incandescent beam, this time it sought Roakland, in the dark preparing to fire. His cloak and armor were scorched as he dove away from the beam.

“It shall pay in breath, which will be taken. It shall pay in memory, which will be unmade. It shall pay in lineage, which will find no future in the shadow of my correction. You will watch the ending you demanded. You will witness the consequence you summoned through your persistence.”

He turned and swung Worldbreaker just as Shinazazi appeared ready to strike, the blow caught her and sent her flying as it had so many before, she vanished midflight.

His gaze moved across them, not as enemies, but as errors.

“I am not your destroyer.”

The words came harsher now, edged with the unsoftened truth of his origin.

“I am your successor.”

Another blow against those attacking him a giant this time, the large form crumpled under the strike and Henigus had to shake him off the spikes.

He drew himself to his full height, the vastness of him no longer restrained by the illusion of mortality.

“You were given the opportunity to yield. You chose instead to persist.”

Blood still coated his mouth renewed from his earlier use of the old tongue, but he breathed deep and exhaled a conflagration into the archers who were peppering him with arrows. Not as powerful as his fathers but still beyond the ability of such mortals to survive.

The final words came not as threat, but as sentence.

“Now you will conclude.”

Henigus broke the line as though it had never existed. The Tyrant Ruby burned from within his cyclopean eye socket, a hateful second sun set deep into the ruined hollow where flesh had long ago surrendered. Its crimson light pulsed outward through fractured bone and scarred muscle, illuminating the cavern in the color

of fresh violence. In his grip, the Worldbreaker Mace rose and fell with slow inevitability, and each blow remade the cavern. Stone collapsed. Bodies broke. Those struck were not merely slain but erased, reduced to ruin that spoke of force beyond mortal measure. They met him anyway. Blades bit into him. Spears pierced his sides. Spells crawled across his vast and broken form in flickering arcs of diminished power. He shrugged them off. Wounds closed even as they were made. Bone reknit beneath torn flesh. Muscle drew itself together. The Tyrant Ruby burned brighter with each injury, its light pulsing faster, feeding him, sustaining him. He advanced through it all, unstoppable, implacable. He crushed a knight of Auris into the cavern wall with a single backhand. The man did not fall. He remained where he struck, armor folded inward, embedded in stone.

It seemed futile.

The Turning Point

Then the black arrow came.

It appeared without warning, a whisper given form, and drove clean through the side of Henigus's neck. The behemoth staggered, his roar filling the cavern, a sound of fury and something deeper beneath it. But his voice was lost. His massive hand rose instinctively toward the shaft. He nearly fell. He did not. He swung blindly, the Worldbreaker describing a murderous arc that shattered stone and forced those nearest him to scatter or die. The arrow trembled where it had buried itself deep beside the spine. A second arrow struck. Then a third. Each placed with impossible precision. Each driven into the narrowing margin between bone and vertebrae. Far across the cavern, Roakland Darkarrow moved with measured calm. He did not hurry. He did not falter. His bow rose and fell with mechanical certainty, each release an execution pronounced without ceremony. His arrows vanished into the wound, widening it, weakening what could not otherwise be harmed.

Henigus endured.

Darkness gathered behind him. It was not shadow. It was absence.

Shinazazi appeared without sound, without warning. Her blades were already in motion when she emerged, twin arcs of impossible sharpness drawn across both sides of the behemoth's neck. The cuts were deep. Mortal. Blood erupted in twin fountains, black and steaming as it struck the stone. She was gone before his retaliation came. Henigus turned, the Tyrant Ruby blazing brighter within his ruined eye, and the beam from that burning cyclopean socket lashed outward, carving a molten trench through the cavern wall and vaporizing stone where she had stood only a heartbeat before. She was no longer there. Roakland's arrows continued to fall. Each one would have slain any other creature that lived. Each one found its mark. Still Henigus stood. Still he walked. Still he killed.

Then another sound entered the cavern. The measured, mechanical click of a Thylorian firing mechanism drawn to full tension.

Master-Gunner Halveth Brann of Thylor knelt behind a shattered pillar of basalt, his enchanted musket braced against stone. His face was calm beneath soot and blood. The weapon in his hands was older than he was, its runes worn with time but not with purpose. He held a single round between his fingers. A bone-razer bullet. Rare. Forbidden. Forged in the final years before the Fade, when such things had still been possible. He whispered the activation phrase, and the runes along the barrel flickered awake, faint blue light crawling across ancient etchings. He waited. He watched Henigus stagger beneath the rain of Roakland's arrows. He watched the blood pouring from Shinazazi's mortal wounds. He watched the Tyrant Ruby burning in that ruined eye, refusing death, sustaining what should have already fallen.

Halveth Brann exhaled.

He fired.

The shot cracked like the breaking of the world. The bullet struck Henigus in the throat. It did not stop. Bone shattered. Spine ruptured. The round tore through vertebrae and exited in a spray of blood and pulverized structure, carrying with it the strength that held the behemoth upright. Henigus staggered forward. The Worldbreaker slipped from his grasp and struck the stone with a sound like distant thunder. He gasped. Blood filled his ruined throat. The Tyrant Ruby flared violently within his eye, its light stuttering, struggling to sustain what the body could no longer support. For the first time since his rebirth, Henigus faltered. He took one more step. Then he fell. The impact shook the cavern. The Tyrant Ruby dimmed within the hollow of his cyclopean eye, its hateful light receding, its power withdrawn or exhausted. The red glow faded until only darkness remained in the ruined socket.

Silence followed, broken only by settling stone and the ragged breathing of the living.

Of the sixty who had entered the cavern, seven emerged who could still walk. Roakland Darkarrow was among them, his cloak scorched, his armor burned, his bow clean, his expression unchanged. Master-Gunner Halveth Brann rose slowly and painfully. Shinazazi was nowhere to be found. For weeks afterward, none could say whether she had lived or died.

But Henigus, the supposed worldbreaker, lay still at last.

And the world endured the cost.

The aftermath and the cost

Little was ever spoken of the Tyrant Ruby after Henigus fell. In the days that followed, when the wounded were carried out and the dead accounted for, many asked after it. They remembered its terrible light burning from his ruined eye, the way it pulsed there like a hateful second sun, nested deep within the socket where flesh and bone had long since surrendered to its presence. They remembered how it watched them, how its light did not flicker even when his body faltered. Such a thing could not simply be lost, not unnoticed, not unclaimed.

Rumors came quickly, as they always did when truth was too large and too terrible to be comfortably held. Some said the allied nations had taken it at once and sealed it away in vaults beneath Auris, where priests and wardens would stand watch over it until the end of days. Others claimed it had been sunk beneath the sea by the priests of the Tide Mother, carried into the deepest trenches where neither mortal nor memory could recover it. Still others insisted it had been destroyed outright, shattered by the same forces that had slain Henigus, reduced to lifeless fragments so that no tyrant could ever again rise beneath its influence. It was a comforting lie, and because it was comforting, it endured.

There were darker whispers as well. Some believed Shinazazi had taken it, that she had returned after the survivors departed and reached into the ruined socket with her pale, unhesitating hands, withdrawing the gem before vanishing once more into whatever hidden paths she alone could walk. Others insisted it had been Roakland. They said nothing escaped his notice and no battlefield he left was without careful accounting. Neither confirmed it. Neither denied it. Their silence gave the rumors strength.

And so, the Tyrant Ruby passed into uncertainty, never to be seen again.

It had been no small thing that could be easily concealed. The gem was the size of a dinner plate, thick and heavy, its surface alive with an inner fire that seemed less like light and more like awareness. Such an object could not be carried unnoticed through camps filled with the wounded and the grieving. It could not pass quietly across borders or vanish into the world without leaving some trace behind. Yet no one ever saw it again.

The truth was known only to those few who had survived the cavern and walked back into the light.

They had left it where it lay.

Henigus rested on his side where he had fallen, his immense form finally stilled. The Tyrant Ruby remained set deep within his shattered eye socket. Its light had dimmed, but it had not gone dark. It glowed faintly within the ruin of bone and blood, patient and enduring, as though waiting for breath that would never return. No one approached it. No one reached for it. Even in victory, there were limits to what any of them would touch.

One by one, the survivors withdrew. Their purpose had been fulfilled. The cost had already been counted in blood and absence, in names that would never again answer when called.

It was as the last of them crossed the threshold of the cavern that something else entered.

No footstep marked its arrival. No voice announced its presence. There was only the sudden certainty that they were no longer alone.

A form appeared beside the fallen behemoth.

It was vast and indistinct, its shape refusing memory even as it was seen. The eye could not settle on it. The mind could not retain it. It bent slowly, deliberately, with the quiet inevitability of something that had always possessed the right.

It reached toward the ruined eye.

The Tyrant Ruby vanished.

When the survivors turned, there was nothing there.

Only Henigus remained, empty at last, his ruin complete and final.

No one spoke of it. Not then. Not later.

Some things were not meant for record.

In the years after a peace fell upon the land and Mithrin and her allies prospered. Papal continued to grow and expand its holdings and scope.

The Passing of Momma Toki

In the years that followed the fall of Henigus and the burning out of the Palehive, Papal slowly found a quieter rhythm.

The town had known hardship. It had known hunger, fear, and the long grinding labor of survival. But time, careful hands, and stubborn people built something steadier in its place. Orchards grew where fields had once been ash. The greenhouses glowed warm through winter frost. Bees thickened the air over the Cinderheart groves, and the roads carried wagons more often than soldiers.

Among the sights that became familiar in those peaceful decades was the slow daily circuit of Momma Toki.

She rode atop Tarkus.

The manticore was enormous now, his shoulders nearly level with the roofline of many Papal buildings. His wings folded along his flanks like great rust-colored sails, the leathery membranes scarred and mended from the long years before he came to Toki's care. His mane of spines stood thick along his neck and shoulders,

darkening toward the tips like burnished iron. The long tail trailed behind him, heavy with clusters of barbed spikes that clicked softly against one another when he moved.

On his back sat the old goblin woman who had once ruled the wild pens of Voolnishart's infamous menagerie.

Time had bent her somewhat.

Her back curved now where once it had been straight as a spear haft. Her steps had slowed, and the deep black teeth she showed when laughing were fewer than they had been in earlier years. But the sharpness in her eyes had not dulled, nor had the certainty in her voice when speaking about animals.

A saddle of her own design rested between Tarkus's shoulders. It was not ornate. It was practical, wide and secure, built to let her lean forward and grip the mane spines when the manticore launched himself into the air.

From that saddle she surveyed Papal's growing husbandry.

They would begin at the kennels most mornings.

The kennels had grown far beyond the rough pens they had first housed the town's war dogs during the Palehive years, six dusk-hounds now grown to 30. Now long timber halls stood in orderly rows, their roofs pitched high and their runs stretching out into fenced fields where the dogs could exercise.

Toki would sit straight in the saddle, pointing with a crooked finger.

"Too thin," she would say of one dog.

"Good hips on that one. Keep that line."

"Feed more marrow. Not scraps. Bone makes bone."

The kennel masters listened. They always listened.

From there she would ride to the apiaries.

The bees had become one of Papal's quiet successes. Rows of carefully built hives stood among the flowering edges of the Cinderheart groves. The trees themselves spread wide overhead, their ruby leaves forming a warm canopy that rustled softly in the wind.

Toki liked the bees.

She would dismount here sometimes, leaning on a cane while watching the slow drifting clouds of workers moving between blossoms.

"Good bees," she would mutter once, watching them. "Not mean bees. Smart bees."

Eeyagoo often stood nearby when she visited the apiaries.

He listened carefully to her observations. The old goblin had an instinct for animals that bordered on the uncanny. She spoke of feed cycles, breeding temperaments, and scent patterns the way a mason spoke of stone.

Eeyagoo learned.

He asked questions.

Sometimes she would grunt and wave a hand.

"Too many questions, Mouseknife."

But she always answered them.

Beyond the apiaries rose the rookery towers.

These had been one of Toki's more unusual suggestions when Papal first began rebuilding. The town had originally intended to raise simple pigeon lofts for messenger birds. Toki had snorted at the idea.

"Pigeons stupid," she had said flatly.

Instead, she helped design the tall wooden rookeries that now stood at the town's northern edge. Iron Shrikes nested there, harsh-voiced hunting birds with hooked beaks and steel-gray feathers. They were clever, territorial, and fiercely loyal to their nesting grounds once properly established.

From the saddle atop Tarkus, Toki would watch the birds wheel above the towers.

"Good guards," she would say.

They were.

Iron Shrikes noticed strangers long before most people did.

There were other animals in Papal now as well. Coops for hardy mountain fowl. Pens for the large wool-backed sheep that thrived in the cooler northern pastures. Even the occasional stranger creature that passed through the town under Toki's careful scrutiny.

More than once the people of Papal heard her and Eeyagoo discussing creatures that never made it into the pens.

The dung beast had been one such discussion.

It had been suggested half seriously by a merchant who believed the creature's prodigious appetite for refuse might be useful in a growing settlement.

The conversation lasted nearly an hour.

Feeding costs. Temperament. Breeding habits. The difficulty of containing a creature that large if it grew agitated.

In the end they decided against it.

Still, the matter had been discussed thoroughly.

Toki believed in that.

Good husbandry began with good thinking.

Tarkus accompanied her on all these visits.

He tolerated most people.

Some he even liked.

But there was one person he never trusted.

Shardra.

The giantess's presence unsettled him in a way nothing else quite did.

Perhaps it was her size. Perhaps the old instincts of predator and rival stirred somewhere deep in the manticore's blood. Perhaps it was the quiet weight she carried in the world, the sense of power that followed her even when she stood still.

Whatever the reason, Tarkus never relaxed when Shardra came near.

His hackles would rise immediately, the long mane of spines lifting along his neck and shoulders like a field of iron thorns. His lips curled just enough to show the long yellowed fangs beneath.

No closer.

The message was unmistakable.

His tail would begin to twitch then, the clusters of venomous spikes rattling faintly as they flexed. Occasionally one would snap against another with a sharp crack that echoed across the yard.

Shardra respected the warning.

She would stop where she stood, resting a hand on the haft of Rimeheart, watching the great beast with a faint half-smile.

“A cautious one,” she would say.

Toki would reach forward from the saddle and pat Tarkus’s neck.

“Easy, boy,” she would murmur.

Her voice always calmed him.

The manticore would settle eventually, though his golden eyes never left the giantess while she remained nearby.

With Eeyagoo and Mimi, it was entirely different.

Tarkus adored them.

Eeyagoo had been there in the early years, back when Tarkus was still young and restless and uncertain of the world beyond Toki’s pens. The kobold treated him not as a monster or weapon but as an animal with moods and habits that could be understood.

The manticore remembered that.

He would lower his head for Eeyagoo to scratch the thick fur beneath his jaw, rumbling softly in his chest.

Mimi he treated like a favorite littermate.

The mimicing would often take her pseudodragon form when visiting the kennels or rookeries. The moment Tarkus noticed her, the great predator would crouch low like an oversized hunting cat preparing to pounce.

Mimi would launch herself skyward.

The chase would begin immediately.

They would wheel over the orchards, darting between towers and skimming the treetops. Tarkus’s wings thundered through the air while Mimi twisted and dodged ahead of him, her stinger-tail flicking playfully.

More than once townsfolk paused in their work just to watch the spectacle.

A manticore chasing a tiny dragon-shaped creature through the sky while a goblin matron scolded them both from the ground.

Papal had grown used to strange things in those years.

It had become part of the town’s character.

The years passed quietly.

Twenty of them.

Momma Toki grew slower with each passing winter.

Eventually she stopped riding Tarkus for the long circuits. She still visited the kennels and the bees and the rookeries, but now it was usually by cart or with a cane tapping steadily against the packed earth roads.

Her voice remained sharp.

Her opinions remained firm.

But time had begun its patient work.

She died late one autumn.

The news spread through Papal by evening.

Work stopped early that day.

The townsfolk gathered near the edge of the husbandry grounds where the kennels, the rookery towers, and the wide fields of the apiaries all met. It had been her favorite place to stand and watch the town's animals at work.

They buried her there.

Her people's tradition was simple.

A cairn of carefully chosen stones was raised over the grave, each rock placed with quiet intention. The structure was modest but elegant, rising waist-high and bound together with iron pins that would keep it standing through the centuries.

No grand statue marked the site.

Only the stones and a small iron plaque bearing her name.

Momma Toki.

Keeper of Beasts.

Tarkus stood apart from the gathering.

He watched from the far edge of the field.

His wings were folded tightly against his sides. The long mane of spines along his back lay flat for once, and his tail hung still behind him.

When the last stone was placed upon the cairn and the people began to drift away, the manticore walked forward alone.

He lowered his head toward the stones.

For a long moment he did not move.

Then he turned.

With a single powerful leap he launched himself into the sky.

The great wings caught the wind and carried him north.

He did not circle.

He did not return.

He flew toward the distant mountains of Kadathe', where the peaks rose cold and sharp against the northern horizon.

The people of Papal watched him go until he vanished into the clouds.

They did not see Tarkus again for twenty-five years.

The Remembrance.

The grove was quiet in the way only old places can be. Not silent, but settled. Leaves stirred high above with a sound like breath passing through cloth, and the air held the faint warmth that Cinderheart always carried, even at dusk. The first tree stood at the center, its trunk broad and dark, its ridges burnished gold by years of sun and care. It was no longer a sapling or even a single guardian. It was a presence. The patriarch. The place from which the others had learned how to stand.

Eeyagoo sat at its roots, wrapped in a thick cloak that smelled of smoke and soil. His frame had grown small with age, shoulders narrow, hands knotted and thin, but his eyes were still clear. Sharp. They moved from the bark before him to the faces around him with deliberate care, as if he were measuring each moment and setting it aside where it would not be lost.

Shardra knelt nearby. She did not tower as she once had. Time had taken something from her height, a subtle settling of bone and muscle, and her hair was threaded now with gray that caught the fading light. One eye watched Eeyagoo steadily. The other remained closed, scarred and unseeing. Tears ran freely down her cheek, and she made no effort to stop them.

Mekni Krelikson stood behind her, tall and broad-shouldered, his mother's strength in his stance and her restraint in his hands. He did not speak. He did not need to. His presence was promise enough.

Mimi perched close to Eeyagoo, her form stable now, chosen and held. She was larger than she had been, wings folded neatly, posture thoughtful. When she spoke, she did so with pauses that mirrored Eeyagoo's own, words chosen rather than spilled.

"You are tired," she said softly.

"Yes," Eeyagoo replied. "Long time tired. Good tired."

He rested a hand against the tree's bark. It was warm. Steady. He smiled at that.

"I want say thing," he continued, voice thin but firm. "Before I forget words."

Shardra leaned closer. "You don't have to," she said, though her voice trembled. "You can rest."

He shook his head slowly. "Need say."

His gaze moved to Mimi. "You stay. You watch. You learn. Guard grove like you already do. Teach Ironshrike chicks like always. Help home be prepared."

Mimi nodded, slow and careful. "I stay," she said. "I watch."

Then he looked to Shardra. For a long moment, he said nothing at all.

"You big," he said finally. "Always big. But you learn... be gentle. Hard thing. Proud."

Shardra's breath broke, a sound halfway between a sob and a laugh. "You saved this city," she said. "You saved me."

He shook his head again. "We did. Together."

The light faded further, the grove deepening into shadow and ember-glow. Elith stood a short distance away, hands folded, his expression strained in a way none of them had seen before. When Eeyagoo beckoned him closer, the elf came at once.

“When time comes,” Eeyagoo said, “I want here. Under first tree. With roots. Let keep me.”

Shardra stiffened. “Eeyagoo,” she began.

“Promise,” he said gently. “Please.”

She pressed her forehead to the ground beside him. “I promise,” she said. “By my blood. By my son.”

Mekni nodded once. “We will honor it.”

Elith knelt then and placed both palms against the bark. He murmured words that were old even when the world was younger, not spells so much as introductions. The grove listened. Leaves shifted. The warmth deepened.

When Elith withdrew his hands, his eyes were bright with unshed tears.

“The tree agrees,” he said quietly. “It remembers him. It welcomes him.”

Eeyagoo closed his eyes at that, relief softening his features. He leaned back against the roots, breathing slow and even.

“Good,” he said. “Good place.”

Mimi leaned forward and pressed her forehead to his, just as he had once done with her. “No scare,” she whispered. “Not here.”

He smiled. “No scare. Mimi, I...no scared happy, tired. Good life, longer than expect. So glad you were in it.”

The grove held them then, as it always had, patient and watchful, carrying forward the memory of a small kobold who had taught a city how to listen.

The day the city gathered was overcast, though no rain fell. Low clouds pressed close to the hills, and the river lay dark and slow, carrying sound farther than usual. People filled the paths and terraces from dawn onward, not crowding, not jostling, but standing with the careful patience of those who understood they were present for something that would not come again. So many faces, so many people near the grove in one place, and yet so quiet.

At the river port, for the first time in living memory, the *Hag* was moored. Her hull loomed black and scarred, her guns silent, her lines secured with ritual care. Captain Grebdin stood on the upper deck with his officers behind him, massive arms folded, head bowed. He did not speak. He did not need to. The ship itself was testament enough. He had offered a gun salute, but the city preferred a quieter ceremony. He only nodded, spoke with Shadra and Mimi before returning to the deck to observe the service. Men and women who had once feared the dreadnought now looked on her as one might look upon an old storm finally at peace. It was luck, they said, that they were in port in Voonishart and could get upriver in time. But many saw it as fate.

Nearby stood two figures whose presence sent a murmur through the assembled crowd. Erill Becom, Asmith’s right hand and voice in Mithrin, dressed plainly for once, hands clasped, eyes forward. Since the fall of Lord Harker, Asmith had become more of a stabilizing force than anything else; his organization kept things running in the chaotic times around the trial. And beside him, half-shadowed beneath a veil of black lace and quiet menace, Shinazazi the Ghostwidow. She spoke to no one. She was not approached. Her stillness was unnatural. She had represented the town’s interests, at the behest of Eeyagoo, against Harker’s estate and made a substantial windfall. Whatever debts or reckonings had once passed between her and the small

kobold now being mourned, they had brought her here. Respect, it seemed, for they rarely had interactions directly after the settlement. That alone elevated the moment beyond any civic ceremony.

Conspicuous by their absence were the members of the Mithrin Council. No banners flew. No envoys arrived late with excuses wrapped in velvet words. The space they left behind was noticed, cataloged, and remembered. It could be the older ones couldn't make the trip, and the younger ones did not see the need; either way, it was slight.

Shardra stood before the gathered city, one hand resting on Rimeheart, the other on the shoulder of her son. Gray streaked her hair now, fine and unmistakable. Her one good eye swept the crowd once, then returned to the simple bier set before the first Cinderheart tree.

"He deserved them here," she said, her voice steady despite the tears she did not hide. "They chose not to come. Let that be remembered, by ALL who did."

No one contradicted her. Shinazazi nodded, a curt, courtly type, but the only reaction anyone saw during the events.

Eeyagoo the Mouseknife lay at rest beneath a woven shroud of plain cloth and pressed leaves. He had passed quietly, as he had lived in his later years. Mimi had been reading to him, one of his cherished herbal books resting open in her hands. He had listened, eyes half-lidded, breathing slow and even. At some point, they had stopped her with a gentle touch. She thought he was thinking. When she looked again, he was gone.

Mimi's wail had cut through the house like a blade. Raw. Wordless. The sound of something breaking that she had not known how to prepare for. She had learned what death was with Kellic. This was different. This was the loss of the one who had shaped her, guided her, taught her how to speak and how to wait. For days, she could not be comforted. She clung to his chair. His cloak. His books. Grief did not obey the lessons she had learned.

As Shardra waited. She sent word through the ironshrikes, and the birds carried it farther and faster than any rider. They seemed subdued as they went, their calls muted. Some had known Eeyagoo for decades. Some remembered the first days of the rookery, when he had fed them by hand and spoken to them softly, treating them not as tools but as neighbors. They had long memories. They circled the city that day in slow, wide arcs.

Then she visited the alchemist, Arika, an old dwarf of Kadathe, and bade her make a time-honored solution. Custom and tradition demanded a death-mark. Shardra braided a bundle of her long hair and dyed it stark white with the potion. It wasn't as long as the others, because it was new. But took a small, brick-brown scale and attached it to the end. Eeyagoo's Death-Mark would stay with her all the rest of her life. Mekni, her son just barely a full-grown Giant, did the same. This was giant remembrance; it was proper.

The city waited with her.

When the time came, they carried him to the grove. The Cinderheart patriarch stood tall and dark, its bark warm despite the cool air, its leaves barely stirring. The earth beneath it had been prepared with care. Elith stood at the roots, pale and drawn, the strain of holding himself together visible in the set of his shoulders. The leader of the druids stood beside him. So did the leader of the farmers, hands rough and calloused, hat held to his chest.

Shardra looked down at the simple bier, at the place where he would soon rest.

"He gave me friendship when I had none. Not because he needed me. Not because I was useful. But because he saw me and decided I mattered."

Her voice wavered.

“He helped me carry my losses. He did not ask me to forget them. He taught me how to live beside them.” She lifted her head again, gaze sweeping the crowd. “I am still here because of him. Stronger. Quieter. More whole.”

She rested her forehead briefly against the haft of her axe, a gesture small and private, then straightened.

“I will carry his name as long as I draw breath,” she said. “And when I am gone, my son will know who taught his mother how to stand when the fighting was done.”

Shardra stepped back then, tears finally spilling freely down her cheek, and made space for the others to speak.

At the far end of the grove, Mimi watched her with wide, shining eyes, clutching a book that smelled of smoke and ink and home.

Elnak, Mayor of Cirksher, stepped forward first. He was an even older elf now, his hair still white, but the luster faded in the intervening decades. His posture was bent by years of figures and ledgers. He cleared his throat and spoke without flourish.

“I did keep his ledgers,” the elf said at length, his voice measured, each word given its full due. “I did show him the greater figures, and the manner in which they speak their quiet truths. Or so I believed, at the time. Yet it became clear, in due course, that he perceived beyond what was set to page. He grasped the weight of things unwritten. He understood need, not as a matter of coin alone, but as a matter of persons, and of seasons, and of the slow turning upon which all mortal lives depend.”

He inclined his head slightly, as though acknowledging a truth that had never belonged solely to him.

“He did never once inquire as to what a thing might yield him. Such a question held no dominion over his thoughts. He inquired, instead, as to what its failure would demand in recompense. What it would take from those who trusted in it. What hunger it might bring. What hope it might deny.”

His hand moved then, not sharply, but with quiet certainty, extending toward the gathered folk, toward the laborers and farmers and stewards who now stood in stillness beneath the open sky.

“It is for this reason that Papal endures. He did set his hand to the lean years, long before their shadow had yet fallen. While we, in our lesser wisdom, did attend ourselves to the abundance before us, he was already in counsel with the winters yet unborn.”

His gaze passed among them, and there was no reproach in it. Only recognition.

“And you, good folk, did possess the rare and commendable wisdom to heed him. To labor beside him. To place trust not in promise, but in preparation. This, too, is no small thing.”

He grew still then. The moment lengthened, not from hesitation, but from care.

“At the end of all reckonings,” he said quietly, “I shall find the world diminished, for want of his counsel. I shall miss our discourse.”

Sir Halveth Ardan Korr stepped forward when called. His armor was worn by years of service, the marks of repair plain and honest. He removed his helm and held it before him in both hands.

“I remember the refugee camp,” he said. “That was a hard time. Order had broken. Fear was stronger than prayer. They came before us, asked for nothing, and began working. Feeding those who had nothing. Counting what remained. Writing names so none would be forgotten. He tended those we believed beyond saving. He held no title or rank. Gave no orders. Yet survival took root where he worked. That is truth.” He paused and nodded once toward Shardra. “If not for him, and his, many of Taurdain would have died in those weeks. They would not have lived to see the cure. Would not stand here now. We should have spoken sooner.

He preserved more lives than we did, though we bore steel. He was wise. Kind in his way. Curt, as our people often are. But sound of heart. Free of greed. That is a rare strength.” Shardra remembered him then, though age had changed him. He had been the new knight at the gate when they first came to the camp, standing his post when so much else had failed. He had seen them arrive, and he had not turned them away.

Sniksnik, the small master of Kraggenkor, stepped forward slowly, leaning on his staff, the small ancient kobold wrapped in layers of careful cloth. He had been old when many here were not yet born. He was old when Eeyagoo first stood before him with soot on his face and impossible ideas in his mouth. Now he was old again, in the way that meant the road was nearly finished.

Forge Master Kraggenkor stood just behind him, a solid presence reduced to stillness. One hand rested lightly on Sniksnik’s shoulder. He said nothing. He would not. This was not his moment.

Sniksnik took a breath. Then another. When he spoke, his voice was thin but steady, each word placed with intention, pauses marking thought rather than weakness.

“I was... already ancient,” he said. “When I met Mouseknife.”

A soft sound passed through the crowd.

“I had made my peace,” he continued. “Knew it. Respected it. He did too.” He nodded once, as if confirming the truth aloud. “That is why we understood each other.” He looked back at the Forgemaster, “Friends helped me push those limits, but it could not be done again. The means were gone, the knowledge lost now.” He shook his head. “If I could, I would have, for that I am sorry.”

He paused, breathing carefully.

“He did not take more than the world could give. He did not ask it to bleed for him.” Another pause. “He believed... that enough was enough.”

Sniksnik’s eyes lifted, sweeping the gathered people.

“He was always looking ahead. Not for himself. For others.” He frowned slightly, remembering. “Even people he would never meet. Some thought that was suspicious. I did not.”

A faint smile touched his mouth.

“He had simple needs. Food. Shelter. Books. Quiet.” He inhaled. “But great responsibility. In his mind. To those he named as his.” He gestured weakly but clearly. “Clan. Tribe. Family.”

His voice caught, just once.

“He chose Papal.”

Silence answered him.

“He was small,” Sniksnik said. “Humble. But he casts a long shadow here.” He lifted his staff and tapped it lightly against the stone path. “Look around you. Some here remember the Palehive, Henigus, those awful years of hardship and want.” He waved his staff at the grove, and the guard walls with vines of hanging fruit growing inside the city, the orchards, and the greenhouses. “The cornucopia of Mithrin is what Papal is called now.”

He let the words settle.

“You did this,” he said, gently but firmly. “He helped. He planned. He asked. But you listened. You acted. You honored the ambitious and sometimes outlandish plans he brought you.” A breath. “That is why they worked.”

Sniksnik lowered his head.

“After,” he said quietly, “I will make markstone.”

Murmurs stirred.

“Kobold way,” he explained. “Name. True name. Mouseknife.” He swallowed. “Shardra. Her son. Mimi.” His gaze softened at that name. “Surviving family.”

He straightened as much as his frame allowed.

“And Papal,” he said. “All of it. Home. Tribe. Clan.”

Kraggenkor’s hand tightened briefly on his shoulder.

“It will glow at night,” Sniksnik added. “So none forget. So travelers know who rests here.”

He did not say what the stone was made of. No one asked. No one knew that it had been drawn from the heart of a mountain, from stone so dense and enduring it was rarely seen outside legends. Heartstone, harder than steel, is worth a fortune beyond reason.

But Sniksnik had never cared for wealth. Neither had Eeyagoo.

Sniksnik bowed then, deeply and carefully, and stepped back into Kraggenkor’s shadow.

The forge master did not speak.

He did not need to.

The Mayor of Papal spoke next, followed by the Mathius and Feleniss Storm representing the druids of the region and the farmers’ head Grav Meld too old to work the fields but still sharp of mind. Each told a piece of the same truth. He was not a hero in the stories told to children. He was the reason children lived to hear stories at all.

It was then, without preamble, something occurred.

The air tightened first. Not with threat, not with cold, but energy, as though the ground itself had drawn a breath and held it. Frost traced the stones nearest the Cinderheart grove in fine, deliberate lines. Sap steamed faintly where warmth and ice touched. Then the space beside the trees folded inward, and an opening like a calm wound in winter light settled into being.

Two figures stepped through.

They were vast, ancient, and deliberate. Towering over even the Karakan Giants in attendance. Ice clung to them not as ornament but as memory. One bore the stillness of deep glaciers and carried it with grace. The other moved with a steadier weight, less distant, eyes bright with a restrained and earnest regard. They paused, both of them, and looked at the grove.

Ulkin the Ancient inclined his great head. Bukri the Earnest placed one massive hand against the frozen earth, as if to feel the pulse beneath it. Neither spoke at first. The crowd did not move. Even those who did not know their names felt the moment settle into something that would be remembered.

Ulkin spoke without raising his voice, yet it carried like a winter’s gale.

“This place should not be,” he said. “Warmth that remembers itself. Growth that endured the fade shattering. This is not the work of fire alone. This is a balance held.”

His gaze moved, slowly, to where Eeyagoo lay.

“We measure deeds by mass, not by noise,” Ulkin continued. “By how much weight is taken from the future. By how much collapse, is prevented. The one you lay down carried more than his frame should allow. He did not bear it loudly. He bore it precisely.”

Bukri stepped forward then, and there was something almost human in the way he lowered himself, careful of the ground, careful of those near him.

“He did not strike Henigus as we strike,” Bukri said. “He did not break it with frost or stone. He changed what it could touch. He denied it soil. Denied it hunger. Denied it the quiet permissions that allow a thing like that to return.”

He looked around at the gathered faces, at the grove, at the town beyond.

“You stand because paths were closed,” Bukri said. “You breathe because growth was guided, not forced. You rebuild because rot was named early and burned out with care. These are small acts, you tell yourselves. We know better.”

Ulkin lifted one hand, palm open, and frost drifted from it like old snow shaken free of a memory.

“Henigus reborn was not ended by one blow,” he said. “It was unmade by many denials. This one gave several that cannot be replaced. We came because the balance was noticed. We came because debt was incurred, and gratitude is weight that must be set down.”

For a long moment, neither spoke. The cold eased slightly. The Cinderheart leaves stirred, ruddy and living. Bukri bowed his head.

“Lay him down without fear,” he said. “What he prevented will not forget him. Nor will the cold.”

Ulkin inclined himself once more, toward Eeyagoo, toward the grove, toward all of them.

“This life mattered beyond its measure,” he said. “That is all the truth there is.”

The portal closed as quietly as it had opened. The frost remained, thin and respectful, until the earth took it back.

Ulkin the Ancient spoke once more, not lifting his head.

“There was weight we did not name,” he said. “A pressure applied where frost alone could not reach. The first flame was touched. A voice carried upward, not in challenge, but in reason. What moved then was not ours to command, yet it turned. Remember that the smallest mass, placed correctly, alters the fall of mountains.”

Bukri the Earnest placed his hand briefly over his chest.

“We do not thank the wind for obeying,” he said. “We thank the one who showed it where to blow.”

No more was said. None of it was explained. They stepped back into the glowing ring of frost and were gone.

The silence that followed was not empty. It was stunned. Those gathered did not look at one another at first. Many could not. The sense of scale pressed in from all sides, not just the size of the Rime-Kin, but the casual certainty with which they had stepped through reality as though it were a door left ajar.

For those with even the faintest spark of the gift, the air still rang. Magic had been used without effort, without declaration, without consequence. It lingered like pressure in the ears after deep water. Several of the alchemists found their hands shaking. A few of the priests swallowed hard, suddenly aware of how small their prayers sounded by comparison.

Shinazazi did not move at all.

Her eyes were fixed on the place where the portal had closed, pupils wide, breath slow and controlled by long habit. She had seen powers move nations, watched secrets tilt markets and topple houses. This was different. This was not leverage. This was acknowledgment. Something vast had noticed Eeyagoo, had weighed him, and had come. When she finally exhaled, it was with something close to reverence and something close to fear. Not of the Rime-Kin. Of the implications, he had moved the first flame to action; could that be?

Elnak was the first of them to find words, though they came slowly.

He had lived with old stories long enough to know when one had just grown larger than its frame. His hands were folded in front of him, fingers pressed together until the knuckles whitened, eyes fixed on the grove as though measuring it against something far older.

“We tell ourselves the world has narrowed,” he said at last, voice rough with age and thought. “That the great weights are gone, buried, spent. What stood here today proves otherwise. They are still awake. They still choose. And they chose to come.”

He turned his head toward Eeyagoo.

“That means this life reached further than we will ever chart.”

Hrauk Devanow stood a little apart from the others, hands braced on the head of his cane. His hair had gone almost entirely white since the day of the wagon, since the mites and the screaming and the way terror had turned to fury and back again. He had not fainted. Not this time. But his face had gone pale, and he breathed through his nose as though steadying himself against a sudden incline.

“I remember shaking over insects,” he said, half to himself. “Little things. Too many of them. Thought that was the end of me.”

He gave a quiet, incredulous laugh.

“And now I stand where mountains come to thank the dead.”

Hrauk straightened as much as his years allowed and bowed, not deeply, but sincerely.

“That wagon mattered,” he said. “That road mattered. I see that now. And so did the one who stood on it.”

Around them, the crowd absorbed these words in fragments and layers. Merchants recalculated their sense of risk. Soldiers reconsidered what courage looked like. Scholars silently revised entire chapters they had not yet written.

Above it all, the grove stood warm against the cold, leaves stirring without wind.

Eeyagoo was not remembered as small that day.

Sniksnik had climbed onto the edge of a low stone, claws gripping for balance. He did not like crowds, did not like ceremony, and least of all liked speaking where his voice might tremble. But his eyes were bright, wet, and unashamed.

“I engrave names,” he said softly. “I cut them deep so time has to work to erase them. I thought that was how you made something last.”

He sniffed, once, sharp and annoyed with himself.

“This,” he gestured vaguely toward the place the Rime-Kin had stood, toward the grove, toward the air itself, “this does not need engraving. It is already cut into the world. Little master,” he added, the old honor slipping out without thought, “you cheated stone. That is not easy.”

Forge Master Garbrik Kraggenkor did not speak immediately. He stood with his arms crossed over his broad chest, beard bound in the old way, eyes narrowed not in suspicion but in calculation. He had felt the magic when it passed, not as a spell, but as stress along unseen seams, like a blade tested against a faultless ingot.

“That was not power spent,” he said finally. “That was power set. Like a keystone. Like a final strike that makes the arch hold.”

He nodded once, slow and deliberate.

“I have forged things meant to outlast kingdoms. I would trade them all for the certainty that comes from knowing one small hand placed the right weight in the right moment. That is craft of the highest order.”

There was approval there, deep and dwarven, and it carried more pride than praise ever could.

Erill Becom stood with his hands folded behind his back, posture easy, expression unreadable. Only Bukri’s eyes, earnest and old, had flicked once to Becom’s right hand. The scars there were deep, layered, the kind earned through years of consequence rather than accident. Erill flexed his fingers once, subtly, as though testing sensation. Whatever he felt, he kept to himself. Men like him understood weight, too. He had just learned how badly he had misjudged the scale.

Elith had gone very still. His ears rang not with sound but with memory. He had studied fragments of older ages, handled bones that should not have endured, traced runes whose meanings were half-guessed. This was beyond all of it. Not myth remembered, not history reconstructed. Living continuity. He glanced at Elnak and saw the same expression mirrored there. They had thought themselves old. They had been corrected.

At last, Mimi stepped forward, shaken slightly by the events but aware of who and what the rime-kin were from a meeting decades ago that haunted her father.

She stood tall now, her form that of an almost-human-sized dragon, with a stinger on her tail, her color deep blue with grief. Steady, an elegant; normally, she was a bright, lively Verdant dragonling. Her balance is sure, her voice is her own. She held one of his books in her hands, fingers resting on the worn leather as if it might still be warm. For a long moment, she said nothing. The city leaned inward, breath held, waiting not for eloquence but for truth.

“He was not warrior,” she said at last. She paused, as she always did. “Not hero.”

A murmur rippled through the gathered crowd, then faded.

“He was provider. Protector. Planner. Survivor.” Another pause, careful and deliberate. “But not alone.”

Her eyes lifted then, meeting faces one by one.

“He watched hunger,” she continued. “And fed. He saw trouble. And stood. He made lists. You did work.” She nodded slowly, as if confirming it for herself. “That is what he said. Always.”

She drew in a breath that trembled but did not break her.

“He taught me many words. He taught me wait. He taught me choose. Taught many things, survival, preparation.” Her voice softened. “He taught me that people make cities. Not plans. Not walls. People.”

Tears ran freely down her cheeks now, but she did not wipe them away.

“He loved here,” Mimi said softly. She paused, shaping the words with care. “Second home. Second tribe. He cherished here.”

Her fingers tightened on the book, then loosened again.

“He helped because you helped.” A small pause. “He never said it was his.”

“He said it was ours.”

Mimi swallowed.

“Kellic,” she said, and the name moved through the crowd like a slow ripple. Those who had not known the story stilled, exchanging glances. They knew the name even if they did not know the life. The old farmer. The fire. The night that changed Papal.

“Kellic asked him... plant that tree.”

She lifted her hand and pointed toward the grove.

Many heads turned at once, following the line of her finger. Faces young and old shifted, some with dawning recognition, others with quiet surprise. A few did not turn at all. They already knew the story. They knew the place. They remembered the man who had died long ago in that fire and why his name was still spoken softly.

Her hand remained raised, steady.

“He said he would try.” A careful pause. “Try.”

She nodded once, as if to anchor the memory.

“And he did.” Another breath. “With help. From many of you.” Her voice strengthened. “It worked. It lived. It grew.”

She lowered her hand.

“It bore fruit.” A longer pause. “And the fruit grew.” She looked around, pausing here and there with a knowing glance. “Like this place, grew and bore fruit.” Her speech became more fluid as she gained confidence. “He made place of magic and family.”

Around her, people looked again to the grove, to the tree that now stood taller than any one life, to the shade it cast and the quiet it held. Understanding spread without words.

Mimi pressed the book to her chest, eyes bright with grief and pride together.

“That is how Da was.”

The silence that followed was deep and full, not empty.

“I will walk his path,” Mimi said at last. “Not same steps. But same way.” She paused, searching for the right shape of the thought. “I will listen. I will help. With all of you.”

She knelt then and placed the book against the earth, just above where he would rest.

The grove accepted him.

As the soil was laid gently over Eeyagoo, the Mouseknife of Papal, the city stood in silence. No horns sounded. No banners waved. Only the leaves whispered, and the ironshrikes circled once more overhead with a keening, mourning sound of loss they made if one of their own died.

And so, his long life of survival ended, not by illness or bloodshed but by the inexorable grinding of time we all face.

And the people of Papal endured but would not forget.

The Council of Mithrin

The news did not arrive with ceremony. It was placed among other documents whose importance could not be measured.

The War Chamber beneath Mithrin's western tower had been in use without pause for nearly two days. Lamps burned constantly, their glass chimneys faintly fogged with soot, and the long table at the center of the chamber was crowded with maps, tide reports, and naval estimates drawn in careful hands. Ink had been layered over ink until the coastlines themselves appeared thickened, burdened by what they now represented.

The Council of Mithrin was assembled, with foreign delegates standing among them.

Gunthane Varrik Halveth of Thylor remained near the western charts with one broad hand resting on the table. His fingers were permanently darkened by powder work and he had not sat since entering the chamber. Across from him sat Doko of Kadathe', straight-backed with his hands folded within his sleeves, pale eyes moving slowly from speaker to speaker with patient attention. Three armored representatives of Taurdain stood together along the far side of the chamber, their presence steady and deliberate, like stones placed to hold something in place.

Among Mithrin's own councilors sat those who had endured the city's most uncertain decades. Councillor Thalenweir Il'Vareth still lived, though the years had thinned him. His silver hair, once unbroken, now carried strands so pale they appeared nearly translucent. He had been present during the first recorded appearance of Shinazazi in Mithrin's understructures fifty one years earlier, when he argued for restraint. History had vindicated him. Beside him sat Councillor Maerethil Sorn, who had overseen Mithrin's internal intelligence during the years when the Undermarket nearly fractured the city from within. Age had sharpened his features rather than softened them. Both elves had seen Mithrin when its stability was uncertain, and both remained because they had survived being correct.

Of the older human councilors, fewer remained. Councillor Bramwell Teys had died twenty-three years earlier, peacefully, his influence largely intact. Councillor Helmin Rook had succumbed to winter fever during the lean years following the Palehive burnings. Others had passed more recently, their replacements chosen carefully after the Harker scandal, when Mithrin learned how deeply trade could wound a nation if left to men who mistook control for stewardship.

Those seats were now held by newer figures. Councillor Seraphine Keld had once been a port registrar and rose through relentless competence after uncovering falsified shipping ledgers tied to Harker's shell holdings. She spoke rarely, but when she did it was from verified record. Councillor Dain Arkwright, younger than most present, came from the eastern caravan syndicates and understood trade not as abstraction but as movement required for survival. His presence marked Mithrin's renewed emphasis on resilient trade rather than profitable trade. At the far end sat Councillor Elowen Marris, who had replaced the disgraced seat once held by Harker himself. She had not been chosen for loyalty but for the absence of ambition. Her family had managed grain reserves for three generations without scandal or praise, and she had never sought power, which was precisely why she had been given it.

Gunthane Halveth was outlining Thylor's cannon readiness when the chamber door opened and a clerk entered quietly in Council grey carrying a narrow case of dark wood. He crossed the chamber without speaking and placed the case beside High Councilor Merrowyn Hale.

Merrowyn had held the chair for forty years, inheriting a fractured council after Harker's exposure. In that time he had restored something Mithrin had nearly lost. Trust.

He rested his hand on the case before opening it. Inside lay a single sheet. He read it once and then again while the chamber remained silent.

When he finally looked up, Thalenweir Il'Vareth asked quietly what had occurred.

"Eeyagoo of Papal," Merrowyn said. "Mouseknife. He is dead."

The words settled across the chamber without embellishment. Gunthane Halveth exhaled once through his nose while Doko remained perfectly still and Maerethil Sorn closed his eyes briefly in acknowledgment. Elowen Marris asked when the burial would be, and Merrowyn answered that it had been yesterday. The implication required no explanation. They were here, not there.

Seraphine Keld spoke carefully, noting that Eeyagoo's work had preserved more viable agricultural land than any individual since the eastern reclamations. Dain Arkwright added that trade routes through central Mithrin had stabilized because of Papal's recovery and that without it inland provisioning would still be compromised. These were not sentiments but structural truths.

Thalenweir spoke softly then, recalling that he had met the kobold once and that Eeyagoo had spoken little but listened carefully, which was rarer than most realized.

Merrowyn set the letter down and said the Council would send word. No one objected, yet no one suggested leaving the chamber.

Gunthane Halveth observed that if Innarlith closed Mithrin's western routes entirely, Papal would become more important rather than less. Merrowyn acknowledged the truth of that with a single nod. Doko's pale eyes rested briefly on the letter before he spoke.

"In Kadathe' we say a man's worth is measured by the stability left behind him. This one left much."

It was not praise. It was judgment.

Merrowyn closed the case and said quietly that the Council would attend when Mithrin could afford to move. No one asked when that might be, because for the first time in many years Mithrin was no longer certain of the answer.

No door opened and no guard announced her. One moment the chamber held only those who belonged there, and the next another figure stood between the western chart table and the southern wall where the lamplight fell weakest. She stood as though she had always been present.

Several councilors did not react. They had seen this before.

Gunthane Halveth's hand remained on the table though his fingers tightened slightly, while Doko's pale eyes shifted toward her at once. He had never seen her before, but he understood what she was. Thalenweir Il'Vareth inclined his head and spoke her name.

"Shinazazi."

She inclined her head in return while Councillor Seraphine Keld stiffened. She had read the records of these appearances but witnessing one was different. Merrowyn Hale did not rise as he observed calmly that she had not been summoned.

She answered that she had not and that she had come because they could not. Her gaze moved slowly across the chamber before resting briefly on the closed case beside Merrowyn's hand.

"I missed him."

The words were simple. She turned her attention to Thalenweir.

"He was careful. He understood restraint and patience. Most who attempt to change a place do so loudly. They destroy something and call the result improvement."

Her gaze returned to the case.

"He planted orchards. He measured water. He counted yields. He persuaded farmers instead of replacing them and rebuilt trade slowly enough that it would not collapse when watched. He built stability instead of power."

Thalenweir inclined his head in agreement.

"That is rare," she continued quietly. "Most rulers and merchants pursue control. He pursued continuity."

Her gaze returned to Merrowyn as she stated that he had been correct not to attend the burial, explaining that absence could wound but presence in the wrong place could wound more deeply. She added that she had ensured the appropriate eyes remained upon Papal.

Merrowyn regarded her for a moment and observed that she had not come only to say that.

She confirmed that she had not and stepped forward into clearer light before explaining that the Iron Fleet of Quttara had left its deep anchorages and was moving west-northwest in staggered formation, not in raiding posture but in war posture. Gunthane Halveth turned fully toward her as she continued, explaining that Innarlith's Warswans had extended their blockade perimeter by thirty-seven nautical miles since the previous tide cycle and now overlapped patrol ranges once maintained by Kanqqa.

Dain Arkwright remarked quietly that the movement was coordinated, and Shinazazi agreed. Her gaze moved across the western coastlines marked on the maps as she explained that Pataq's vessels had repositioned into a secondary containment line and were no longer the spear but the wall.

Merrowyn asked about Dracart.

She paused before answering that Dracart was not moving ships but moving her. No one required clarification that she meant the Dragon Queen of Innarlith.

Gunthane Halveth asked where she was headed, and Shinazazi answered that the dragon was moving toward Taurdain. The word settled heavily across the chamber.

Doko spoke then, asking why. The question was not disbelief but calculation.

Shinazazi met his gaze and explained that something had changed. The fleet movements matched containment rather than expansion and suggested preparation for a precise strike rather than broad conquest.

Thalenweir observed that Taurdain possessed a fleet possibly capable of threatening Innarlith directly. Shinazazi agreed but noted that Taurdain held something else. She did not elaborate, and none present asked her to.

Gunthane Halveth stated plainly that if Taurdain fell, Mithrin's northern shipping lanes would be exposed. Shinazazi confirmed that assessment and added that Thylor's artillery would then become the next barrier.

Merrowyn studied her before asking whether she was certain.

She met his gaze without hesitation and replied that she did not bring uncertainty into that room.

The chamber fell silent. After a moment she inclined her head once more and repeated quietly that she had missed him. Then she stepped backward into shadow and was gone.

The chamber itself had not changed, but everyone within it had.

Gunthane Halveth finally spoke, observing that when Shinazazi appeared it was already late. No one disagreed.

Merrowyn rested his hand on the case containing Eeyagoo's notice. Outside, Mithrin continued its ordinary motion. Inside, war had just become inevitable.

Message from the Council.

The message arrived the following afternoon.

It did not come by courier on horseback but by Ironshrike.

The bird descended without sound, its metal-dark feathers catching the light only along their edges as it circled once above the grove before settling on the tall post that marked the path into Papal. It did not call out and did not move again once it had landed. Those who approached it saw that it bore a sealed cylinder of dark steel secured against its leg, etched with the unmistakable sigil of the Mithrin Council.

The cylinder was addressed plainly.

To Papal.

To Shardra Shalkdottir.

To Mimi, daughter of Eeyagoo.

The seal remained unbroken.

Inside rested a single sheet, heavy and precisely cut, its script deliberate and unmistakably official. When Shardra opened it she read the contents aloud so that those gathered nearby could hear.

The Council of Mithrin acknowledged with full measure the passing of Eeyagoo, known to the nation and beyond as Mouseknife of Papal. The letter stated plainly that his work had preserved land that would otherwise have been lost and that his judgment and restraint had allowed recovery where destruction had already taken root. His service, it continued, had not been performed for recognition, yet its absence would be known immediately.

It was known now.

The Council expressed its regret that none of its members had been present at his burial. The absence had not been chosen. Representatives of Taurdain, Auris, Thylor, and Kadathe' were presently gathered within Mithrin under emergency convocation, and confirmed naval mobilization by Innarlith alongside coordinated positioning of western fleets had altered the balance of peace. Trade routes were already contested and further escalation remained possible.

The Council could not depart without risking greater consequence to the nation Eeyagoo himself had helped preserve.

The letter made clear that this necessity did not diminish their recognition of him. When present obligations permitted, the Council would travel to Papal in person to stand witness to the place he had restored and the people he had protected.

Until then, the final line read simply:

Mithrin stands because of people like him.

The letter closed with the seal and authority of the Mithrin Council.

Shardra lowered the page when she finished reading, a novel thing she had learned in the peaceful years. The Ironshrike had not moved during the recitation and remained perched upon the post with its head slightly tilted, dark metal feathers unmoving in the still air.

Mimi would not fully understand the politics described in the letter. The movements of fleets and councils belonged to a world that had never concerned her father very much. But she understood the truth beneath the words.

They had not forgotten him.

They had simply been forced elsewhere.

The Ironshrike did not depart when the message had been read. It remained where it was, silent and watchful, its steel cylinder now empty.

It was not waiting to carry another message.

It was there to watch.

Not Papal.

For Papal.

The First Flame

A week and a day after the service, the most astounding event took place. It began slowly, but it was felt early and spread quickly.

They did not see him enter the gates. This would trouble the guards for the rest of their lives. They remembered the moment clearly. The sun had stood high and pale, its warmth diffused through the thin haze that so often hung above Papal's cultivated slopes. The orchards were heavy with fruit even so late in the season, their branches bowed beneath impossible abundance. Bees drifted lazily through the air. Laborers moved along the terraces. Wagons creaked. Voices carried. It had been an ordinary hour. And yet somehow he had passed among them.

He walked as a man, though no man had ever carried such stillness within him. His skin bore the deep crimson of cooling embers, not the red of blood nor paint nor sunburn, but the color of something that remembered heat older than light. His hair fell long and dark, bound loosely with clasps of a style no living artisan could have named. His garments were ancient beyond fashion, layered robes of ash-grey and coal-black, trimmed with sigils whose meanings had been lost when the world was young. They did not sway with his stride. They seemed instead to follow him out of respect. None barred his path, not because they chose not to, but because they could not conceive of doing so.

He moved through Papal without haste, his gaze falling upon the works of mortal hands. The long irrigation channels. The terraced fields. The careful grafting of vine and branch. The root cellars built into the hillsides. The granaries sealed with rune and resin. He passed men and women who had been born into security they had never questioned, who had never known famine, never known the desperate arithmetic of survival that had defined their grandparents' lives. His eyes lingered upon these things, not with surprise, but with recognition.

When he came at last to the inner grove, he slowed. The Cinderheart trees rose before him, their immense trunks coiled with living strength, their bark dark and textured like old ironwood, their leaves deep red fading

to brick and ember. Their warmth could be felt even at distance. Their presence bent the air itself. These were not mere trees. They were statements. Defiance given root and permanence. He drew a slow breath. For the first time since his arrival, his composure shifted. A faint smile touched his lips, not pride, not ownership, but something gentler. "Ah," he whispered, in a voice like the flutter of a distant flame. "you endured." Those closest to him would later swear the leaves stirred at his words, though no wind blew.

It was here that the first of the townsfolk began to follow him. They did not speak. They did not question. Something within them knew this moment felt important, knew they were witnessing a turning. The quiet word spread ahead of him without sound. A runner was sent. Then another. At Eeyagoo's home, Mimi felt it first. The mimicing froze where she perched upon the warm stone of the hearth. Her pupils widened until only black remained. A sound escaped her, small and involuntary, not pain, not warning, but recognition without memory. Shardra rose at once. Age had claimed her strength in measure, but not her presence, not her readiness. She took up no weapon. She did not need to. Whatever came would not be turned aside by steel.

By the time the stranger reached the grave, half the town had gathered behind him. No voice called out. No child cried. Even the animals were silent. The grave itself lay beneath the broad shelter of the grove, the oblong stone set flush with the earth as was proper. The runes Sniksnik had carved still glowed softly, their dim draconic script encircling the brighter inscription at its center.

The crimson stranger approached it alone. He knelt. He did not kneel as mortals knelt, with uncertainty or reverence borrowed from tradition. He knelt as one greets a peer. He placed his hand upon the stone. When he spoke, the language was not one any living scholar knew, though fragments bore resemblance to the oldest draconic roots. Each syllable carried weight beyond sound. The air thickened with it. The grove listened. "Rest well, little brother," he said. The words were simple. The meaning was not.

From his palm, flame gathered, not fire as mortals knew it, but something purer. It formed into a perfect sphere, no larger than a clenched fist, its surface smooth and unmoving, its light steady and eternal. He lifted it gently and placed it above the crest of the grave. It did not fall. It did not flicker. It remained there, hovering, its light neither consuming nor fading. A promise given form.

Only then did he rise and turn to those gathered. His eyes moved across them all, and those he looked upon would carry that moment until their deaths. They felt seen in ways no mortal gaze could accomplish, seen in their entirety, their victories, their failures, their fears, their endurance. When he spoke, his voice carried with perfect clarity. "Hear me, children of earth and breath, wardens of this gentle dominion wrested from hunger and despair." His words flowed like molten gold, each phrase deliberate, each syllable measured. "In an age not yet forgotten by the bones of this world, there came unto me a supplicant clad not in arrogance nor in presumption, but in necessity. He bore neither crown nor conquest, neither lineage nor claim of divine sanction. He brought instead a singular petition, offered without expectation of recompense."

His gaze found Mimi. She trembled beneath it. "He asked not for dominion," Azhraikar said softly. "He asked not for immortality, nor vengeance, nor the petty ascendancies that so enthrall your kind." His eyes moved to Shardra. "He asked for life. Not his own. Never his own." The grove itself seemed to lean closer. "And in that moment, I beheld within that fragile vessel a truth older than empires. That greatness resides not in power claimed, but in burden borne. He stood where others would have broken. He endured where others would have yielded. And by his will, innumerable souls yet draw breath beneath the turning sky." He placed one hand lightly against his chest. "A debt was thus incurred."

He turned fully to them all. "And know this, keepers of his legacy. The fire remembers." Mimi could not look away. Shardra did not bow. Neither did he expect her to. His final words to them were quieter. "Do as he did. Grow beyond what you are. Seek not comfort in what is known, but strength in what must yet be wrought. The age turns once more, and the horizon darkens." His eyes lifted westward. "I shall be watching."

A lesser being might have taken offense. There were many reasons he could have. The scale was unmistakable. Its color alone declared its origin, that deep and sovereign blue that no mortal forge could counterfeit and no alchemical process could replicate. It bore the faint internal luster of draconic permanence, the subtle sheen of something that had once lived and would, in its own way, continue to live long after the hands that carried it had returned to dust. It rested over Shardra's eye not as an ornament, but as a function. It had been shaped, fitted, and worn with purpose.

Azhraikar saw it immediately. He had seen it long before she was born. He knew the exact moment it had been given. Knew the winds that had carried his brother over the broken icefields of Karakan. Knew the taste of that age, when the world was harder and simpler, when mortals still understood the difference between reverence and entitlement. He felt no offense. Only recognition.

His brother had loved them, not as mortals understood love, with fragility or dependence, but with interest, with approval. The giant-kin of Karakan had distinguished themselves early, when others had not. They had listened when taught. They had refrained when given power. They had not sought to bind what they did not understand, nor to elevate themselves beyond their nature. They had accepted gifts as stewardship, not ownership. This, more than anything, had earned them favor.

The scale had been given in a winter of ambush. The Karakan clans had been hunted then, harried by things that moved beneath the ice and wore the shapes of beasts they were not. Mortals died easily in such conditions. Even giants, for all their strength, could be brought down by patience and hunger. His brother had watched for a time, measuring them, judging whether intervention would distort what they were meant to become.

In the end, he had chosen a single gift. Not a weapon. Not power. Awareness. The Scale of Warning.

It had been removed from his own flank, a small and inconsequential sacrifice by draconic measure. Shaped and presented to the clan's speaker beneath the aurora. No proclamation had accompanied it. No oath demanded. Only the quiet understanding that it was given because it was deserved. It did not make them invincible. It made them harder to surprise. That was enough.

Over the centuries, other things had followed. Not many. Never many. A tool, when needed. A fragment of something older. The axe that would become Rimeheart had passed through their keeping long before it found its current bearer. The sword now carried by Shardra's son had once rested in a place where only those with restraint could retrieve it. These were not rewards. They were continuations.

Azhraikar saw all of this when he looked upon her. He saw the scale still worn. Still used. Still honored. Not traded. Not discarded. Not forgotten. This mattered. It spoke not only of her, but of the unbroken line behind her. Of memory preserved without corruption. Of a people who had remained themselves even as the world had changed around them.

He understood then that his brother's judgment had been correct. His brother, who had burned bright and brief by draconic reckoning. His brother, whose absence remained a silence that even ages had not filled. Azhraikar felt the echo of him in that single blue scale.

Shardra did not bow. She did not avert her gaze. She stood as Karakan had always stood. Ready. Unyielding. Aware. Not because she thought she could endure if he chose to attack, but because she would not retreat from this place.

He would not insult that legacy by mistaking stewardship for theft.

The gift had been given.

It remained where it belonged.

And so, the line endured.

He broke his long stare at Shardra without flourish.

Then he rose, without effort. Light gathered around him, first gentle, then unbearable. His mortal guise dissolved like smoke drawn into wind. Wings unfurled that blotted out the sky. Scales vast and radiant caught the sun and shattered it into a thousand burning reflections. His true form could not be contained by mortal measure. He was not merely a dragon. He was the First Flame, the living embodiment of creation's primordial fire.

Azhraikar ascended. The air roared in reverence, not violence. The trees bent but did not break. The flame above the grave did not waver. He turned once in the heavens above Papal. Then he was gone, flying west, toward whatever end awaited even beings such as he.

Silence held the grove long after. No one moved. No one spoke. The flame remained.

In the days that followed, emissaries arrived from Mithrin, from Auris, from Taurdain, and Thylor. Priests came. Scholars came. Generals and diplomats and kings' representatives came. They listened. They questioned. They recorded every word, every gesture, every breath. Some saw opportunity. Some saw warning. All saw significance.

For forty years, Azhraikar had not been seen. Not since the old wars. Not since the world had nearly broken. And now he had come. Not for a king. Not for a council. Not for a nation. He had come for Eeyagoo.

And in that truth lay a power none could command, and none could deny.

The Return of Tarkus

Little was known of the years that followed Tarkus's departure.

Manticores were not creatures inclined toward stories, and Tarkus had never been a talkative one even in his younger days. Whatever had happened beyond the northern mountains, whatever hunts, battles, and winters he had endured in the frozen reaches of Kadathe', remained unwitnessed by the people of Papal.

Time passed.

Twenty-five years is long enough for orchards to thicken, for walls to be rebuilt twice over, for children to grow into elders. The town changed in a thousand quiet ways, but some things remained as they had always been.

The Cinderheart grove still stood near the old heart of the settlement.

The Iron Shrikes still nested in their tall rookeries.

The warning bell still hung in the outer field.

When it rang, people listened.

The bell sounded shortly after midday.

One hard strike.

Then another.

The tone carried across the outer orchards and fields, a sharp iron voice that cut through conversation and work alike. Heads lifted. Tools were set down. Workers turned toward the sound.

The bell rang again.

Not the steady rhythm of a fire.

Not the measured pattern of a meeting call.

This was the irregular hammering of alarm.

The Iron Shrikes reacted first.

The moment the bell sounded a second time the rookeries erupted in a storm of gray wings. Dozens of birds burst from the towers and climbed rapidly into the air, circling wide above the fields. Their harsh cries followed a moment later.

Workers in the outer fields began moving immediately.

They knew the routine.

Tools were abandoned where they lay. Wagons were turned toward the road. Those closest to the orchards began jogging toward the inner streets while the overseers shouted directions.

Then the call came with them.

“MANTICORE APPROACHING!”

The words carried across the fields in a rising wave of alarm.

People looked up.

At first it was only a shape in the distance, coming low over the western pasturelands. The creature’s wings beat unevenly, the great body tilting with each stroke as though the air itself resisted.

It flew badly.

Ungainly.

Workers fled toward the gates, some stumbling in the tall grass as they ran. The guards on the outer wall moved quickly to their positions, pikes rising along the parapets as the alarm spread inward through the town.

The manticore did not slow.

It crossed the outer fields in a ragged glide, passing over the fleeing workers without even turning its head. The great wings struggled for lift again, carrying the beast over the low palisade and into the air above Papal itself.

Shouts followed it through the streets.

“Archers to the wall!”

“Clear the square!”

The creature flew directly toward the old heart of the town.

Toward the Cinderheart grove.

Its landing was not graceful.

The manticore struck the ground hard among the broad-rooted trees, skidding through fallen leaves and red-tinged soil before collapsing heavily on its side. Dust and dry leaves rolled outward from the impact.

For a moment nothing moved.

Then the guards arrived.

They approached in a cautious line, pikes leveled, shields raised. The creature was enormous even now, larger than any hunting beast most of them had ever seen up close. Its wings lay half spread against the ground like torn banners.

But it did not rise.

It barely moved at all.

The manticore lay on its side, sides heaving with rapid, shallow breaths. Blood marked its mouth and flanks in dark streaks. One forepaw twitched weakly against the earth.

A low groan escaped its chest.

Then a blur of motion streaked across the grove.

Mimi arrived like a thrown dagger.

The small mimicing crossed the distance in seconds, shifting from flight to ground in a single fluid motion as she skidded to a halt beside the fallen beast.

She stared.

“Tarkus?!”

Her voice cracked with shock.

For a heartbeat she simply looked at him.

The great manticore was older now, far older than when she had last seen him. The thick mane of spines had thinned and darkened with age. His hide was crisscrossed with scars both old and new.

Most of the long spikes along his tail were gone entirely, broken away or torn free.

Blood slicked the fur along his flanks.

One wing bent at a wrong angle.

His face was torn in places, the fur matted with blood and foam at the corners of his mouth.

The guards stepped closer.

Mimi spun toward them immediately.

“Get a healer and back away!” she shouted. “He is an old friend, not a monster!”

The soldiers hesitated.

Some of them had heard the stories. Some had not. What they saw before them was still a wounded manticore in the middle of their town square.

Mimi’s color shifted sharply.

The soft tones of her usual form flushed into a deep angry red.

“NOW!” she snapped. “GO NOW! Hurry!”

The authority in her voice broke the moment of hesitation.

The guards glanced at one another, then several of them turned and sprinted toward the alchemy houses deeper in the district where Papal’s healers and brewers kept their workshops.

Mimi turned back to Tarkus.

Her posture softened.

She approached slowly, making the same soft chirping sounds she had used decades earlier when they played in the skies above the orchards.

“Tarkus,” she said quietly. “Hang in there. Help is coming.”

The manticore groaned faintly.

He did not answer.

Up close the damage was even worse than it had appeared from a distance. The old scars spoke of years of hard living, but the fresh wounds were what worried her most.

Deep rents cut through the fur along his side.

Blood seeped from beneath his shoulder.

His wing was twisted badly.

Mimi began examining the injuries, moving carefully along his flank.

Then she heard something.

A low sound.

A growl.

Then another.

She froze.

The sound came again, higher now. Not one voice.

Several.

Mimi slowly raised her head.

Three small shapes lifted themselves from the thick fur along Tarkus’s back.

They were little more than round bundles of pale fur and oversized paws, each no larger than a ratting dog. Their manes were only beginning to grow in short stubby bristles along their necks.

Three manticore pups.

They stared down at her with wide golden eyes.

Their short tails lifted instinctively behind them, the tiny undeveloped spikes trembling as they raised themselves in a defensive posture.

Mimi blinked.

For a moment she simply stared.

Then Tarkus rumbled weakly.

“Hush.”

His voice was little more than a rasp.

“She friend.”

The pups immediately quieted.

They sank lower into the fur of his back, their small bodies pressing against the old manticore's spine as though they understood the command completely.

Tarkus slowly turned his head toward Mimi.

His golden eyes were clouded with pain but still clear enough to recognize her.

He struggled to speak.

"Dangerous things..." he rasped.

His breath hitched.

"Save pups."

Mimi stared at him for a moment longer.

Then she turned sharply toward the guards who still lingered at the edges of the grove.

"Archers!" she shouted. "Crossbowmen too!"

Her voice carried across the square.

"Something chased him here."

She looked back at the battered manticore, at the broken wing and the blood soaking into the roots of the Cinderheart trees.

"Tarkus ran."

Her voice hardened.

"He ran home."

The Scent of Ash

What followed was confusion.

Orders crossed each other in the grove as guards shifted positions and runners carried messages through the streets. Archers climbed the low watch towers near the orchard road. Crossbowmen hurried into the square with half-fastened belts and hastily gathered bolts.

The healer arrived first.

An older woman with sleeves already rolled and a satchel banging against her hip as she ran beneath the Cinderheart canopy. An alchemist followed close behind, breath ragged, two assistants struggling to keep up with a crate of supplies between them.

By the time they reached Tarkus, the great manticore had begun to sink deeper into the ground.

His breathing had slowed.

Too slow.

His chest barely moved.

Mimi saw it at once.

"No... no no no no..."

The words spilled from her before she could stop them. Panic sharpened her voice into something thin and raw.

She pressed both hands against Tarkus's neck, searching for the pulse beneath the thick fur. It was there.

But faint.

Too faint.

Her colors flickered wildly across her skin, anger and fear and grief bleeding together in quick flashes.

She turned to the healer with desperate eyes.

"Help him," she said. "Please... please don't let him die."

The words came out broken, her voice warbling as she fought to steady herself.

For a moment she simply stood there.

Then instinct returned.

Mimi snatched the healer's kit from the satchel before the woman had even fully opened it.

"Hold his head," she snapped.

The healer blinked once at the sudden command, then obeyed immediately, kneeling beside the manticore's massive skull.

Mimi worked.

Healing draughts first.

She pried Tarkus's jaws open just enough to pour the bitter liquid past his tongue. Some spilled from the corners of his mouth, but enough went down.

Next came the salves.

She cleaned the wounds quickly but carefully, rinsing away dirt and dried blood while the alchemist passed her fresh cloths and jars without needing to be asked.

The cuts were ugly things.

Not clean slashes.

They were tearing wounds, jagged and irregular, the kind left by claws or talons ripping sideways through flesh. Some were shallow. Others bit deep enough that bone showed white beneath the torn muscle.

Mimi worked methodically.

Clean.

Salve.

Stitch.

Again and again.

The healer assisted where she could, holding flesh together while Mimi threaded the needle through thick hide that would have resisted most ordinary tools.

Slowly, gradually, Tarkus's breathing changed.

It was still weak.

But the frantic shallow gasps began to lengthen. His chest rose deeper with each breath.

Mimi noticed immediately.

She did not stop working.

It took nearly an hour.

By the time the last wound was closed, her hands were sticky with drying blood and the sleeves of her coat were dark to the elbows.

Throughout it all Tarkus said nothing.

He remained still beneath their hands, the only movement the slow rise and fall of his chest.

The pups never left him.

The three small manticores clung to the thick fur along his back as if rooted there. At times they shifted nervously when Mimi's hands moved near them, but they did not growl again.

They understood.

This was help.

When the last stitches were tied, Mimi finally allowed herself to examine the wing.

She already knew it was bad.

Seeing it up close confirmed it.

The outer bone of the wing was shattered.

Not a simple break.

The bone had splintered into several pieces, some of them pushed through the skin entirely. The edges were ground and worn where the broken fragments had scraped against each other with every desperate wingbeat.

He had flown like this.

Miles.

Maybe hundreds.

Mimi felt her throat tighten.

The pain must have been unbearable.

Carefully, she cleaned the exposed bone and eased the fragments back into alignment as best she could. The healer held the wing steady while the alchemist prepared a thick binding splint made from resin-stiffened cloth and shaped wooden braces.

When it was done the wing lay bound tightly against his side.

It would heal.

But Mimi knew the truth of it the moment she stepped back.

Tarkus would likely never fly well again.

Still.

He would live.

For the first time since he collapsed, Mimi allowed herself a long breath.

She wiped her hands on a cloth and rested one hand against the manticore's neck.

“Stubborn old hunter,” she murmured.

That was when the bell rang again.

The warning tower in the outer field began hammering against the iron bell with desperate force. The sound rolled across the orchards and through the streets like a thunderclap.

Everyone in the grove froze.

Mimi’s head lifted slowly.

And then she smelled it.

The scent she had noticed earlier returned, now carried stronger on the shifting breeze that drifted down from the western fields.

She inhaled again.

Her eyes widened.

Burnt hair.

Not rot.

Not disease.

Burnt fur.

Her gaze moved slowly toward the western edge of the grove where the orchard road disappeared into the outer fields.

Tarkus had not simply fled something.

Something had chased him.

And now it was close enough that the wind carried the smell of fire with it.

Nightmares on the Wind

The second bell changed everything.

Papal had known alarms before. Fire, raiders, wandering beasts from the plains. The town understood how to respond. Workers fled the outer fields, shutters slammed closed along the streets, and militia gathered at the crossroads with spears and bows in steady hands.

But the sound of the second alarm carried a different weight.

It rang faster.

Harder.

Those who had lived through the Palehive years felt the old tension rise in their chests again.

Men and women began taking up arms.

Spears were pulled from racks beside the gates. Crossbows were strung. The watch towers filled with archers who scanned the western horizon beyond the orchards. Messengers ran through the streets shouting orders as the town shifted from quiet routine into defense.

Then Shardra arrived.

She did not come running.

She walked into the grove with the calm stride of someone who had stepped onto battlefields many times before. Her armor was already on, heavy plates fitted to her broad shoulders and torso, the worn steel marked by decades of use. Across her back hung the massive greataxe Rimeheart, its pale edge catching the afternoon light like frozen water.

She took it down closed her eyes and the axe slowly lengthened and changed to the shape of her great spear, it still looked made of ice with a red core but now it was a long spear. Behind her came her son.

He followed close, younger but already massive in stature, the long blade of the Barrier Sword resting across his shoulder as if it were no more than a walking staff. His eyes swept the orchard as he moved, watching the towers and the distant field beyond the grove.

Shardra stepped into the clearing and looked up.

The creatures were just becoming visible over the distant rise beyond the fields.

For a moment she froze.

Not a hesitation.

Not a moment of thought.

She simply stopped.

Her body locked where she stood, the great axe hanging motionless in her hand as her pale eyes fixed on the shapes moving against the sky.

Those closest to her noticed the change.

The giantess did not frighten easily. Most people in Papal had never seen her surprised by anything.

But now she stood like stone.

Mekni noticed first.

He stepped forward and gripped her arm.

“Mother.”

The touch broke the moment.

Shardra inhaled sharply.

Then she moved.

“GET EVERYONE INSIDE! NOW!” Her voice rolled across the grove like thunder.

Workers who had been lingering near the edges of the square immediately began running for the nearest streets. Guards turned and began pushing people toward the inner gates.

Shardra was already shouting again. “Fire! We need fire as much as possible!” She pointed toward the western towers. “They hate fire!”

The archers looked at one another. Shardra turned toward them with a glare that could crack stone.

“Send a runner!” she roared. “Break open the inferno arrows! Quickly!”

One of the younger guards hesitated only long enough to nod before sprinting toward the armory storehouses near the barracks. Those arrows had been sealed away for years, rarely used since the Palehive wars.

Today they would be needed again.

Mimi ran toward Shardra through the grove.

She still carried the bloody cloths from Tarkus's treatment, her hands stained dark from the work. She had not even shifted form. Her small body moved quickly across the grass, panic and urgency pushing her forward.

She stopped in front of the giantess.

"What is it?" Mimi demanded. "What are they?"

Her voice trembled.

"They almost killed Tarkus."

Shardra looked down at her.

For a brief moment the hard battle mask slipped and something older passed across her face.

Recognition.

Memory.

"Tarkus?" she said.

Then she turned her gaze back to the sky.

The shapes were clearer now.

Large.

Winged.

Moving with a predatory glide that carried them quickly over the fields toward Papal.

Shardra's jaw tightened.

"These..." she said quietly.

Her voice carried none of its usual certainty.

"These are the things that attacked my village when I was young."

The wind shifted again.

The smell of burnt fur drifted stronger across the grove.

Shardra lifted Rimeheart slowly, the pale blade turning toward the approaching shapes.

"Nightmares made flesh."

The Last Flight Home

For reasons no one in Papal ever fully understood, the creatures came for Tarkus.

They did not circle the town.

They did not probe the walls or test the defenses.

They came straight for the grove.

Five of them.

The defenders saw them clearly once they crossed the outer fields.

They were vast things in the air, their wings long and ragged like torn sails, their bodies stretched and wrong in ways that made the eye hesitate to measure them. Their hides were pale and semi-translucent, dark veins crawling beneath the skin like ink moving through water. Their heads carried too many eyes, opening and closing along the skull in uneven patterns.

Others.

Shardra had named them correctly.

Nightmares made flesh.

They flew directly toward the Cinderheart grove.

Toward Tarkus.

But Papal was not undefended.

Not anymore.

The watch towers were already manned. Archers stood ready along the orchard walls, and crossbowmen had taken positions on rooftops where they could fire downward into the approach.

The runners returned from the armory with the infernal arrows.

The crates were broken open where they stood. Bundles of black-shafted arrows were passed up the towers, each head packed with volatile alchemical pitch designed to ignite on impact.

“Hold,” called one of the captains.

The creatures crossed the outer field.

Closer.

Closer.

“Hold.”

The first of them let out a sound like tearing metal as it descended toward the grove.

“Loose!”

The sky erupted.

Arrows filled the air in disciplined volleys, black shafts rising in perfect arcs before descending into the oncoming shapes. Crossbows snapped in harsh rhythm beneath the archers’ fire.

The first inferno arrow struck.

Flame burst across the creature’s wing in a bright orange bloom. The thing shrieked, a high unnatural sound that made several of the younger guards flinch.

More arrows followed.

Another struck the creature’s flank. Fire crawled across its pale skin, clinging unnaturally to the slick surface before spreading outward in hungry tongues of flame.

The creature faltered.

Another volley struck the second one.

Then the third.

Papal’s defenders were not panicked farmers with hunting bows.

They were trained.

Disciplined.

Deadly.

Volley after volley climbed into the sky, the inferno arrows bursting into fire wherever they struck. The creatures writhed as the flames spread across their wings and bodies.

Two of them lost lift almost immediately.

They crashed into the outer orchards beyond the grove in tangled heaps of burning flesh.

The third tried to climb higher, its many eyes blinking wildly as fire consumed one wing.

It did not make it far.

The fourth fell screaming into the fields beyond the wall.

Only one broke through.

The last creature dove sharply, slipping between the rising volleys with a speed that carried it nearly to the grove itself.

Archers shouted warnings.

Crossbowmen shifted aim.

The creature descended in a twisted glide, its burning wing dragging sparks behind it as it rushed toward the trees.

It never reached Tarkus.

A final volley met it mid-descent.

Three infernal arrows struck almost simultaneously.

Flame erupted across its chest and throat.

The creature convulsed violently in the air before crashing into the ground just beyond the outer street, its body rolling through the grass before coming to rest in a heap of smoking pale flesh.

It did not rise again.

Silence followed.

Then chaos.

The grove erupted in movement as soldiers rushed forward to confirm the kill while others remained on watch for further attackers. The archers continued scanning the sky long after the last creature fell.

Near the walls, a new argument began almost immediately.

The alchemists wanted the bodies.

So did the naturalists.

Such creatures were rarely seen and even more rarely recovered intact. The pale flesh, the strange organs, the unnatural structure of their wings and eyes, all of it represented knowledge that might take generations to gather again.

But the captains hesitated.

The danger might not be over.

For nearly an hour Papal remained in a tense half-ready state, archers still posted, patrols sweeping the fields beyond the walls.

Eventually the truth became clear.

Nothing else came.

The creatures had been hunting Tarkus.

And they had failed.

Slowly the town began to breathe again.

Authority

Peace after battle rarely came cleanly.

Even when the enemy lay dead, the echoes of violence lingered. People spoke too loudly. Orders overlapped. Questions multiplied faster than answers. In Papal's streets that afternoon the aftermath of the fight carried the same unsettled weight.

Guards stood over the fallen Others in wary clusters.

Alchemists argued with officers over access to the bodies.

Archers remained posted along the towers though the sky had long since emptied of threats.

The town was alive with tension that had not yet decided where to settle.

That was when the new garrison commander arrived.

Captain Ravik Galaid did not walk into the square quietly.

He stormed in.

His boots struck the stones sharply as he pushed past two startled soldiers and marched straight toward Shardra. His crimson officer's cloak snapped behind him as he moved, and the anger on his face was unmistakable even from a distance.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS!"

The shout rolled across the square.

Heads turned.

"YOU HAVE NO AUTHORITY TO COMMAND MY MEN!"

The captain's face had gone red beneath his trimmed beard. His hands shook slightly, though whether from fury or embarrassment was hard to say.

"Those munitions were property of the Mithrin Army!" he continued, voice rising further. "You had no right to order them used!"

Shardra turned slowly.

Her face hardened as she looked down at him.

"Without those arrows and bolts we would have had mass casualties instead of none."

Her voice began level.

Then it rose.

“The battle was AN HOUR AGO!”

The last words came out like thunder.

Every guard, worker, and citizen within earshot stopped what they were doing.

Shardra stepped forward.

“Where have YOU been?”

Captain Galaid faltered.

Only for a moment.

But people saw it.

He sputtered slightly, taking a half step back as the giantess loomed over him.

“DO NOT QUESTION ME!” he snapped. “THIS IS MY COMMAND!”

He drew breath to continue.

Shardra bent down suddenly.

The movement brought her face level with his. Her voice dropped to a quiet hiss meant only for him.

“Then bloody well do your job,” she said.

“Or I will request someone who can.”

Her pale eye locked onto his.

“Two warning bells sounded,” she continued softly. “And you were nowhere to be found.”

She straightened slightly.

“I took steps to protect everyone here.”

Her voice hardened.

“Exactly what I would have expected from you or your second.”

Then she leaned closer again.

“Now stop making a scene you will regret,” she said quietly, “and have your men gather these monstrosities and take them to be examined while I deal with Tarkus.”

There was no trace of civilian politeness in her tone.

It was the voice of a commander giving orders to an officer who had failed.

Captain Galaid flushed deeper.

“How dare you speak to me that way,” he snapped. “I am in charge here, NOT you!”

Shardra stood upright.

All ten feet of her.

Age had taken some of the quickness from her movements, but not the presence. The giantess still filled the space around her like a storm front gathering strength.

She looked down at him.

“Well then act like it,” she said.

“Get your men to work.”

Her voice was quiet again.

“But if you will not,” she added, “I will.”

Then she turned.

The conversation was finished.

She began walking back toward the Cinderheart grove where Mimi and the healers continued working over Tarkus beneath the red canopy.

Behind her the captain continued shouting.

Something about authority.

Something about command.

He never explained where he had been when the bells rang.

Shardra did not look back.

Her mind had already moved on.

She was thinking about the letter Mimi would write later.

A report to the Mithrin Council would be necessary. Papal’s defense strategy depended on cooperation between the town’s leadership and the garrison. That system had worked well for years.

This man did not fit it.

Better something she could crush and hack, she thought grimly.

Bureaucrats were far harder to deal with.

By the time she reached the grove the afternoon light had softened under the Cinderheart leaves.

Tarkus still lay where Mimi and the healers had worked on him.

But before Shardra could take more than two steps closer a chorus of tiny growls erupted.

Three small manticores lifted their heads from Tarkus’s back.

Their little manes bristled.

Stubby tails rose behind them in fierce defiance.

The sound they made was absurdly small compared to the threat they were attempting to project.

But the intention was unmistakable.

Shardra stopped.

“Well,” she said mildly.

Mimi looked up from where she knelt beside Tarkus.

“I’m trying,” she said apologetically.

The pups continued their furious display.

Mimi chirped softly at them, using the same sounds she used to calm them during feeding.

They ignored her completely.

Shardra raised one eyebrow.

“His pups?”

Mimi nodded.

“I think so,” she said. “They listened to him.”

Shardra considered that.

Then she nodded once.

“So,” she said quietly.

“Like their father.”

Her eyes drifted toward Tarkus.

“Wary of anything as big as I am.”

The pups growled louder when she shifted her weight.

Shardra took a slow step backward.

The growling eased slightly.

“Well then,” she said.

“I will leave him in your care.”

She glanced once more at the wounded manticore.

“Let me know how he is doing when you can.”

Mimi nodded.

“I will.”

Shardra turned again.

There was still work to be done.

The nearest of the fallen Others lay only a short distance beyond the grove where the archers had brought it down.

She walked toward it steadily.

The creature was even uglier up close.

Its pale skin had charred black where the infernal arrows had burned through it. Several shafts still jutted from the twisted body, their heads fused into the flesh where the alchemical fire had ignited.

Shardra’s great spear stood embedded deep in its chest.

She stepped forward and gripped the shaft.

The spearhead came loose with a wet tearing sound.

She studied the weapon for a moment.

Then she turned to the soldiers nearby.

“Well,” she said.

“Let us see what nightmares are made of.”

Pale Remnants

It did not take long for the truth to settle over Papal like a cold fog.

The creatures had not been beasts.

They had not been natural predators, nor even monsters in the ordinary sense. As the smoke cleared and the wounded were carried away, those with knowledge of darker things began to see the pattern.

These were kin to the horrors Henigus had once drawn into the world.

Not the shambling Inklings themselves, but something older. Something from the same unreachable place beyond the veil that had birthed those abominations decades earlier.

Up close, the fallen thing in the street near the Cinderheart grove was worse than anyone had expected.

Its body was long and serpentine, easily twice the length of a warhorse, yet thin in a way that suggested starvation rather than sleekness. The skin was not scaled like a dragon's nor furred like a beast's. It was smooth and pale, almost translucent, stretched tight over a lattice of unnatural musculature that shifted beneath it like something trying to rearrange itself.

Veins showed clearly through the flesh.

Dark.

Branching.

Too numerous.

Spines ran along the length of its back, irregular and crooked, some broken from the fall or from the infernal blasts that had burned the creature from the sky. The wings were vast but fragile-looking, membranes stretched between elongated finger-bones. Light passed through them, revealing a webwork of reddish veins that pulsed faintly even in death.

Its tail was long enough to coil twice around its own body.

Barbed ridges ran along its length, though none seemed sharp in the normal sense. They looked grown rather than formed, as if the creature's flesh had hardened unevenly during development.

But it was the head that drew the eye.

No one who saw it forgot.

Where a mouth should have been there was a cluster of thick, muscular tendrils, each ending in hooked black barbs. They lay slack now, glistening faintly with a translucent film, but the damage they could inflict was easy to imagine.

Several of the guards who had fought in the Palehive campaigns turned away at the sight.

They remembered other things with mouths like that.

Clusters of small, lidless eyes dotted the skull at irregular intervals. Some were burned shut. Others stared glassily at nothing. None seemed aligned in any useful direction, as if the creature saw the world through a scattered array of perceptions rather than a single forward gaze.

The smell around the body was unmistakable.

Burnt hair.

Burnt meat.

And something else beneath it.

Something sharp and bitter that stung the nose.

Dozens of townsfolk gathered at a cautious distance, drawn by equal parts horror and curiosity. Murmurs spread through the crowd as alchemists and naturalists pushed forward with notebooks, tools, and sample jars.

“Careful,” one of the militia warned.

The alchemists ignored him.

“This is extraordinary,” one muttered, already kneeling beside the creature’s flank. “If the tissues remain stable we may, ”

His sentence stopped.

The skin beneath his gloved fingers sagged.

Not from pressure.

From change.

A ripple passed through the creature’s flesh as if something inside had liquefied. The pale surface lost its tautness, slumping inward while a thin clear fluid began seeping from cracks in the burned areas.

The alchemist jerked his hand back.

“What in, ”

The body shuddered once.

Then again.

Across the street another cry rose as one of the fallen creatures in the field began to collapse in on itself. Wings folded inward as the supporting structures softened, membranes wrinkling like wet parchment.

“They’re dissolving,” someone whispered.

The comparison came quickly.

“Like Tal-Shie bodies.”

Those who had seen the aftermath of battles against the semi-fae elementals knew the pattern well. Their physical forms rarely lingered long once the animating forces that bound them to the mortal world were broken.

These creatures were doing the same.

The alchemists protested loudly.

“If only we had arrived sooner!”

They scrambled to collect what they could, scooping viscous residue into jars and scraping fragments of still-solid tissue from the dissolving mass.

The naturalists worked just as frantically.

Several sat in the dirt sketching as fast as their hands could move, capturing the shape of the wings, the arrangement of spines, the grotesque cluster of tendrils that formed the mouth. Assistants shouted measurements while others tried to preserve what details they could before the forms degraded further.

Within an hour the bodies had lost all definition.

Within three, they resembled nothing more than heaps of pale gelatin streaked with blackened ash.

By the sixth hour there was almost nothing left.

No bones.

No horns.

No claws.

Not even teeth.

Only a slick residue that soaked slowly into the earth or evaporated into a foul-smelling vapor that left the air tasting metallic and bitter.

The streets were washed repeatedly before the smell finally faded.

When it was over, Papal was left with questions instead of trophies.

Where had they come from?

Why had they hunted Tarkus?

And most troubling of all,

Were there more?

No one in the square spoke that last question aloud at first.

But it hung over the town all the same, heavy and unavoidable, like the memory of a storm that might return at any moment.

Far beneath the Cinderheart trees, Tarkus slept uneasily.

The pups stayed close to him.

And for the first time in many years, Papal's watch kept its eyes not only on the roads and fields...

...but on the sky.

Tarkus slept for three days.

Seven Days of Flight

Answers did not come quickly.

Tarkus lingered between waking and darkness, his great body still weakened despite the healers' work. He could not remain conscious for long. When he did wake it was often only for minutes at a time before exhaustion dragged him back down into uneasy sleep.

Something was wrong beyond the visible wounds.

His breathing would suddenly shallow. His pulse would race without cause. At times his muscles trembled as though seized by fever, yet his body never grew hot. The healers suspected venom. The alchemists

suspected poison. Others wondered whether something stranger had seeped into his blood during the attack.

None of the usual remedies worked.

Antitoxins did nothing.

Purifying draughts had no effect.

Even the more esoteric mixtures from Eeyagoo's carefully hoarded supplies, that Mimi still kept, produced only momentary improvement at best.

The kobold spent long hours hunched over his books, turning brittle pages with careful claws. He checked recipes, venom tables, obscure notes from travelers and herbalists long dead. Every time Tarkus worsened he returned to those texts again, searching for something he had missed.

The alchemists conducted their own tests.

They drew small samples of blood when they could, examined the residue from his wounds, even attempted to identify the strange scent that still lingered faintly in his fur.

Nothing conclusive emerged.

It was as if whatever afflicted him did not belong to the categories they understood.

When Tarkus did speak, it was only to those he trusted.

Elith from time to time and Mimi.

Elith, who approached with quiet respect and spoke to him as one wounded hunter to another rather than as a curiosity.

Shardra, though that trust came grudgingly and only after several attempts that ended with low warning rumbles from his chest.

His voice had changed.

Where once it had carried a deep rolling strength, now it sounded rough and worn, like stones grinding together beneath water. Each word seemed to cost him effort.

"They attacked... cave," he rumbled during one of his longer waking periods.

Mimi leaned closer, listening carefully while Elith sat nearby with stylus ready, recording every detail.

"Mother... killed."

The pups, sleeping nearby, stirred at the sound of his voice but did not wake.

Tarkus's eyes closed briefly as if the memory itself caused pain.

"Would not leave... alone."

He refused to describe the attack in detail.

Whenever questions pressed too close to that moment, he would turn his head away or simply fall silent until they stopped.

But he did speak of the flight.

"Seven days," he said once, voice barely above a whispering rumble. "No rest."

The image was terrible to imagine.

A wounded manticore flying on a shattered wing, carrying three young on his back, pursued across leagues of wilderness by things that did not tire.

“They followed,” he continued. “Always.”

His claws flexed weakly against the ground.

“More... at start. killed some.”

He paused, breathing shallowly.

“Many.”

Elith’s stylus scratched across parchment.

“How many?” Mimi asked softly.

Tarkus’s eyes unfocused as he searched his memory.

“twenty... maybe.”

The number chilled everyone present.

“But not all followed,” he added after a moment. “Some stayed.”

Stayed where?

He did not know.

Or would not say.

The pups had survived the journey largely on Tarkus’s strength. They were old enough to endure without frequent feeding, but the cost to him had been enormous.

He had burned everything he had to reach Papal.

Home.

Even days later he could barely stand without assistance. Walking more than a short distance left him trembling. The healers doubted he would ever regain the endurance he once possessed.

Flying was worse.

The shattered wing might heal enough for gliding someday, but true flight... that was unlikely.

Tarkus understood this.

He took it poorly.

The pups never left him.

They curled against his back and sides, small bodies tucked against the thick fur of their father as though he were a living fortress. They watched every movement around him with wide golden eyes, tiny tails twitching whenever strangers came too close.

They would not leave him even to eat.

Not until Mimi began feeding them by hand.

That changed things.

She brought them small strips of meat and sat beside Tarkus while they cautiously accepted the food from her fingers. Soon enough they learned she was safe.

After that they followed her everywhere.

Three small manticores trotting awkwardly behind a tiny shapeshifting creature became one of the stranger sights Papal had ever grown accustomed to.

And Papal had grown accustomed to many strange things.

Thus the town gained new residents.

A pack of three young manticores.

And one very old one.

When Tarkus finally woke, the grove was quiet.

The Cinderheart leaves whispered softly overhead, their deep red canopy filtering the morning light into warm scattered patches across the ground.

Mimi was sitting nearby when his eyes opened.

She noticed immediately.

“Tarkus?”

The great manticores shifted slowly, his bound wing rustling against the cloth splints as he raised his head.

He was weaker now.

The long journey and the battle had taken their toll. The old strength was still there beneath the scars, but it carried the slow weight of age.

The pups stirred as he moved.

Three small heads popped up from where they had been sleeping beside him.

Tarkus looked past them.

Toward the edge of the grove.

“Cairn,” he said.

His voice was rough and dry.

Mimi understood.

She helped guide him there later that afternoon.

The walk was slow.

Tarkus moved carefully through the grove, favoring his injured side while the pups trotted close behind him. Guards stepped aside as he passed, watching quietly as the massive creature made his way through the trees.

They stopped at the cairn.

Momma Toki’s resting place stood as it always had, the stacked stones weathered slightly now by years of rain and wind.

Nearby lay another grave.

Eeyagoo’s.

Tarkus lowered himself carefully beside the stones.

For a long time he said nothing.

Then he turned his head slightly toward Mimi.

“Will you bury me...?”

His voice was softer than she had ever heard it.

Mimi’s throat tightened.

Her eyes filled immediately, tears spilling down her face before she could stop them.

She nodded slowly.

“If you want,” she said quietly.

Then she wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve and forced a small smile.

“But not soon.”

She rested a hand against his massive cheek.

“You stay.”

Tarkus studied her for a moment.

Then he nodded once.

“Stay long as can... friend.”

Without warning he pushed his head forward.

The massive skull bumped into her chest with a heavy affectionate headbutt that nearly knocked her flat onto the grass.

“Hey, !”

She barely caught herself.

The pups saw this.

Three small manticores immediately rushed forward, chirping excitedly as they launched their own enthusiastic headbutts into her legs and sides.

Mimi disappeared beneath a pile of wriggling fur and tiny paws.

“Okay, okay!” she laughed through tears. “Enough!”

The grove echoed with the sound.

For the first time in many years, the cairn of Momma Toki stood witness to something new.

Life.

More than once Mimi found him staring toward the sky through the branches of the Cinderheart trees, his expression distant and hollow in a way she had never seen before.

A hunter grounded.

A creature of the air confined to the earth.

It was a grief all its own.

The pups, by contrast, adapted quickly.

Grak was the largest of the three, bold and curious, always the first to investigate anything new. Ulbit was smaller and quicker, darting in and out of the others' reach with endless restless energy. Sark, the darkest-furred of the trio, was quieter but watchful, often positioning himself between his siblings and anything unfamiliar.

Together they formed a whirlwind of claws, tails, and half-grown wings.

Mimi delighted in them.

She played with them constantly, shifting shapes to match their games, sometimes a darting bird to chase, sometimes a scuttling creature to stalk. Their delighted chirps and squeaks echoed through the grove at all hours.

Mimi also took a gentler role.

She fed them carefully, speaking to them in soft Common as if they understood every word. They seemed to enjoy her presence, pressing close to her when resting and following in awkward bounding trots when she moved about the grove.

They ate everything offered.

Cooked meat.

Raw meat.

Even scraps of bone they gnawed industriously with growing jaws.

Tarkus ate little.

Only enough to survive.

He spent most of his time resting, conserving what strength remained.

The garrison commander was not pleased.

Captain Galaid demanded reports daily, his temper worsening with each lack of concrete answers. He questioned the healers, the alchemists, even Mimi herself, as though she might be withholding information.

"Are there more of them?" he demanded repeatedly.

No one could say.

"Where did they come from?"

No one knew.

"Why were they targeting the manticore?"

Speculation only.

His frustration turned to bluster, then to anger, then to thinly veiled accusations about preparedness and oversight. The cooperative defense system Papal had relied upon for years strained under his leadership.

He did not listen.

He demanded.

And Papal did not respond well to that.

Within the month, the Mithrin Council would replace him.

No announcement was made publicly beyond a brief notice that Captain Galaid had been reassigned. His departure was quiet, almost abrupt. A new commander arrived shortly thereafter, one who spent his first week speaking with town leaders rather than issuing orders.

The city breathed easier.

Life, cautiously, began to resume its rhythm.

In the Cinderheart grove, an old manticore slept beneath red leaves while three young ones played nearby under the watchful eyes of friends who had become something like family.

Above them, the sky remained clear.

But no one in Papal assumed it would stay that way forever.

The Spine That Remained

Hope returned to the grove in cautious measures.

Elith and Mimi conferred in low voices beneath the Cinderheart canopy while Tarkus lay unmoving between them, the pups curled close to his flanks. Both had seen strange afflictions before. Both had survived lands where magic had twisted itself into knots, and poisons behaved like thinking things. If anything could be done, they would find it.

Their first thought was Lestagii.

In its weakest forms the substance was restorative, a catalyst that encouraged the body to reclaim what it had lost. Stronger preparations could mend grievous wounds and purge lingering toxins. It was not something given lightly, but Tarkus was already dying slowly.

The first draught did nothing.

The second seemed to make him worse.

His body shuddered violently, muscles tightening as though caught between two opposing forces. His breathing became erratic, pulse surging and crashing in alarming waves. Elith pulled the vial away before the dose could be completed.

“It is fighting something,” the elf said quietly.

Mimi nodded grimly.

“Or something is fighting it.”

They adjusted.

Smaller amounts. Different carriers. Altered preparations meant to coax rather than overwhelm.

Nothing worked.

So they escalated.

Mimi opened stores Eeyagoo had long kept in reserve for emergencies that might never come. Potions meant for armies rather than individuals were carefully diluted and refined into something Tarkus’s failing body might endure.

Each treatment was a risk.

Each failure cost them time he might not have.

At last they prepared the strongest restorative they knew how to make, something far beyond the usual curative draughts, closer to a concentrated surge of life forced back into a body that had nearly forgotten how to sustain itself.

Tarkus swallowed it with difficulty.

For a long time nothing happened.

Then he stopped moving entirely.

His breathing slowed until it was almost imperceptible. His eyes closed, not in sleep but in something deeper, his body slack as though the animating force within him had withdrawn.

Mimi panicked immediately.

“He’s dying!”

“No,” Elith said, though his voice carried no certainty. “He is... somewhere.”

Tarkus did not wake.

Hours passed.

Then a day.

Then another.

He lay as if carved from stone, unmoving, unresponsive even to pain or noise. The pups whined and nudged him repeatedly, confused by the sudden absence of the steady presence that had anchored them since birth.

On the third day the change came.

A low convulsion ran through his body.

Then another.

His jaws opened in a harsh rasping sound, and a foul black bile spilled from his mouth, thick as tar and reeking of rot and burned metal. The smell sent several onlookers reeling backward.

More followed.

The liquid seeped from his mouth and nostrils, pooling darkly beneath his head.

Then something solid pushed through it.

At first it looked like bone.

Then the shape became clearer as it slid free with a wet sound and clattered onto the stone beside him.

A spine.

Barbed.

Curved.

Not from Tarkus.

The object was the length of a forearm, pale gray mottled with darker striations, its surface slick with the same black fluid. Wicked hooks lined its edges, all angled backward as if meant to anchor it deep within flesh.

Mimi stared at it in horror.

“What... is that?”

Mimi crouched closer, eyes narrowed.

“It should not be there,” he said softly.

Elith did not touch it.

“If it belonged to the creatures,” he said, “it would have dissolved.”

It did not.

The spine lay solid and unchanged even as the bile around it began to dry into a foul-smelling crust.

The implication settled slowly over everyone present.

Something had been inside Tarkus.

Something that had remained after the wounds closed.

Shardra arrived shortly afterward.

She listened to the explanation without interrupting, her expression growing colder with each detail. When she finally looked at the spine her jaw tightened visibly.

“I remember something like this,” she said.

Her voice carried a distant edge, as though she were speaking from the far side of memory.

“When they attacked my village.”

She did not elaborate at first.

For a long time she simply stared at the object.

“I think...” she said at last, “it was trying to take me.”

Mimi blinked.

“Take you?”

Shardra shook her head slowly.

“Learn me,” she said, using the old phrasing she had spoken as a child after the attack that had nearly killed her.

Her memory of that event was fractured. The trauma had stripped away much of her earlier life, leaving only impressions and fragments. But those fragments carried weight.

She remembered the feeling of something probing.

Of being examined from the inside.

Of knowledge being drawn away.

Whether it was true or merely the mind’s attempt to make sense of pain, none could say.

But the idea lodged itself firmly in everyone present.

Did the creatures infest their prey?

Did they plant something within victims to track them... or to harvest something later?

No one had answers.

Letters were sent.

Riders departed in all directions carrying detailed descriptions of the attack, the creatures, and the spine that had emerged from Tarkus's body. Messages went to allied cities, distant scholars, wandering orders of monster hunters, even isolated enclaves known to keep records of things most people preferred not to acknowledge.

Responses came slowly.

Disturbingly, they were not unique.

Other settlements had reported sightings of pale winged horrors in recent years. Attacks were rare but brutal. Survivors were fewer still. In several cases bodies of the creatures had likewise dissolved, leaving little evidence beyond scorched ground and lingering sickness among those wounded.

No one knew where they came from.

No one knew how many existed.

Talimonde' responded with unusual speed.

A specialized team was being assembled, composed of scholars, wardens, and containment specialists. Their plan was simple in theory and terrifying in practice.

Capture one alive.

Study it before it could fade.

Shardra rejected the idea immediately.

"Absolutely not," she said.

Her tone left little room for debate.

The academics argued that understanding the creatures might prevent future attacks. The alchemists spoke of antidotes, countermeasures, perhaps even ways to seal whatever breach allowed them into the world.

Others agreed reluctantly.

It was a reasonable plan.

Shardra remained unmoved.

"I will not have one of those things alive anywhere near this city," she said. "Not caged. Not bound. Not watched."

Her hand rested unconsciously on Rimeheart as she spoke.

"I know what they can do."

Discussions dragged on for weeks.

No consensus emerged.

Reports slowed.

Action slowed even further.

Eventually a compromise of sorts took shape, not through agreement but through exhaustion.

If a living specimen could be obtained without direct risk to Papal, Talimonde' would take responsibility for containment and study elsewhere.

To encourage such an unlikely outcome, a bounty was announced.

A large one.

Enough gold to tempt professional hunters, desperate mercenaries, and the sort of adventurers who specialized in tasks sensible people avoided.

And so, once again, coin was offered as bait.

Greed had accomplished many things throughout history that reason could not.

Whether it would bring answers this time remained to be seen.

In the Cinderheart grove, Tarkus slept more peacefully than he had in weeks, the terrible presence within him finally gone.

The barbed spine was sealed away under heavy wards.

And across the realms, word spread quietly among those who listened for such things.

A price had been placed on living nightmares.

Anchors

The council chamber in Papal had rarely felt so small.

Windows stood open to the late afternoon air, yet the room seemed close and heavy, as if the discussion itself pressed inward on the walls. On the long table at the center lay the barbed spine sealed within a shallow tray of treated glass and warded cloth. No one touched it now unless necessary.

It had not changed.

Days had passed, yet the object remained solid, pale, and faintly wrong to look at, as though the eye struggled to settle on its exact shape. The backward hooks along its length glinted dull gray in the light, each barb angled with deliberate purpose.

“It resembles some of the leg structures,” said a young voice from the edge of the table.

A junior alchemist leaned forward, hands clasped tightly as if to keep them from trembling. “I saw them before the bodies dissolved. Near the well. They moved... like jointed limbs.”

Several heads turned.

“Harik Mal has a sketch,” the young man continued quickly. “He was documenting the one that fell near the water. That part,” he gestured toward the spine, “, it looked almost exactly like this.”

A murmur spread through the room.

If the object was part of the creature’s anatomy, its persistence after dissolution raised troubling possibilities.

Shardra spoke next.

She had remained standing near the wall, arms crossed, expression carved from stone.

“They took those they could,” she said quietly.

The room fell silent.

“They did not just kill.”

Her gaze fixed on the spine.

“They seemed to need something from the victims.”

Several of the scholars exchanged uneasy looks.

“My people told me,” she continued, “that once they drew blood, they did not stop. They did not shift targets. They did not flee when wounded. They pursued until the victim was gone.”

Her voice remained steady, but the memory behind it was not.

“That is what they said when I woke,” she finished.

Before anyone could respond, another figure stepped forward.

Tenciv Lained.

The eldest of the conclave that oversaw Papal’s fauna and husbandry, he rarely spoke during strategic discussions. His role was advisory, practical, concerned with the health of the city’s animals rather than matters of war or extraplanar threat.

Today he looked deeply unsettled.

“In my younger years,” he said slowly, “I worked with a group that gathered rare creatures for sale.”

All eyes turned to him.

His voice carried a tone none of them had heard before, tight, controlled, edged with something very close to fear.

“We traveled widely,” he continued. “Some of the buyers were... unconventional.”

He hesitated.

“Once we had a summoner.”

The word itself seemed to chill the room.

“One who could call forth things to assist him in the working of his magic. Loathsome creatures.” He swallowed. “Sardonicus, I believe he named them. From elsewhere.”

His hand lifted, pointing at the spine. The fingers trembled.

“They needed life to remain here,” he said.

“Not food.”

“Life.”

A soft rustle passed through the gathered scholars.

“Essence,” he added. “Vital force. Whatever term you prefer.”

He shook his head slowly, pale hair shifting against his shoulders.

“Our group argued constantly. The creatures drained whatever we captured. Animals grew weak. Some simply died with no visible cause.” His voice dropped further. “Eventually we refused to continue supplying them.”

“What happened to the summoner?” someone asked.

“He was sent away,” Tenciv said flatly. “Or we were. I did not stay to learn the difference.”

Silence followed.

Then he looked again at the spine.

“These creatures may require something similar,” he said. “A way to anchor themselves to this world.”

He paused, searching for words that would not sound like madness.

“To attune,” he finished quietly. “As one attunes to an enchanted object.”

The implication settled over the room like frost.

They were not merely predators.

They might be parasites of reality itself.

Drawing strength from living beings to stabilize their existence here.

A door opened softly behind them.

Harik Mal entered, clutching a sheaf of papers.

He stopped immediately when he sensed the mood of the room.

No one spoke.

He approached the table slowly and laid the sketches down with careful hands.

Elith stepped forward first.

He studied the drawings in silence.

The sketches were precise despite the hurried conditions under which they had been made. One showed the creature’s collapsed form near the well. Another focused on the underside, where jointed protrusions extended from the torso like vestigial limbs or anchoring structures.

Elith lifted the sheet and held it beside the sealed tray.

There was no doubt.

The barbed spine matched one of the structures almost exactly, same curvature, same backward-facing hooks, same irregular ridges along the surface.

“It is a limb,” Elith said quietly.

“Or part of one.”

Mimi leaned closer, her expression tightening.

“So it broke off inside him?”

“Or was placed there,” Tenciv murmured.

No one liked that possibility.

Mimi tapped a claw lightly against the table, thinking.

“If anchor,” she said slowly, “then maybe for tracking. Or feeding. Or... holding.”

Shardra’s jaw tightened.

“Or claiming,” she said.

The room fell silent again.

If the creatures embedded these structures into victims, then Tarkus had not merely been wounded.

He had been marked.

Possibly prepared.

For what purpose, none could say.

The questions multiplied faster than answers.

Did every survivor carry such an anchor?

Did removal save him, or had something else already been taken?

Were the creatures hunting Tarkus specifically, or had he simply escaped long enough to reach the one place capable of helping him?

Elith finally set the sketch down.

“What it means,” he said quietly, “is that they are not merely attacking at random.”

He looked around the table.

“They are doing something.”

Outside the chamber, the sounds of Papal drifted faintly through the open windows, voices, distant hammering, the ordinary noise of a city trying to convince itself it was safe.

Inside, no one believed that anymore.

Because if these things required life to remain...

Then they would come again.

And next time, they might come prepared.

Wings Over the Realms

The message did not travel by horse.

Iron Shrikes carried it.

Three of the great birds launched from Papal’s rookery at dawn, each bearing tightly sealed packets bound beneath their breast harnesses. The documents within were not simple reports but entire bundles of transcribed discussion, sketches, alchemical notes, eyewitness accounts, and carefully worded speculation. Nothing was omitted. Nothing softened.

What was known.

What was suspected.

And, most importantly, what remained terrifyingly unknown.

They flew north toward Kadathe’.

The journey took them over forests already touched by frost and across jagged ridgelines where the wind cut like knives. Iron Shrikes did not tire easily, and these had been bred for endurance as much as intelligence. By the time they descended toward the high stone towers of Kadathe’s capital, the urgency of their mission had not diminished.

King Corin III still ruled there.

Many had expected him to fall years earlier. Assassination attempts had been frequent during the turbulent decades following the old wars, but he had survived each one. Some credited luck. Others credited skill. Most suspected the truth lay in his unusual relationship with magic.

Corin was gifted.

Not in the flamboyant sense of battlefield sorcery, but in the quieter, more dangerous manner of someone who understood how power worked beneath the surface of the world. He did not fear knowledge, even when it led into uncomfortable territory.

When the reports from Papal reached him, he ordered the Talismonde' archives opened without hesitation.

Scholars who had spent their lives cataloging forbidden phenomena were summoned. Old records were unsealed. Accounts previously dismissed as myth or exaggeration were reexamined with fresh urgency.

The conclusions were not reassuring.

No single entry described creatures exactly matching those seen at Papal.

But fragments existed.

Descriptions of pale winged entities in remote mountains.

Reports of livestock found drained yet unmarked.

Stories of hunters who vanished without a trace in high alpine passes.

Nothing definitive.

Nothing recent enough to form a clear pattern.

Only enough to suggest that the phenomenon was not new.

Other realms responded in their own ways.

Taurdain reported nothing.

Their council searched records stretching back generations and found no credible encounter with such creatures. The absence itself raised questions. Taurdain's reach spanned broad territories, yet no sightings appeared even in obscure frontier reports.

"Perhaps the sea shields us," one councillor suggested.

No one could confirm or deny it.

Thylor's response was similar.

The island-state had no history of pale winged horrors. Their watchers reported nothing unusual beyond the usual maritime threats and occasional storms that defied normal weather patterns.

Auris, however, provided something closer to a lead.

Their sightings were sporadic but consistent in one detail.

High mountains.

Remote peaks where snow lingered year-round and few travelers ventured willingly. Several patrols had reported glimpses of large pale shapes moving against the sky at extreme altitude. In each case the observers assumed them to be unknown dragons or distant cloud formations until closer inspection proved otherwise.

No attacks had been confirmed.

No remains recovered.

But the pattern was unmistakable.

Mountains.

Cold.

Isolation.

When the Papal incident was added to the data, the connection sharpened further. Tarkus had come from Kadarthe's icy ranges. The creatures had pursued him across those same regions before reaching lower lands.

Whatever their origin, it likely lay far above ordinary travel routes.

One detail troubled every scholar who studied the reports.

The restorative failure.

That even the most powerful curatives, administered within the life-rich aura of the Cinderheart grove itself, had barely saved Tarkus suggested an affliction beyond ordinary poison or wound. Something fundamental had been compromised.

Something that did not belong entirely to the physical body.

If such damage could be inflicted reliably, no army was truly safe from it.

No fortification mattered.

No healer could guarantee recovery.

In Papal, preparations began quietly but relentlessly.

The alchemists worked long hours in their laboratories, the air thick with the acrid scent of volatile compounds. Inferno arrows required careful balance, too little charge and they were ineffective, too much and they became unstable even in storage.

Artisans carved new shafts from seasoned hardwood, reinforcing them with metal collars to withstand the shock of ignition. Black pitch mixtures were refined for maximum adhesion to flesh that might not behave like flesh at all.

Crates filled steadily.

More than Papal would normally keep.

No one complained.

The memory of burning pale wings falling from the sky was still fresh enough that even the most cautious voices supported the effort.

Militia drills resumed with renewed intensity.

Archers practiced coordinated volleys until their arms trembled from repetition. Signal protocols were reviewed and revised. Watch rotations doubled along the towers facing the western approaches and the distant northern skyline.

Above all, eyes remained on the mountains.

The high cold places where something unseen might be watching in return.

In the Cinderheart grove, Tarkus slowly regained strength.

Not quickly.

Not fully.

But enough to sit upright for longer periods, enough to watch his pups tumble through the fallen leaves, enough to lift his head when the Iron Shrikes departed or returned.

Sometimes he would stare north for long stretches, his golden eyes distant and unreadable.

No one asked what he sensed.

They were not certain they wanted to know.

Because across the realms, one conclusion had begun to solidify among those who studied the matter seriously.

Whatever these creatures were...

Papal had not ended their story.

It had only survived the first chapter.