

The Mines of Panth Remure

“Back in the badlands,” Katha spat with no little disgust in her voice as the light and excess energy from the spell that had just transported them back into the wasteland quickly dissipated.

“Yes, indeed we are,” Callidus agreed with a smirk as the blazing sun beat down upon them from a clear but unpleasantly yellow-tinted sky.

“Just where in the badlands are we?” Naeline asked as she looked around in vain for familiar landmarks.

“We are about four leagues north of the Panth Remure mines,” the wizard replied, turning his slowly drifting carpet in what the others assumed was a southerly direction leading to said mines.

“And what is it that you hope to gain from going to the mines?” Daselpha asked with a frown as she turned her conjured mount to follow.

“Knowledge of the enemy,” Naeline answered the elf woman, eyes now fixed on the southern horizon as she and the others followed the magic worker. “Knowledge about the origins of these soul metals. Hopefully, we’ll be able to find some good information from the mine offices. And I don’t think any of us would mind putting a thorn in the foot of the Witch Queen Cindar if we have a chance.”

“How many other mines does she have producing the same mineral?” the elven woman asked.

“We don’t know,” the noblewoman told her quietly. “We’re pretty sure it is a metal being mined. We know the metal, if indeed it is a metal, from this mine is taken to the damned city/fortress of Yul Funus. We believe that somewhere in the depths of that terrible place is where the metal is refined and warped into the soul metal. We also believe it is there that it is being forged into weapons, armor, and other extremes of unpleasantness. And putting a stop to that is our ultimate goal.”

Daselpha thought for a long moment before saying, “That is a very noble goal. However, it is also very foolhardy. Cindar is more powerful than is easily imagined. And she’s got an entire army at her beck and call. Multiple armies in fact.”

“We know,” Father Garnell replied with a quiet smile. “Still, my archangel has given me this task to accomplish and I will not let her down. She believes that a small group may get into the Damned City where an army could not. Similarly, as a small group, we should be able to move around unobserved within the city itself. While we would love to put an end to this evil, one of our goals is to learn as much as possible.”

“Everyone is observed within Yul Funus,” the handmaiden replied somberly. “There is some sort of unsleeping creature there that sees all that happens within the city and immediately reports it. Our agents have found this out at the cost of their lives....”

“Then we are warned of another danger along our path,” the good father replied with a thoughtful nod. “And with that knowledge we will find a way to overcome this new obstacle as well. The angels guide our steps. With their help we will not fail.”

“Why are you helping these people?” Daselpha asked Callidus as they stood watch over the sleeping camp that night. She spoke quietly so as not to wake the others and used the elven language in case not all of them slept as they appeared to do. “Their quest is noble but foolish. It has no chance of success. You helping them only increases their delusion that there is truly any possibility of them succeeding.”

“I suppose there are a couple of reasons,” he replied slowly in the same language. “I promised my last apprentice that I would help them. He said they were good people and needed my help. Maybe he was right.”

She was silent a moment before asking, “This apprentice... he is now dead?”

“Yes. At less than a tenth of my years, he died of old age. He was a good man. His opinion meant a lot to me.”

“I see,” she replied thoughtfully. “What is your other reason?”

“I suppose in a rather inadvertent, roundabout way, Ephillia is the other reason.”

“How so? Please explain this.”

“You have to understand that my motivations are partly based on things I’ve only imagined. Things I do not truly know about her feelings.

“I think about her years of confinement within the Varinheim that came immediately after the prince’s death. During our trials, the elves made it quite clear that what I did was a disgrace. While they rightly did not give her an equal share of this, I cannot help but imagine that this attitude continued for years... possibly centuries. People of all races can be cruel. Most usually are not but some few habitually are. For how long did she hear cutting, cruel remarks about the events before and after the prince’s death?”

He fell silent a moment but the elven handmaiden made no reply or comment.

“Since that time,” he began a while later, “I’ve tried to do good things with my life.”

“To make up for the death of our prince?” she asked with almost no inflection.

“No, not to counter any wrong I might have done in killing Sellirri. We were both young and foolish. It is the way of nature for some of the young and foolish to die young. And for some to grow up and become wiser than they were.

“No, I fought in the Demon Wars, the Abyssal Gate Incursion, and dozens of other campaigns for various good reasons. But there was always a single, underlying purpose that helped drive me to do these things. To strive to make the worlds a safer place to live....”

Again he fell silent and again she said and did nothing to intrude on this silence.

“One of my oldest fears stems from those old imaginings of mine,” the wizard eventually continued in a near whisper. “That after the trial, everyone around my beloved princess would tell her what a disgrace my actions had been. That they would speak of my shame and dishonor and that she would hear nothing else for year upon long year. And I came to fear that she would grow to become ashamed of her relationship with me. That my memory would become an unpleasant reminder of the beginning of a long period of her life which she had no desire to ever remember again.

“And so I began enlisting in armies that were fighting demons. I sought out dark wizards and brought them to justice. I repaired the fabric from which the Creator made the worlds when some monstrosity from beyond attempted to gain entry into our worlds. I did all this and more with one powerful, underlying cause for what I did.

“I wanted to give her a reason to be proud of me. Proud that she knew me and loved me.”

After a short time had passed, Daselpha rose, turned and without a word walked away

from their cold camp and into the colder night. Some time later the elf woman returned but said nothing. Without looking at him or speaking to him, she sat down at the outside perimeter of the camp until their watch was over.

“This is harder than I had expected,” Daselpha told Naeline quietly with a sigh.

“How so?” the noblewoman asked with obvious interest and equal lack of volume. It would take the two of them the better part of the day to get into position. Still there was no denying they were in hostile territory and at this point stealth was their best ally.

“I’m not sure what I expected to learn of the wizard,” she began with a frown. “But it’s not what I’m learning.”

“I’ve come to realize something myself,” Naeline replied as they slowly made their way around to the north side of the massive mine complex.

“What is that?”

“In part that Callidus seems to think like an elf. The arrogant sword trainer I hired, the one who got along so well with you...”

“Taelias Morrenstairis,” the elven handmaiden spat as though speaking a curse. “His family lost a lot of status when Prince Sellirri died. He still blames me. And of course Callidus.”

“Yes, the very man,” Naeline agreed with a raised eyebrow. “I don’t like the fellow but I respect him. He’s a very talented blade master. And while he was rough, he did indeed impart a lot of information onto us in a very short time.”

“I’ve seen the technique,” Daselpha stated, keeping careful watch around them. “Had it used on me a few times. Didn’t like it. Had to use it a few times when training others. Liked it even less then.”

“But it was necessary?” the noblewoman asked. At the elf’s nod, she continued, “I thought so. Callidus is doing the same thing with us. When we first met him, the four of us were sure we were ready to storm the gates of Yul Funus. Then he led us into a band of giants. At first I thought it merely a coincidence that we came upon them and had no way around them... but now I don’t think that was the case at all. Thank the angels he equipped us ahead of time or that would have been a disaster. But we survived, learned, and moved on. Then he ran us into a den of incorporeal undead. Again we survived and we came out with a great treasure. One that will serve us well when we get to Yul Funus.”

“The stone tears?” the elf asked.

“Yes, how did you know about them?”

“For one attuned to magic, they’re rather hard to miss. They have a wonderful, soothing aura about them. It’s one of the things that finally convinced me to go with you.”

“Really? I thought you agreed before you even came out of the woods to meet Callidus.”

“Oh yes, that’s true. Ephillia and I were using a scrying pool to see who had so dramatically come visiting upon the borders of our forest... then suddenly she figured out who it really was. That turned into a rather humorous moment. Anyway, after that she asked my help. I watched you and your group for a while. I think it is not everyone who can wear those tears. I think that sort of thing is only for someone very special. And you have two members of your band wearing them. To tell the truth, you intrigue me. I told my princess I would help her, summoned a mount, and went to the tower.”

“Wow,” Naeline stated with a wondering smile. “Who’d have guessed that you mirrored

my feelings so well.”

Daselpha smiled in return as the two women continued their way around the mine complex.

“I still don’t like it,” Denny grouched quietly as he and Katha moved in otherwise near perfect silence around towards the ventilation shaft that was their first stop. “We don’t know this elf and we have no way of trusting her. She shouldn’t have been allowed to join us.”

“Denny!” the lanky woman replied fondly but with more than a hint of laughing reproach. “She’s practically elven royalty. Besides, the elves pretty much universally hate the Witch Queen. Much more so than we humans.”

“Bah,” he replied with even less volume. “She’s an unknown force. We don’t know how well she’ll work with us. You know as well as I do that we’re rapidly getting to the point that one person doing the wrong thing at the wrong time could get us all killed. And that’s only going to become worse the closer we get to Yul Funus.”

“That’s true,” the lanky woman agreed, “but I received the impression that Daselpha had more than her share of talent to bring to our collective table. Mistress of Illusion. Scion of the Sword or whatever it was. And we both saw her dueling with Callidus. She’s got some serious talent. And we really do need all the help we can get.”

Denny shook his head. He then grinned and snorted a little laugh. “Who would have thought that the wizard would turn out to be so good with a blade? Not great by any means, but there was no questioning that the man was no stranger to it.”

“You don’t like him, do you?” Katha asked with an honest, questioning look.

“Not really, no,” the big man replied thoughtfully. “But I’ve come to respect him. And I have to admit, he’s not nearly as annoying as he used to be.”

“Maybe you’re just not as overly sensitive when it comes to wizards as you used to be,” she suggested with a grin. “Or maybe you’re starting to forgive him for tricking us when we first met him.”

“Could be,” the big man agreed with a shrug as they rounded a spire of rock and continued on towards their target.

“Is she going to be a distraction to you?” Father Garnell asked as he wiped sweat off his brow with a handkerchief.

“Daselpha?” Callidus asked, eyes searching the horizon for signs of enemy activity.

“Who else?” he asked with a wry grin. “I can see she intrigues you. Engages you on many more levels than any of the rest of us.”

“Her presence is making me think more,” the wizard replied with a quiet smile and a quick look to the priest before his eyes returned to the horizon. “That’s usually a good thing. While she’s studying me, she’ll be using her considerable talents to assist you in your endeavor. I will be thinking twice as hard about things in an effort to keep her safe. That should work out to the benefit of us all.”

“Perhaps,” the priest replied with a thoughtful frown. “Perhaps.” With a laugh the priest shook his head. “And it’s always someone else’s endeavor. Someone else’s quest. I think we

will not truly make significant progress until this becomes your quest as well.”

“We’ve already made significant progress father,” Callidus replied without turning to face him. “The group has gained cohesion. They are no longer a collection of strangers but now a unified band. Everyone knows each other... with the exception of Daselpha and possibly myself. More importantly, everyone is growing to know themselves. You are all gaining confidence and skills beyond what you thought were possible. Soon that confidence will be tested. Soon, you will find there is a great deal more to be learned.”

“You may find this hard to believe, but I already knew all of that.”

“You are a wise man Garnell.”

“Some days. Monumentally foolish others.”

“Aren’t we all?” the magic worker replied with a sardonic smile as they approached the witch queen’s distant magical defense tower.

Some time later, the good priest asked, “What are the odds that the tower will be unmanned?”

“I couldn’t honestly say,” Callidus replied. “Long ago, after I was attacked by Cindar’s agents while scrying, I began testing her defenses every so often. That occasionally included taking a poke at one of these towers. Of the three I’ve played with, two of them were occupied. One was full of dark wizard trainees, the other occupied one had a dark arch-magus, and the third was running on automated defenses. I think the last tower was trying to communicate with the other towers. I found it to be quite interesting.

“Are you saying the automated one was intelligent?”

“No, but I do think there had been a dark spirit tied to the tower. Further, I think it had orders to report any incursions against it. It didn’t get a chance to though,” the magic worker finished with a smug smile.

“What did you do to it?”

“I tipped it over into another dimension. Sold it to some near friends of mine who like to break down magical items down to their primal energies.”

“Had you told me that before I’d seen you conjure your own tower from wherever you kept it, I might have suspected you of exaggerating. Now, I think I will take you at your word,” the priest replied, shaking his head slightly.

“As I said: wise.”

“What did he say the signal would be?” Daselpha asked as they waited near their target.

“He didn’t,” Naeline replied with equally low volume. “However, I got the impression it would be one of those things that we’d recognize without difficulty when we saw it.”

“Hmm...”

“All stories aside,” Naeline began quietly, “he really is a very powerful wizard, isn’t he? I mean we’ve seen him do some stuff. Some of it pretty impressive. But mostly he’s been letting us do the work. Still, any man who can pull towers out of thin air and into elven fields... That seems really strong to me.

“That’s not even my real point or question,” the human noble woman continued before the elven woman could formulate an answer. “I’m not an expert on magic by any measure, but I think we’ve traveled with him too much to truly appreciate just how strongly steeped in the mystical arts he really is. While we don’t see the legend anymore, I’m wondering if we’ve ever

really seen any of the power the stories are based on. Does that make any sense?"

"I suppose it does," Daselpha agreed after a moment of consideration. "I think in a way you are wondering if you are too close to the tree to see how truly large the forest is?"

"Yes," the human noblewoman agreed with a nod. "I suppose that's exactly what I'm wondering. I mean, we've all heard the stories. Hero of the Demon Wars. The man who's brought more dark wizards to trial than anyone in history. He's a living legend. And most days he seems very ordinary. I'm just wondering if we're missing the real Callidus?"

"No," the other woman replied quietly, her gaze far away. "I don't believe so. I think you've seen the real man. It is the legend that is illusion."

"But what about all the things he's done?"

"Ninety nine percent of the time he is not using magic, correct?" The elven woman asked.

"Yes, inasmuch as I can see, that's right."

"There can be no doubt that part of the man lives for that one percent when he is doing magic. But when he is not doing magic, he is simply a man."

"I don't think Callidus is simply anything," Naeline contradicted with a smile.

Daselpha let out a quiet, musical laugh and nodded. "Maybe you are right, maybe you are right." She gestured towards a hole in the earth ahead of them. "I believe this is our entrance."

"Yes, looks like." With a grin, Naeline asked, "What do you think the signal will be?"

The elf shook her head. "I do not know but like you, I think we will know it when we see it."

Pulling her sword out of the back of the now dead guard, Katha turned to Denny, whom she could just see circling around the stone. As she watched, he pulled a wide-bladed hand axe out of his belt before disappearing around the rock formation. Listening intently, she heard a barely audible thunk of a sound followed by that of a body hitting the ground.

"Ladder leading down as planned," Denny whispered to her as she stalked slowly around into the clearing where the air shaft was located.

"Looks like," Katha agreed. "Let's hide the bodies quickly."

"What species are these guys?" the big man asked, pulling the relatively small axe out of the head of one of the lizard-like guards. The pair of scaled, humanoid guards had worn leather armor and had carried spears as well as knives just a hair too short to be called swords. "I don't recall ever seeing anything like them before."

"Scaled hides. Snake-like eyes. No nose or ears to speak of. Slightly jutting jaws with short but sharp teeth. Short tails. From what I've heard, that pretty much fits the descriptions I've heard of 'saurians'," the frowning woman replied. "But if that's true, that opens up another box of trouble for us."

"How so?" Denny asked, kneeling down to examine the short claws on the dead guards' fingers and toes.

"The rumors I've heard about saurians say they often ride on giant, carnivorous lizards."

Looking up at her, he asked, "How big is giant?"

"Big enough to eat a full grown man in two bites. At least that's what the stories said."

"I gotta tell you, I do not like these stories of yours."

"Just now, I can't say I'm too fond of them myself," she replied with a smirk before

wiping her sword clean and re-sheathing it. “How long you think we have until the signal? And why were there guards at our air shaft?”

“Maybe there was an escape attempt by the workers,” he replied with an uncaring shrug. “For the signal, I hope it comes sooner rather than later. Especially since someone’s going to miss these guys eventually.” With another shrug of his massive shoulders, he grabbed both corpses and started dragging them away from the air shaft.

“Let’s go over this one more time,” Father Garnell suggested a bit nervously as he eyed the distant tower.

“Certainly,” the wizard agreed equitably.

“Yes,” the priest stated before clearing his throat. “You’re going to cast a spell upon the area we’re standing in that will mask the magical energy generated by our spells.”

“A transferred-flare effect,” Callidus agreed. “Basically, I’m going to transfer the extraneous, magical ‘noise’ from our efforts to another part of the wasteland. Shifting my metaphor a bit, to anyone looking for magical emanations, that area will shine as though we were casting our spells from there.”

“Have you done this before?”

“Yes, but not on this world.” It was unclear if this made the priest feel any better or not.

“Okay,” Garnell began, his gaze drifting to the large grey-stone tower. From here he could see neither entrance nor exit. No windows and no balconies. The top appeared smooth and flat with no conical tops or battlements. But there was something about it. A certain sense of forces waiting to be unleashed he could feel from here. That or his imagination was running wilder than usual. Tearing his gaze away from the distant edifice, he picked up his recital again. “After that, I perform a blessing of the redirected gaze. That should make it more difficult for them to find us. However, I’m not sure how long that will delay the search...”

“We won’t need long for our initial part, father. What will be interesting will be the response of the people Cindar has in charge of defending this area. That’s when it’s likely to become interesting. Until then, relax and have fun.”

“Right,” came Garnell’s deadpan response which the wizard took as a clear indication he had no plans of either relaxing or enjoying. “Moving on. After my blessing, you’ll begin your assault on the tower, using those items we spent all day placing. You’ll direct your spells through them, thus further confusing the enemy as to where it is the attack is really coming from. During this time, I will perform a blessing of guided fate, put up defensive wards, as well as any other blessing that comes to mind.”

“Exactly,” Callidus replied with a smile. “The trick is to stay flexible. From the instant we engage in combat, the circumstances are likely to start skewing our plan. You have to be ready to adapt to the changing situation. Don’t worry, you’ll do fine.”

“I wish I had your confidence.”

“Live another thousand years and you might.”

“Heaven forbid!”

“You’d be surprised at how fast a thousand years can pass,” Callidus replied, turning his gaze briefly back the way they’d come before returning it to the tower before them.

A brilliant flash of light caught their attention moments before a crash akin to not-so-distant thunder reached their ears.

“That’s the signal. Let’s move.”

Daselpha drew her sword and leapt through the hole. With a curse, Naeline slid over and more cautiously dropped down into the hole. Landing badly, she fell to the side in a clatter.

“Good idea,” the elf woman told her with grinning eyes. “You provide a distraction and draw them to us. I’ll kill them while you hold their attention.”

“Sorry,” the human woman muttered, blushing in embarrassment as she stood up. They were in a rather smallish tunnel that had once been part of an underground river. It was Callidus’ belief that this intersected the mines further in. Pointing to the left, she said, “I think we need to go that way.”

“I concur. I’ll scout ahead a short distance.”

“I’m right behind you.”

Katha slid down the ladder and started down the rough hewn passageway at a trot. A moment later and Denny caught up with her.

“Definitely a decisive signal,” she whispered.

“I admit, I had no trouble figuring it out,” he agreed quietly.

A moment later they were battling for their lives as saurian warriors came pouring out of a side tunnel. The fighting was vicious and nearly silent. The saurians mostly made hissing sounds with a few coughs thrown in for good measure. Even as they died, they made little sound.

When one of them pulled out a bell to change this, Denny went into high action, slashing his way through them so fast it was difficult to know exactly where his blade was. Both the bell and the hand still attached to it dropped to the floor where it made a single clank before Denny stamped it flat with one of his metal-shod boots. Soon after that, the last of the lizard men died.

“Well that was entertaining,” he told Katha with a grin. “But we have places to go.”

Smiling by way of reply, she trotted down the corridor in the direction of their targets.

“Is this what you were expecting?” Garnell shouted in between calling forth defensive spells. Before him lay dozens of dead enemy spellcasters. Men, women, demons, half-demons and other things that had teleported to the area in response to Callidus’ destruction of the magical tower. Some crushed by hands of stone that had risen out of the earth of the badlands, others burned to a crisp or even disintegrated. To the right a group still twitched from the lightning that had struck them from out of the clear sky. Even as the priest watched and finished his current prayer, the half dozen men in black plate mail armor were thrown high and far into the sky. A moment later and they were lost from sight.

Smaller explosions from the remaining stub of tower continued to shake the ground even as smoke, sparks, and embers poured from the burning ruins and blew away in the light wind. The priest’s thoughts came to a stop when he realized that the latest sound had actually been a

dragon teleporting in.

Roughly the size of a small castle, the black-blue scaled monster immediately unleashed a massive jet of flame. Fortunately, it was mistakenly directed towards one of the stones they'd so painstakingly set before starting their assault on the tower. And much like their assault on the tower, the wizard directed his attack on the monster through those same stones. Fourteen brilliant white-blue orbs struck the dragon from all around. The passing of the nearest orb took away the priest's breath and burned his nose and throat with cold. Upon striking the dragon, all the orbs exploded in a blazingly frigid blue light which encompassed the entire area and momentarily blocked sight of the huge creature. When the light faded, the dragon stood immobile.

Without hesitation, the great mage continued quietly casting. This time, a backblast of pure sound knocked the priest to the ground. Striking the frozen dragon, the powerful wave of sound shattered scales and the flesh beneath. Yet somehow the dragon did not die. With muscle and bone showing all across its massive body, the monster let out an agonized scream.

"That's a new one," Callidus muttered before unleashing his next spell.

Spinning towards the sound of his voice, the horribly wounded dragon inhaled in preparation for cutting loose with another blast of flame. As the fire just started out though, fourteen beams of brilliant gold light struck the monster, one from each of the stones. A brilliant flash of light enveloped the creature and then dust drifted down through the afterimage where the dragon had stood.

"That was horrible," the priest told the wizard.

"Yes, it was. And it's likely to get worse before it gets better."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Father Garnell replied.

"How many more cages are there to free?" Naeline asked without looking as she unlocked yet another cage.

"Too many," the elf woman replied. "It's time to turn the liberation over to the liberated. We have a mission to complete and time is not on our side."

Torn for a moment, the noblewoman nodded her agreement.

"Don't worry," the prisoner she'd just freed told her. "We'll continue the job until we're all free."

"Best of luck," she told the man, handing him the keys before hurrying to catch up with Daselpha who was even now jogging quickly out of the slave quarters. His quiet thanks followed them as they heard the clank of another cell door being opened. Hopping over the bodies of the guards, the two women moved quickly down the worked stone corridor.

"How far away do you think the offices are?"

"To be honest, I'm not entirely sure," the elf woman replied without slowing down.

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

"I'm not sure what that was," Katha informed Denny as the two of them ran out of the large, machine-filled chamber, "but judging by the screeching and sounds of tearing metal, I think you breaking it was probably well done."

“Thanks,” he panted while running. A small explosion seemed to punctuate her statement.

“We’re not far from the next area,” the lightly running woman stated. “Hopefully, that will prove to be even more fun.”

“We can always hope,” the big man agreed, sharing a quick feral grin with her as another explosion chased them down the wide hallway. “I’ve never destroyed a smelter before.”

“Then it looks like this will be a first for both of us.”

“What do you think to accomplish by this wizard?” a disembodied voice asked, the sound echoing across the entire area.

“Accomplish?” Callidus asked in return, his voice seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere just as that of the unseen speaker had. “What makes you think I’m trying to accomplish anything?”

“The witch-queen is not lightly attacked. And this is not the first time you’ve destroyed one of her towers, Callidus of Cordel Vale.”

“Congratulations, you know my...” the wizard stopped when a peculiar gonging sound filled the air. “Well,” he resumed, speaking a bit faster, “it’s been nice chatting with you but we’ve got to go now.”

At Garnell’s puzzled look, the spellcaster winked and said in a quiet voice that carried no farther than the priest, “That was a sound illusion. It just happened to be an exact duplication of the flat church bell in the city of Uru Maddel.”

“That’s one of Cindar’s damned cities,” the priest replied slowly with growing comprehension. “And it’s a good five hundred leagues from here.”

“Well how about that?” the wizard replied with grin. “And with that, I think it’s time we fell back and met up with the others.”

“I’ve saved a Prayer of Unseeing for just this moment,” he whispered just before his muttered but heartfelt prayer took hold. Without further word, the two men turned and moved quickly towards the rendezvous point.

“Well, well, well,” the man called in a silky voice as the two women entered the mine offices. “What have we here? Mmm. Why I do believe you two delicious morsels are part of the commotion that’s disrupting production?” The pale, thin man was well dressed as though for an appearance at court. With a smile he tossed his hat across the room to a coatrack where it landed perfectly. Straightening the lace at his sleeves, he focused his attention upon the two women.

“Leave now and you won’t be hurt,” Naeline offered as she and the elf cautiously entered the offices.

“That’s a very generous offer,” the richly dressed man replied with a smile. He then tapped the door next to him with his ball-topped cane. Two large, armored men stepped out with swords drawn. “Sorry, but I can’t make you the same counteroffer. No, the best you can hope for now is an immediate surrender and the hope that I remain in control of your destiny.”

“These are not men,” Daselpha stated, drawing her second sword. “They’re demon-kin

of some kind.”

“And I’m a vampire,” the man offered with a feral grin. “Of the Khorval bloodline. And I’m going to enjoy bleeding you... amongst other things.”

“You screwed up dying the first time,” Naeline stated as she advanced on the leftmost armored figure. “We’ll help you get it right this time.”

“Disarm them!” the vampire barked. “Try not to kill them.”

The large figures lurched forward and attacked with surprising speed. The human noblewoman was forced to parry several times in quick succession. Each strike of metal on metal created a brief, ghostly shriek.

“I hate to state the obvious but they’re using the damned soul-metal,” Naeline declared, managing a weak counterattack that never reached the intended target before falling back on the defensive. Across from her, the elf woman darted around with surprising ease, never quite touching her opponent but never being touched either.

“Of course we are,” the vampire stated with a grin. “What do you think we do at this facility?”

“Die?” Daselpha asked as her sword slid through the vampire’s back and out his chest. The surprised vampire slid off her blade, aging swiftly as he fell. Meanwhile, the illusory elf continued to dance around the second armored figure.

“Mistress of Illusion,” Naeline remembered aloud.

“That’s one of my....”

She was interrupted by the door behind her being kicked off its hinges which sent the door and herself crashing into the opposite wall. Dazed, the elf groaned even as she reached for the closest of the swords she’d dropped.

A rather short, thin bald man wearing plain clothing stepped into the room. “Damn but I hate elves,” he declared with some disgust. “When they’re cocky too, that just compounds the issue.” Walking across the now dusty remains of the vampire, he stepped on the blade of the sword even as her hand reached the haft. “Well, now. That’s a fine lot of magic you’ve got there. Armor, swords, rings, amulets, and more. Yessss. It’ll look good in my collection. You... I suspect you’ll become part of one of the queen’s slave collections.”

“Go to hell,” the elf woman spat, as she regained her focus.

By way of response, he kicked her armored belly hard enough to send her flying the short distance to the wall behind her. Dropping back to the floor, the damage she’d done to the stone wall was impressive.

“Leave her alone!” Naeline yelled. She was now being held off the ground by her arms; one each in the grasp of the armored demon-kin.

“You’re hardly in a position to make demands,” the bald man stated, looking down at the gasping elf. “Tell me what I want to know and perhaps I’ll take it easy on her before sending her on to the capital.” He then kicked the fallen elf several more times in quick succession. “No matter how many times I do this, the fun just never goes away.”

“Stop it! You’re killing her!”

“Little human, you simply must learn that you’re not in charge here. I am. And while I’m in charge, I’ll do as I wish. And it turns out that I like my elves well tenderized before I eat them.”

“You said you’d go easy on her before sending her to the capital,” the human noblewoman exclaimed, helpless tears running down her cheeks.

“Yes, but that was then. Funny how situations can change quickly like that.”

Callidus stepped into the room wearing a dark smile. “That is so very true.”

“Is she going to be alright?” Naeline asked.

Garnell nodded, “She’ll be fine. I’ve done a little healing but very little was actually necessary. Her armor and protective spells absorbed most of the damage dealt her.”

“So who is this guy?” Denny asked as he scowled at the bald prisoner who lay bound and unconscious some distance away.

“He’s a half dragon,” Callidus answered from his seat next to the now sleeping elf woman. “And he was in charge of the facility.”

“Half dragon?” Katha wondered aloud. “What’s the other half then?”

“Good question,” the wizard replied. “I have a substantial sample of his blood on the towels we used to clean him up. I think I’ll find that out.” And with that he walked up to the next floor of the tower.

“Think they’ll be able to track us here?” Katha asked quietly a couple of minutes later.

Naeline frowned a moment before answering, “Callidus teleported us six times before opening the portal to... whatever you call this place this tower is.” The others turned and looked out the window at the strange grey mist that seemed to make up everything outside the tower. “I don’t like whatever it is out there and I suspect strongly that it is a most difficult place to get to. Additionally, I suspect this tower is better protected than the one he destroyed. I hope so anyway.”

“Speaking of which,” Denny began, turning away from the window and its eerie view, “What happened with the tower?”

The priest shook his head. “It was impressive. Both what he did and the enemy response. I hate to say it, but we’re not ready for the damned city yet. There were demons and dragons and elementals sent as part of the witch-queen’s response. We could not have successfully overcome a single group that came in response to the attack. It was the most terrible thing I’ve ever seen.”

Naeline leaned over and put a hand on his shoulder. “The more we know, the better we can prepare. I didn’t fare well against the two demon-kin that the vampire had doing his dirty work. More training, maybe better equipment. That will help us get to where we need to be.”

“Maybe we need to do more where we can work together,” Denny suggested. “The four of us work well together as a team. Less splitting up would help.”

“We have to remain flexible,” the noble woman replied. “But I like the idea. I’m just not sure we’ll be allowed that luxury.”

“So what did we learn about the metal the mine was producing and refining?” Katha asked with a yawn.

“Well, the mine is certainly a source of the base metal,” Naeline answered with a tired smile. “However, it’s just the base metal. Whatever enchanting and stuff that’s done to it happens somewhere else. And the paperwork indicates all the metal goes to Yul Funus. There’s a variety of methods it’s transported: caravan, dragon back, flying wagons, earth elementals carrying it underground. Various means, all well protected.”

“Also,” Garnell replied quietly, “we found diagrams and instructions on how to build some of the equipment used at the mining facility. While some of that equipment was magical,

as our leader said, it bestowed no magical properties on the metal. Apparently, most of the magical energy was required to get the smelter hot enough for the metal to properly form. We have a few samples we'll work with while we rest and recuperate. I'm curious to see if the stuff holds good powers the way it does bad."

"Let's get some rest," Naeline told the others. "We can do more weapons training here while Callidus and Father Garnell learn more about the metal and it's properties... and hopefully how to remove any dark forces imbedded into it. What we need to be thinking about is where to get more information about the damned city. Thanks to our elf friend here, we know that something is always watching over the city. We need to find a way to hide from it... whatever it may be."

"I'll think about it," Katha stated, standing up and yawning again. "In the meantime, sleep well everyone." Waving in reply to their responses, she walked downstairs to her room.

"Training, conditioning, and gaining intelligence," Denny nodded. "A good plan. I'll be up early should anyone wish to get a jump on training." And with that he also went downstairs.

"Get some sleep," the priest told Naeline with a fond smile. "Apprehensive though we may be, today was a good day. The best preparation for tomorrow is rest."

"You're right father."

"May the angels watch over your sleep."

"Yours as well," she replied sleepily.

"You have the half dragon in hibernation?" Daselpha asked Callidus as the others slept.

"Yes, I do," I agreed. "I'm glad to see you're up and about."

"Thank you. It's good to be back up and moving. The others are all sleeping. Garnell knows they're not ready for what lay ahead of them."

"Good. I thought this might be a wake-up call for them. And what about you? What do you think now?"

"I think I'm still transitioning from practice to real world combat. I think I was sloppy and nearly got myself and Naeline killed."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," he told her quietly. "I had the luxury of easing the others into this. Unfortunately for you, you came in right when it started getting rough."

The elf woman nodded, "Giants and bodiless undead. Yes, I've heard. Still, I feel like I let them down. And I let myself down."

"The others don't feel that way. You notice they're talking about how to proceed and how to get better and to better prepare for the task ahead? They know this is just another step along the way. Some steps you stumble over but you keep going. Remember, it's a long path. Letting a single misstep throw you off stride means you don't reach the goal. So learn from your mistake but don't dwell upon it."

"What makes you think I would dwell upon it?" she asked with a little smile.

"You used to do it all the time. Your need for self-perfection frequently sent you into dozens of mini-exiles and/or behind closed doors for hours on end."

"That was Ephillia, not me," she whispered.

"It's been a very long time since I came across an illusion I couldn't see through," he replied with a patient, quiet smile.

She simply stared at him for a long moment before pulling her pinkie ring off. While her

armor remained the same, her face and hair changed to match the features the man remembered from times long past.

“Those are the eyes I’ve been waiting to see.”

Pulling off her armored gauntlets, she walked across to where he stood. “You understand why? Why I did what I did?”

“Yes, I do. And it was the right thing to do.”

“You’re not angry then?”

“No my princess. We needed the time to get to know each other again. A thousand years brings a lot of changes. And we still have a lot to learn.”

“What do you want to do now?”

“I want to kiss you so much I can hardly stand it,” he answered with smile.

“That makes two of us,” she declared in an emotion-filled rush, striding forward into his arms as the long parted lovers’ eager lips met for the first time in far too long.