

I am Rosa Hersator. There's nothing much to me, I'm just some street elf from Noam. I was raised by a horrible woman, and ever since I left that witch's house, I've had to do whatever I could to survive. The period where I was one of the little slaves of the Noam Royalty was just another step in the downward spiral that is my life. The only way out of this servitude was to secretly assist the crown's number one enemy, Beezle's Armor Company, and hope that Neslin Beezle, the company's owner, would in return help us regain our freedom. Until then, I was stuck with Gruzz the rock-headed dwarf, shy little Pae, and Xarjun the magic dragon.

It had been about a week since our last mission. We had absolutely nothing to do in the little section of the guest wing that Fulcewind had granted us. Out of sheer boredom, I had found myself drumming on my bedroom table with my fingers. Suddenly, a guard stepped through the open door. "Miss Hersator," The guard said in an almost disgusted manner as he looked down on me. I could tell he didn't like me one bit, but I suspected that Fulcewind was making him treat us more respectfully than he would have preferred. "Royal Advisor Fulcewind has a new task for you." He continued. I internally sighed in relief. Finally, something to do. However, I remained stoic as I got up and let the guard lead me to the royal advisor's chamber.

Xarjun, Gruzz, Pae, and I sat down in front of an expertly carved wooden desk, which was likely thousands of times more expensive than the plain and frankly uncomfortable wooden chairs we were given. There were bookcases all around us that reached up to the ceiling and were full of a barely organized mess of thick books. Written on each book's spine was an overly fancy cursive script that I could hardly read. Sitting at the other side of the table was Fulcewind, and behind her was a window that overlooked the courtyard between the castle and the wall that surrounded it. It was a cloudy day, so the outside was cast in a dreary grey light. "Let's get down to business." Fulcewind said. "I've gotten reports of a shady workshop that, strangely enough, seems to have a connection with the Beezle Company. It sells poorly made weapons at prices far too low for them to recoup, yet they still remain in business. A spy that is tailing a Beezle associate told me that he saw her coming in and out of the building's back entrance several times now. Therefore, this workshop must be some kind of front for the Beezles. I want you to investigate this business. While some of you pretend to be interested customers, the rest of you try to figure out what they're actually doing in there. Do you have any questions?"

"Are there any other signs that they're related to the Beezles?" Xarjun asked.

Fulcewind shook her head. "The only thing tying that business to the Beezles is that associate."

"What is the workshop called?" Pae asked.

"The owners call it the Smithshop." She looked around at us, and seemed to notice that we were all deep in thought. "Anymore questions?" She asked.

After a moment of silence, I said, "Nope."

"Then it's time for you to go. Good luck." She said before slipping a list of directions to us.

Moments later, we were set loose outside the castle, with only the threats of imprisonment and ruined reputation ensuring that we would return by the end of the day. We walked through the crowded streets for some time. Today seemed colder than last time we were out, and the snow on the rooftops was thicker than before. The foot traffic was bad, as per usual, and many times we had to worm our way through many people. "Well," Xarjun said, "I see a problem here. Those phony blacksmiths either do or don't work for Neslin. If we assume they do work for him and tell them we're also under his employment, but it turns out they don't work for him, then our business secret will be let out."

I said, "And if they do work for him, he won't be happy if we investigate his establishment like that."

"We could go to the Tower to inform Neslin about this mission." Pae said.

"That's a good idea," Xarjun said, "But with all the spies Fulcewind has, she's going to be very suspicious if she learns about our tower visit."

"Someone might be spying on us right now." I said before looking all around us. Just a moment later, we heard a loud bang! We became startled, Gruzz pulled out his shield and hammer, and we looked ahead of us as the crowd screamed. A large wave of fire had burst out the entrance of one of the establishments: a gold trader. Exiting from the blasted-open doors were a group of large red dragonborn, each lugging a large full sack over the shoulder as they wielded a longsword in their other hand.

"It's the Tiamat Devils." Xarjun growled as we watched the dragonborn at the front laugh hysterically and push through the crowd. I heard Gruzz murmur hateful words as he stepped forward. I tugged on his coat. "Come on, let's go a different way." I said. Gruzz said nothing, but followed my lead along with everyone else as I stepped toward an alleyway.

In time, we made it to the workshop. As expected, it was completely shady. It was in a poor part of Noam, where the more unruly types like myself tended to hang out, so the shop was surrounded by all these small rundown buildings that would've looked more fitting in a slave town. The workshop itself was just as rundown. It had letters spelling out 'Smithshop' loosely hanging across its front. There was hardly anyone around, just a grouchy halfling smoking from a pipe as he sat on the cracked sidewalk, an ugly elf couple that walked past us, and some fat orc leaning against the wall. Everyone was pretending that they did not notice the orc. We stared at this shop for a minute or so. "What should we do?" I whispered.

Xarjun scratched his chin. "I have an idea." But then, we felt the ground begin to rumble.

"Is there an earthquake?!" Pae asked.

"Probably, we need to get to a safe place before it gets worse!" I said. As the people around us scrambled, I turned to run back the way we came. We had passed a ditch on the way here, and I knew that if we ran back and hid in it, it would adequately cover us from falling debris. Suddenly, we heard a large muffled crack! "What was that?!" I shouted. We heard the crack again. It sounded like thunder was erupting underground.

Xarjun became stock-still. He clutched his mace with one hand, and with the other he pulled out his holy medallion and held it tightly against his chest. "It's coming from the shop." He said.

"Could it be magic?!" Pae said.

I was about to comment that she should know since she's our wizard, but I was distracted by a realization. "Something is definitely wrong." I said. "A weak shake like this never goes on for this long! It either fades away fast or gets far worse!"

Gruzz suddenly pulled out his shield and hammer. "Enough talk! These phonies are up to somethin', and we're gonna find out!" He charged forward.

"Damnit, Gruzz!" Xarjun shouted as he ran forward.

"No choice but head on, huh?" I looked at Pae. "Come on, let's go!" We both ran after them.

Gruzz barged through the door with his shield, and we all spilled in behind him. The entrance room was medium-sized, and had a floor consisting of old wooden planks. Faint orange torchlight was shining through the cracks between the floor planks. In front of us to the left was a long counter which was in front of a long rack that had many swords hanging off of it. To the right was a stable door that had both the top and bottom half shut. The top door suddenly flew open, and a skinny black-haired human stared angrily at us. "What's the big deal?! We're clo-" His eyes widened as he got a good look at us. He saw our battle-ready postures and the intense looks on our faces. He looked over at Xarjun, and as his eyes layed upon the holy symbol in his grip, I saw a tinge of fear in his eyes. He looked behind himself. "Master, it's as we feared! A holy order has shown up to stop us!"

In the darkness behind the man, I saw two eyes peer at us. "Hm, that's no holy order. That's a group of clowns. Nevertheless, we can't let them interfere!" The human looked back at us, then opened the bottom half of the door and stepped out. He was wearing a white stained shirt and brown pants. He lifted his shirt up slightly, revealing a mace and several daggers hanging from his belt. As he raised his mace towards us, the man in the darkness stepped out. He was an elf with long black hair down to his thighs; he wore chainmail, a black cape, and a black mask that covered the top half of his face. He unsheathed two curved blades, one long and the other short, then he made a wide stance.

We moved to engage, but then the elf leapt toward Gruzz. In an instant, his sword slashed across Gruzz's right arm. Of course, all that did was make Gruzz mad. He roared, and the elf looked up in surprise just as Gruzz

clocked him in the head with the butt of his hammer. The human was so frightened that he failed to notice me come right at him. I jammed a dagger between his shoulder and his chest and kicked him back into the wall. To my surprise, he immediately recovered, bouncing straight off the wall and charging at me. He raised his mace, and I prepared to circle-block his arm to stop the swing, but he completely blindsided me with a knee to the stomach. Even with the armor I wore under my coat, it still knocked the wind out of me. I gasped and made short, shallow breaths as I pressed my arm against my stomach. The human backed away a few feet, then smirked. At the same time, the elf prepared to charge at Gruzz. A roar of icy wind from Xarjun suddenly blasted both of our enemies.

They braced against the cold blast, which left their bodies covered in icicles. They immediately recovered and looked towards Xarjun, who immediately charged at the elf and swung his mace. The elf blocked it with both swords, but Xarjun didn't go for another swing. With a long battle cry he kept pressing down against the elf, as if trying to crush him. The human raised his own mace, but an ice bolt from Pae suddenly hit him in the stomach, forming a large chunk of ice on it. He wheezed, bended forward, and clutched his frozen stomach. "Heh, take that." I said with my voice strained.

The elf glanced at his frozen friend. "Damnit! Kobolds, get in here!" Before any of us could react, a small lizard person, about the size of a child, rushed in from the dark room. He looked around the room for a moment, then noticed me. He raised a small shield, pointed a javelin at me, and slowly stalked towards me. I could not stand up straight. All I could do was point my dagger at him and back away. Xarjun glanced at the kobold, then at the elf. Just as the kobold leaped at me, Xarjun bashed him in the head with his shield, but in doing so the elf was able to slip out from under his mace just as Gruzz swung at him. As the kobold was sent sprawling into the wall, the elf ducked under Gruzz's swing and made a deep cut into his side. Gruzz screamed and backed away, clutching his side with his shield arm as a good amount of blood spilled on the ground. As this happened, the human raised his mace and started to approach Xarjun, but then another ice bolt from Pae froze his arm to the top half of the stable door. I heard a crack in his arm from the force of the blast.

As the elf stepped backwards to assess us, Xarjun did the same to check on Gruzz. At the same time, another kobold stepped out of the door. Without moving his eyes off his opponents, Xarjun said, "Gruzz, are you-"

"Grrrr..." Gruzz suddenly smashed the floor with his hammer, leaving a sizable hole in it. "DAMN YOU ELF, YOU THINK YOU CAN BRING ME DOWN?! NO! I'LL NEVER RELENT AGAIN!!!" Much to my and the elf's surprise, Gruzz charged recklessly as blood sprayed out his torso. As I watched the spectacle, I felt my breath return. The elf started to back away, but Gruzz was too fast, so the elf panicked and stabbed at him. The blade went into the side of Gruzz's neck, stopping his charge. A weak gasp came from him, and the elf smiled a bit too soon, because Gruzz roared back to life and thrust his hammer forward. The elf's eyes widened and he tried dodging, but the top of the hammer banged hard into his side. He crumpled but kept standing, and then he backed away and vomited. I could see the look of terror in his eyes as I suddenly appeared from behind Gruzz. Before he could react, I swiftly stabbed his chest. I pulled it out and backed away before he could retaliate, and all he did was clutch at his chest and cough up blood.

I heard a bang, and saw a kobold with a bloody face fly straight into the wall. I looked over and saw Xarjun return to us. "Damnit Gruzz, you're going to get yourself killed!" He held his mace close to his chest and

prayed quietly. Gruzz, as he panted, stared at Xarjun, but made no effort to resist the healing word despite his earlier convictions against it. Xarjun whispered another prayer, then passed a protective aura onto Gruzz by touching him with his shield. I glanced at the human just in time to see Pae freeze his head against the stable door. I looked back at the elf, who stared back with bloodshot eyes and clenched teeth. I wasn't sure if he was angry or scared.

The elf went back into his wide battle stance, but his legs were shaking. Gruzz swung his hammer; the elf sidestepped it and stabbed at Gruzz's chest. The sword poked into a gap in the armor, but there was a flash as the cleric-granted aura disappeared, and the sword popped out. The elf was baffled, then yelped in surprise as I slashed his side while stepping around him. With one last swing, Gruzz sent the elf's head flying off his body.

The fight went much quicker after that. After several more kobolds were killed, only one was left. He was able to scratch Xarjun's leg once. After that, he was blocking Xarjun's swings and Pae's ice bolts with all his might as he desperately backed away from the door. Two more kobolds ran in, took one look at the blood soaked room filled with their dead friends, and froze in fear. Xarjun backed away from the kobold he was fighting, who went back to his friends. Gruzz stepped forward. "Well scabies, you think you can take us on?! Huh?!"

All three of them dropped their javelins and shields and raised their arms high. "Please don't hurt us!" They said.

We made them cower against the wall. "Now tell us what the hell is going on!" Gruzz commanded.

One of the kobolds said, "Master summon monster. Big monster. Scary monster."

"Where?!" Gruzz shouted.

The kobold pointed at the door. "In basement."

"Let's go!" Gruzz shouted, before bounding through the door.

Xarjun said to the kobolds, "Now you, get the hell out of here, and don't let us see your faces again!" The kobolds sheepishly nodded, then ran out the front door. Once the last one left, Xarjun looked at Pae and I. All three of us nodded, then we ran in after Gruzz.

There was no time to check the details in this dark room. The rumbling was growing more powerful, and we noticed a ghastly red light shining from under the floorboards. We heard Gruzz shout, "I found a trapdoor!" He was in the corner of the room, looking down at the floor. We ran towards him just as he bashed the

trapdoor in. "Let's go!" He shouted. As he took a step towards it, the shaking went from minor to extremely violent.

"Fuck!" I shouted as I was thrown way off balance. I caught myself on a desk. Sawdust fell from the ceiling, objects were falling over, and cracks were forming in the walls. I heard shouting from Xarjun and Gruzz, but could barely understand it. Coughing from the sawdust, I went with my instincts and tried hiding under the desk. Before I could get in, Xarjun suddenly grabbed my arm.

"Come on, let's go!" He practically threw me towards an open door that led to the outside. Gruzz and Pae were already running out it, and so I ran too. Xarjun was the last to get out, just as with one final bang, the building collapsed in on itself. A wave of sawdust struck us. I squeezed my eyes shut and coughed up a storm.

"Damn it, what the hell!" I shouted. There were shouts from the others as I tried to get a grip; easier said than done when I was effectively blind and suffocating. Eventually, I managed to rub the sawdust out of my eyes and wave the rest of it from my face. Through the dust cloud, I saw that the others were still near me. They were mostly recovered from the blast of dust.

"This is some bullshit!" Gruzz said. "They musta failed their ritual!"

"No..." Pae said, before hoarsely coughing.

"No"? What do you mean?!" Gruzz shouted. Pae tried to answer, but wasn't able to get her coughing under control. "I said what do you mean?! Tell me damnit!"

Xarjun said, "Gruzz-"

Pae interrupted. "The summoning-" She coughed a couple more times. "-succeeded..." She took a deep breath. "I remember what my teachers told me. A void to another realm, if not opened carefully enough, will cause a massive shockwave due to rapid pressure changes." We all looked at her, as she stared back at the building that was.

The rest of the dust cleared away, and I was able to see our surroundings. We were standing in a pavilion where three roads met. The building we just escaped from was nothing more than a massive pile of firewood. A liquid of some sort slipped out through a series of tiny spaces between the wooden debris. It was crimson-colored. The liquid poured onto the ground, but it didn't form a puddle. Every drop of it kept together in what I could only describe as a massive ball of red slime. It slid onto the pavilion and stopped in front of us. I felt my heart leap up through my chest when I realized how huge it was. While it didn't go up past my knees, its body spread out in a 10 or 15 foot diameter, big enough to envelope a horse. To my horror, I saw another crimson slime slip out from the rubble and stop next to its brother. As I looked longer at the creatures, I realized there was something in them. Multiple things, actually. It was difficult to see them since

their bodies were mostly opaque, but by squinting hard, I saw various gold coins, jewels, weapons, and... a couple kobold bodies.

"What the hell are these things?!" Xarjun said.

"They... look similar to Ochre Jellies." Pae said. "But I've never read about red-colored jellies."

Suddenly, the jellies started inching towards us. "Look out, they're coming!" Gruzz said.

I heard Xarjun quietly say, "Kord, may her wounds be healed." A light shone on me, and I felt the pain in my stomach disappear. Xarjun stepped in front of me with his mace at the ready. "We'd best be in top fighting condition for this. For the good of Noam, we cannot let these creatures escape!" I nodded at him. We charged straight for the jellies, and the jellies charged at us!

Gruzz confronted the rightmost jelly and swung his hammer. The jelly backed away in the nick of time, the hammer only scraping off a small amount of its body. Gruzz swung again, and again, and again, but didn't attain a direct blow. Then, as he hesitated for just one instant, the jelly struck; jetting itself forward, it punched its body into the right side of his waist. Gruzz screamed as he was forced back; there was a sizzling sound, and the smell of burnt flesh rose in the air. Xarjun and I kept our distance and desperately tried to assist him with a blast of ice breath that also struck the other jelly, and myself with a thrown dagger. The dagger pierced it, and both it and its sibling were covered in ice, but neither of them slowed. The right slime rammed itself into Gruzz again, this time hitting his face. Gruzz let out an intense cry as he covered his face.

Suddenly, I noticed light shining from behind me. I glanced backwards and saw that Pae's orb was glowing, and she held it up while looking into it, as if in a deep thought. She looked up at the jellies, not with a fearful face as she usually had during battle, but instead with a great intensity. "This is going to be hard on my mind." She said. "Force Orb!" She lifted her orb up, then made a powerful throwing motion. A copy of the orb was launched forward toward the left jelly, burying itself into the jelly's body on impact. For a moment, we saw a bright glow from inside the jelly, and then it exploded from the inside, sending shards that sliced the hell out of the other jelly before it could attack Gruzz again. The left jelly had a great hole in it, and the other had crumpled. "I'm not through! Flaming Sphere!" She shouted as she pointed her orb at the jellies. Her teeth gritted and her eyes twitched from intense concentration. A large vein popped out of her forehead as a red glow formed between both jellies. There was another explosion as a great ball of fire formed between both jellies. They emerged from the blast with their bodies blackened.

The jellies quickly moved away from the fire ball; the left one stayed near Gruzz, while the other went for Xarjun. "Shit!" He shouted as he raised his shield. It punched at him once, he blocked it but was thrown backwards. It oozed forward and punched at him a second time, but he jumped away, and the jelly hit the ground instead.

Pae commanded the fire sphere to roll towards the right jelly, but it crawled out of the ball's path, and was only singed by its flames. Gruzz, clearly in too much pain to think, was swinging his hammer wildly at it. His

blows were shallow, and the jelly was only being slowed down. I threw another knife at it, harder this time. The blade pierced deeply into its body, and it became still. Xarjun said, "Gruzz has a chance to stop it, but he needs help!" He jumped away from the other jelly as it rushed down at him. As it slammed into the ground, he placed his mace against his amulet, which began to glow intensely. Waves of energy shot out from him, creating enough force to make the frills on his head fly as if in a wind storm. The jelly was approaching him fast, so I knew I needed to play distraction. I ran behind it and slashed it, but my blade failed to break into its body. It came after me. I backed away as it stretched several tendrils of itself toward me, which I desperately batted away with my daggers. In this near-death experience, I heard Xarjun's powerful prayer: "Oh Kord, lord of battle and the storm, hear the oath. I will not back down, no matter the odds. Whether its a hundred men against me, or a titan crashing onto the shore. The weapon in my hand; or the knuckles on my fist; or the fingers on my hands; or the teeth in my mouth; everything I own and all that I am capable of will be used by me, in battle, until my last breath!"

A bright light shone out, and as before when we fought the ravens and when we fought Prize, I felt a comforting warmth wrap around me. The jelly itself stopped in place, and for a moment I smirked, assuming it was scared. It suddenly lunged forward and slammed into my right arm. I was badly thrown off balance, and I stumbled back with a terrible aching pain. I heard a sizzling sound, and looked down at my arm. Some of the jelly's ooze had gotten on me. Though it was a liquid, it acted like a terrible fire that incinerated straight through my coat and melted my leather armor. Just a moment after I looked at it, the ooze touched my arm, and a terrible pain set in. I screamed. My arm was burning away!

I tried to remind myself of the speech, I tried to tell myself that we were in Kord's good hands, but it was just so painful. As I screamed in pain, I could only back away from the approaching slime. Suddenly, a yellow light glowed around my arm, and my burns disappeared. "You can do it!" Xarjun shouted. "I know you can slash it to pieces!" That was just what I needed. I held my right dagger towards the slime and charged at it. It stretched a massive tendril from its body and slammed it towards me, but I stepped to the side as I made an upward slash. My little dagger created a massive cut in it; half of its body was only hanging by a thread to its other body. The thread snapped, and the slime fell to the floor in two halves. Suddenly, both halves started squirming! One went right towards me and bashed into my other arm!

"Oh shit!" I shouted a second before the pain sent me to my knees. In my haze of pain, I saw the other half charge towards Pae, who was looking towards her flaming sphere as it charged at the other jelly. She glanced at it, and I saw her intense look turn to fear.

"No! Kord, let Rosa's aim be true!" Xarjun shouted. He leapt forward and slammed his mace into it. A blinding light burst out of the area where the slime was hit, a moment before it slammed itself into Xarjun. I stared at the jelly. Despite the pain making my vision hazy, I swear I could see a white symbol glow in the center of it. A target.

I rose to my feet and stumbled towards the slime attacking Xarjun. Its other half lunged towards me. "Cloud of daggers!" I heard Pae shout, before a storm of shards appeared and cut through that chunk of jelly, causing it to slide away in a panic. I barely paid attention to that; my focus was on the target in the half ahead of me. As I got close, the jelly relented in its attempts at swallowing Xarjun, and instead went for me. It extended another large tendril and tried crushing me. It never learned. I had no energy to avoid it, so I took the slam

head on. Wielding my left dagger deftly, I made a wide upward swing that went deep into the tendril. The jelly was split nearly in half once more, and each half fell around me.

It began to ripple, but I was hardly surprised, nor did I care; the target in the jelly was so close to me. I raised both of my knives up and brought them together. "Go back straight to the depths of hell! YAH!" I shouted before plunging both knives deep into the target. The jelly seized up, and for a moment my confidence gave way to fear. I thought, what if that wasn't enough? Then, the whole thing went limp, and it started melting into a crimson puddle. I looked up at the remaining slimes. There was no time to celebrate. The other jelly that Gruzz was fighting had also split into two. Though both jellies were burnt to a crisp at that point, they were attacking at full force, and Gruzz looked barely able to stand. The remaining half of the jelly that Xarjun and I were fighting had turned its attention to Xarjun and was bashing itself against his shield. He looked badly burnt himself. His whole coat had melted away, pieces of his armor were hanging off his body, and I could see terrible burns all over him. Suddenly, Xarjun backed away from a slam that would have otherwise crushed him, and then he slammed his mace into the jelly as he shouted a prayer. There was another flash of light, and the same target from before appeared in the jelly. I gave an intense look that belied the feelings of pain and fear that coursed through me. I knew what I had to do.

I broke out into a run towards the marked beast, as Pae retreated from it and fired a frost bolt at it. The bolt hit it dead-center and formed a large ice chunk that weighed it down. It flailed at me as I drew near, but I parried each whip of its body with my dagger, until finally I drew close enough to stab deep into the target. I finished the attack with a brutal slash. The slime flopped to the ground and began to melt. Xarjun, Pae, and I stared at the fallen ooze for a moment. "The way Kord guides your knife deep into them, it made me realize..." We suddenly looked back at Gruzz. He stood tall against the remaining two slimes, but something was wrong. He was completely still. After a second, I noticed a lot of steam coming from his body. He dropped to his knees and fell onto his side. The slimes hungrily approached Gruzz.

Xarjun charged straight at the closest slime as it lunged toward Gruzz. "You won't consume another soul, now that I understand your weakness!" Xarjun shouted. "You can shrug off surface hits all you like, but you can never handle a strike into your direct center!" He slammed his mace directly under the slime's massive tendril; the weapon broke through its whole body, sending a wave of ooze splashing across the pavilion. The rest of the slime dropped to the floor and started melting; the final slime carelessly trampled over its friend and swung itself at Xarjun, but he ducked under it.

"One more slime..." I said. "Let's do this!" I ran towards the other end of the slime. Xarjun kept swinging, but the slime was constantly moving, rippling, and shooting itself out at him. He couldn't even land a decent hit on it, let alone strike its center. Suddenly, Pae sent the fire ball hurtling towards the slime. It leapt out of the way, only getting grazed by the fire, and it started shuffling forward as if all it cared about was getting away from the heat. Alas, I realized a moment too late that it was heading towards me! It stretched a tendril toward me; I slashed it, but the blade failed to pierce its body. I took a good smack to the face. A deep horror ran through me as I stumbled back.

I felt the burning. Oh god, the burning. I shudder to even think of the pain I felt as the ooze ate away at my face. I felt my ear and my lips start to melt, and I went into shock. The ooze then seeped into my eye, and... that part is best left to the imagination. I dropped to the floor, the pain too great for me to even think. My one

good eye looked up into the cloudy sky... the ooze monster leaned over me, its horrible crimson enveloping the sky's calm grey as it tried to envelope me. Then, I heard rapid footsteps, and the sound of metal smashing into goo. "Return to the hell from which you came!" I heard Xarjun shout. I tilted my head, and there he was, that good old dragon cleric was whaling away at the ooze. It lunged at him, he raised his shield, and it bashed him back. Then, the ooze wrapped around his arm. Xarjun let out a yell as he winded his mace back as far as he could. "Kord, hear my words! I beg for the storm to turn in my favor!" He screamed out. Suddenly, thousands of blue sparks surrounded his amulet, then traveled up his body and onto his arm. Xarjun laughed. "You never stood a chance, ooze, because Kord smiles upon me! DIE!!!" He slammed his mace straight into the slime. There was a loud thunderclap that deafened me as a bright flash of light blinded me. I shut my eye and rolled my head back.

For what felt like forever, all I could see was white, and all I could hear was buzzing. Unable to tell what was going on, not even whether we were safe or not, I was overcome with fear in that moment of complete vulnerability. Then, the bright white faded to black, and the buzzing softened to a whisper. Instead, I heard burning. I brought myself to open my eye and turn my head back towards Xarjun and the jelly. I saw him standing there, panting, as he looked into Pae's fire orb. I focused my eye on it, and saw the black silhouette of the jelly engulfed in it. Its writhing, rippling movement had stopped; all it did was shrink as the fire consumed it. Xarjun just stared at it until it was finally reduced to nothing. With a loud clap, the fire orb disappeared, and its flames dispersed into the cold air. Xarjun looked towards Pae, who ran towards him. I was still in too much pain to celebrate. With the danger finally gone, there was nothing to make me ignore my pain, and I felt it soar to unimaginable heights. Before I passed out, I saw Xarjun and Pae look towards me. Pae covered her mouth with both hands, while Xarjun gave a look of concern.

The next thing I knew, Xarjun was kneeling beside me. I had woken up just in time to see the light from his healing word fade away from my face. I blinked. Both eyes felt good as new! And the horrible pain in my face had gone away entirely. All that I felt was a slight stiffness. Xarjun smiled for a moment when he saw my open eyes. "Good, you're alright."

I started to respond, but at that moment I realized my heart was pounding hard. It was practically leaping out of my throat, to the point that I could hardly speak without choking. "Th-thank you--" I mumbled as I placed my hand on his arm.

His smile quickly dropped as he went back to business. "My healing word only took care of your face. I'll need to bandage the wounds on your arms myself." He gently took my arm as he pulled out a waterskin. My arm wasn't in the best condition. It had a terrible burn on top of it. The wound was about as wide as my palm. The sleeve that covered that area of my arm had been reduced to tatters, which hung down around the end of my now shortened sleeve. The armor around that portion of my arm had melted off entirely. Xarjun poured a little water on the burn, creating a stinging sensation that made me wince, then he carefully wrapped and tightened a cloth around the wound. He moved to my other side, and as he worked on my other arm I slowly forced myself to sit up. Xarjun didn't pay any mind to this, and kept silently working as I looked around. Pae and Gruzz were close to us. Pae was just standing still, arms huddled together as she slowly looked back and forth. Her brows were furrowed, she winced occasionally, and other times she rubbed her temples. Gruzz sat all hunched over on the ground, chin resting in his hands. He looked surprisingly different. Much of his armor and the clothes under it had been torn off, exposing bandaged skin. A big patch of his face was a duller color

and had this leathery look to it. For the first time, I saw a face on him that was neither angry nor aggressively stoic. He looked terribly bummed, and looked deep in thought as he stared down at the ground.

I then looked around the pavilion. It was a mess. Giant red puddles were everywhere, and the various coins, jewels, and bodies that the jellies held now lay on top of these puddles. I was frankly disgusted to see what remained of the bodies after spending so long in that inexplicably burning substance, so I looked at Xarjun. I watched him work on my arm for several moments, and noticed that he was still covered in burns. "Why aren't you using healing word on yourself?" I asked him.

"The power I borrow from Kord is limited, and takes a good while to recharge, and rightly so. We cannot grow into better warriors if we always have a helping hand." Xarjun said without looking up from his work.

I felt, and still feel, that it was wrong that Kord didn't give his help all the time. We had become reliant on his powers, yet the amount we were allowed was often hardly enough to get us through our struggles. Yet, the conviction in Xarjun's voice kept me quiet, and I didn't know of a good counterpoint against his argument. After a moment, I asked, "How's Gruzz doing?"

"He had it worse than you." Xarjun said.

Gruzz sighed, then slowly stood up. He walked forward several steps, towards where his hammer was lying on the ground. As he bended over to pick it up, Pae asked, "What are you doing?"

Gruzz didn't respond. He slowly stood up, with hammer in both hands. Suddenly, he turned around, a look of wild death in his eyes as he gnashed his teeth. "MY BEARD!!" At that moment, I noticed that his face, which was once adorned with a thick but short beard, was now entirely bare. "FUCK THESE BASTARDS!!! THIS IS THE LAST STRAW!!! I'LL PLUCK EM OUT OF THERE AND SHOW EM--!!!" His shouts became unintelligible, and he dashed straight for the rubble.

Xarjun stood up, "GRUZZ!!" His words were ignored. Gruzz jumped into the rubble pile and began whaling away at the debris.

Xarjun bolted toward Gruzz, while I brought myself to stand up. He stopped just outside the field of wood and shouted, "Gruzz, listen to me! Listen to me!" Gruzz didn't hear him over the loud sounds of wood smashing and fracturing. "Gruzz! Gruzz! Listen to me, it's dangerous there! You'll-" Suddenly, with a loud snap, Gruzz quickly sunk below the wood pile. We heard a thud. "Damnit Gruzz!" Xarjun said as he threw off his pack and rummaged in it. "Where's that damn torch thing..."

Pae ran to him. "Don't worry, I've got this!" She waved her orb for a moment, then a bright orb of light appeared on his mace. "Use this!"

Xarjun nodded at her, then pulled out his mace and trudged through the debris field. Pae and I followed behind him. We got to the hole Gruzz fell in, and Xarjun shined his light in it. There was Gruzz, deep in some small section of the basement that somehow remained intact. He was writhing on the ground, clutching his right forearm. "Ah, shit." Xarjun said. "Good thing I brought rope with me. Le-" There was a crack, and suddenly the floor under Xarjun gave way.

"Xarjun!" Pae and I shouted, as with a yell he too sunk into the ground.

His back hit a debris pile down there, and he slid down next to Gruzz. Xarjun took a moment to recuperate, then got up. He looked up at us and gave a thumbs up, then looked down at Gruzz. "Gruzz, get up. We need to get you out of here."

"Why does it have to be this way, huh?!" Gruzz said. "Everything my father taught me, what has it led to?! First I'm defeated by some ravens, and then by some jellies! Some fucking jellies! And now, my beard, all that was left of my dignity, it's all completely gone!"

"Your beard?" Xarjun asked.

"Yes, my damn beard!"

Xarjun shook his head. "We've all been going through rough times, Gruzz. It hurts now, but know these wise words that Gorior, one of the last paladins of the Frozt Dragonborn, had said: 'As long as I can stand on my own two feet and walk onwards, I still have hope.'"

Gruzz stopped freaking out. He looked up at Xarjun.

Xarjun extended his hand down to Gruzz. "Now try to stand up and walk. Prove to yourself that there's still hope." Gruzz just kept looking at Xarjun for a moment. His forlorn face turned back into the aggressive stoicism that we expected from him. He grabbed Xarjun's hand and pulled himself up. "Good. Now, I should look at your arm." Xarjun said.

Gruzz let go of Xarjun's hand and pulled his arm back. "Nothing's broken. It'll be fine." He said curtly.

Xarjun smiled for a moment. "Alright. Let's get out of here before the roof collapses on us." He started to turn around, but something caught his eye. He turned off to the right and held his shining mace towards something.

"What is it?" Gruzz asked, before looking at what interested Xarjun.

"What is it?" I asked.

"There's a mural down here." Xarjun said. I stepped around the hole with great care and craned my neck to get a look at it. It consisted entirely of red painted lines, which shaped out a complex image. In the center was the human and the masked elf. They appeared to be lying on the ground, in painfully contorted postures. Crowding around them was a great jumbled mess of images. They were being crowded by weapons, the town guard's helmets, fractured buildings, pouches full of white powder, and jeering faces. I even noticed a few graves among the crowd. Tightly encircling the mess was a thick line of pouches that were overflowing with coins. Several giant hands reaching from the outside were pushing the money towards the mess, while many hands emerging from the mess were pulling them inwards. It almost looked like the human and elf were to be sacrificed upon an altar of, well, whatever all those objects were supposed to mean. "...I wonder what the hell these people were trying to do." Xarjun said.

I said, "You'd better get out of there before you start thinking about that."

Gruzz suddenly looked off in the direction opposite from the mural. "Did you hear that?" He said.

Xarjun looked at Gruzz, then in the same direction he was looking at. "No, what is it?" He asked.

"Listen." Gruzz said. Pae and I kneeled by the hole and curiously peeked into it. We were barely able to see a pile of debris just feet away from Xarjun and Gruzz.

Then, I heard it. "...help..." It was coming from inside the rubble. Gruzz stomped toward it and bashed a large beam with its hammer, which sent it flying out of his way. Several smaller plank fragments were knocked off the pile in the process, allowing us to get a good glimpse of the human cultist's frosty face as he lay trapped in the debris. "...help..." He reached toward Gruzz and grabbed his leg. "...Beezle... they found us... please save us..." Crack! Gruzz smashed his head with the hammer, dislodging more debris and causing a small avalanche. When it ended, only the human's hand could be seen sticking out of the pile.

"Asshole." Gruzz said.

"Gruzz, didn't you realize what he was saying?" Xarjun asked.

"Does it matter?"

"He thought you were Mr. Beezle, Gruzz. And it sounded like they've been working together." We all went silent from the realization.

Our discussion didn't get back on track until after Gruzz and Xarjun climbed out of there. "So wait." I said. "Does that mean Neslin... WAS the associate meeting these guys?"

"He's involved, at the very least." Xarjun said. "But why the hell would he want to summon a couple aberrants to Noam?"

Pae said, "I don't know, but if he's involved, I think he'll be mad to find out we ruined his plan."

We went silent again. Waves of utter disbelief and panic flowed through me. All we had to do was help Beezle with his problems, and he'd get us out of our enslavement, but we couldn't even do that right. I was so mad, but I was too tired to do much about it. I breathed in, then out, before saying, "Shit."

"The hell do we do now?" Gruzz asked.

"The only thing we can do is talk to him." Xarjun said.

"We're really going to go admit our crime to him?" I said. "Let's leave now, before we get caught."

Xarjun said, "No, that is utter cowardice. We must confront him on this before he does it again. Perhaps we can convince him to stop, perhaps we'll have to kill him; any outcome is better than backing down once more."

"We can't kill him, he's our only chance at freedom." I said.

"We may not have to, Rosa." Xarjun said. "I will only consider it if he insists on putting Noam and its people at risk."

"Even then, I doubt he'll continue to help us after we ruined his plan."

"Good. I will only be his pawn if I agree with his actions." Xarjun said. "Now if any of you want to keep being loyal to him, be my guest. Just don't get in my way when I go confront him."

Pae stepped between us and said, "That's enough, that's enough... I think it's best for us to go back to the castle for now. We don't have to decide what to do now, we should have plenty of time to think before we get the chance to talk to Mr. Beezle again."

There was no arguing against that point. All we were doing was dilly-dallying, and leaving ourselves exposed to attack from any friends this cult could've had. We went and trudged through the red puddles on our way

out of the pavilion. As we moved, we couldn't help but look at the many items that lay around. Much of them were too dissolved to be of any use; the gold and silver were practically fused to the ground at this point. However, we did see a few things that had survived being swallowed. I saw a hand crossbow with yellow streaks painted into its body, and it was surrounded with a faint aura. Curiosity led me to stop for a moment in order to stuff it in my coat. Pae and Gruzz also couldn't help themselves; Pae took an orb that held swirling dark colors, and Gruzz took a pair of large thick gloves that had a complex dwarven design stitched on the backs, and the palms were covered in black dots that shimmered with the same aura as my hand crossbow.

As we exited the pavilion, we heard a voice that made us stop in our tracks. "So, you figured it out." We saw someone step out from behind a building in front of us. It was a dwarf about Mr. Beezle's height, who wore matching clothes and a slightly longer hairstyle. I would have thought they were Mr. Beezle himself if it wasn't for their lack of a beard and their distinctly female voice. "You should talk to Mr. Beezle about this." She said. "Understand his side before you jump to conclusions."

"Who the hell are you?" I said.

"I'm just a messenger." She said.

"Won't Mr. Beezle be mad that we destroyed his monsters?" Pae asked.

"Not at all." She said. "This was only a test of Noam's defenses. If you were able to defeat those jellies, it wouldn't have taken long for the guards to do the same. He will be happy to know that you helped. In fact, as a show of gratitude, I won't ask you to return those magic items you stole. Consider them payment for test participation."

There was a pause. Xarjun said, "We-"

"However, we can't let you go just yet. As I said before, you need to talk to Mr. Beezle about this. You must know everything now that you've gotten a good glimpse at the Company's deepest secrets." Suddenly, a big group of Beezle guards swarmed out from the alleyways and surrounded us.

"No choice, huh." Xarjun said. He looked at Gruzz, who was growling as he reached for his hammer. "Gruzz, I know you want to prove that you're not the type of person to be pushed around, but we need to meet with Mr. Beezle. At least he's giving us a chance to talk it out."

Gruzz sighed and lowered his hand. "Fine, but know that there's only so much of this I can take before I snap."

"Don't do anything stupid." Xarjun said, before the guards led us off into the alleyway.

We went on a long walk through Noam's back streets. By the time we reached the back of the Arcziga View Tower, the sun had begun to set, casting the city in a faint orange light. After a long walk up the tower, we were taken through a small hallway and towards an unmarked door. We entered it, and found ourselves in a small, unassuming, and dark room that had only a wooden desk and a few chairs in it. The only source of light was a torch on the left wall, and the light from this torch was so inadequate that it barely enveloped the table. There was a door at the other end of the room. Sitting at the opposite end of the table was Mr. Beezle. He gestured to us, and we sat down. Most of the guards left, and the remaining four stood all around us.

"Please tell me, what did you see at the Smithshop?" He asked. "You're not in trouble. I just want to know how much you know."

The four of us shared a deep sense of reluctance. I could tell because, for a moment, we all just sat tight-lipped and looked at each other. Yet, as I looked at Mr. Beezle, I felt that he was being genuine. He did not look mad, just concerned. Perhaps this concern was mostly for himself, yet he really did seem to care about what we felt about the incident. Xarjun piped up before I could, and he recounted the entire incident with no sugarcoating. He made it clear that we were solely involved in the destruction of the jellies, and we had done it not because Fulcewind ordered us to, but because we wanted to stop the jellies from hurting anyone else. He finally ended his story with, "Mr. Beezle, I have to ask you, what brings you to summon aberrations to this city? Every attempt at summoning puts this entire plane at risk."

"This was just one of many plans to take the royalty out of the picture." Mr. Beezle said. "That is what I brought you here to talk about. Many projects for this purpose have been undertaken in hidden rooms all over Noam, each being handled by a different subordinate of mine since we cannot agree on any single method for removing the crown's power."

"Was the summoning your idea?" Xarjun asked.

Mr. Beezle shook his head. "I don't agree with it, either. I believe it is destructive, and too risky."

"So why did you allow them to go through with it?" Xarjun snapped.

"The associate of mine in charge of this project claimed that the monsters her contracted workers were summoning were easy to control. I believed her word, until I was informed otherwise by an expert in the Extra-Planar field. To be frank, I wasn't happy with her. So I ordered her and a team of guards to go there and stop the summoning, but it sounds like they had gotten there too late. I'm glad you were there to stop the aberrants."

Xarjun relaxed. "So this was all a big misunderstanding."

"Yes. I have no intention of putting the city in danger."

The tension in the room lessened after that. We got to informing Mr. Beezle about everything we were able to gather while we were in the castle, including Fulcewind's suspicion of the Smithshop and how her spies were tailing Beezle's associate. Once we were done, he let us go, and we found ourselves back in Noam's streets. It had become completely dark by this point, so we didn't delay in heading back to the castle. We made it to the castle's back gate. As we approached the gate's guards, one of them said, "Finally, you showed up. Fulcewind was starting to panic."

"Did she think we had run away?" I asked.

"Yes." The guard said. "Come on, we need to bring you to her." We were rushed to her chamber. When we got there, we saw her pacing in front of the window. She looked quite frazzled. Her hair was sticking out, her pupils had shrunk, and dark circles were beginning to form under her eyes.

"Where were you?!" She asked.

"It was a most extraordinary series of events." Xarjun said as we walked in.

"I know for certain that it was." She said. "The town guard had found the Smithshop completely destroyed, and there were these giant puddles of blood in the pavilion behind it."

"It was ooze, actually." I said.

"Ooze?!"

"Yes. Let me explain. When we arrived at the shop, we found that they were summoning these red jelly creatures in their basement. We tried to stop the ritual, but we were too late, and so we had to fight those jellies. When we were done with them, they had been reduced into those red puddles."

Fulcewind was befuddled. "What the hell are the Beezles doing...?"

"Well, we don't think the whole company was involved in the scheme. It just looked to be the doing of that one associate." I said.

Fulcewind gave me a suspicious look that made my heart skip a beat. "How do you know that?" She asked.

"W-well," I said.

"The associate just happened to come to the Smithshop when we finished off the jellies." Gruzz said.

"No doubt that she wanted to see how the summoning was going." Xarjun said.

"When she saw us, she flew into a panic." Pae said. "For a moment, she thought Gruzz was the owner of the Beezle company, and she started begging him for forgiveness."

I regained my composure and said, "Yeah, couldn't have said it better myself. Xarjun was helping me recover from some painful injuries, so I didn't get to see everything that happened."

"What happened after she saw you?" Fulcewind asked with one brow raised.

I said, "She ran off, and we chased after her. We put up a good chase for a while, but in the end she gave us the slip. We searched around for an hour or two, but no dice. That's why we were gone for so long."

"I see." Fulcewind said. "Next time you lose a target, immediately come to me about it so I can send a search party after them. Hopefully it's not too late to find that associate. Anyway, I have something of great importance to tell you. We need to move focus away from the city's corruption, because a matter far more serious has popped up. There is a long abandoned building that had been formerly used as an indoor market. A few hours ago, I got a report that a rift has opened up inside of it. Nobody knows where it leads to, but the sightings of several monsters inside the building has led us to believe that it leads to a plane full of creatures like them. Tomorrow night, you will be going with several Planar Arcanists to the building. Your mission is to protect them while they close up the rift."

I wanted to ask her why the hell she was making this our jobs, but I held my tongue. We had to sit down, shut up, and do everything she asked. Such is the life of a slave.