

Ow.

Any time he ran for too long, that sharp pain in his back would return. Khae was covered with small marks and blemishes from his years in the forest, but this scar was different. It was dark pink and smooth as baby's skin, a sign that it was healed by magic and not medicine. It was fresh too, barely two weeks old. That dark pink color would never fade, his body permanently marred by that assassin's blade.

The tracks he was following were getting a little too fresh, so Khae took to the trees. He glided up the branches, careful to avoid the squirrel and bird nests. His small and wiry body made traveling through the forest's canopy easy, although doing it made him look like a devilish monkey. He knew the pace he went at wasn't the quietest, but he couldn't slow down. He had to catch up with them. He had to save Barold.

Khae had, without really trying, ended up being a bodyguard for a caravan heading East along the same road as him. He'd prevented some of the traveler's children from eating poisonous berries and they graciously insisted that he help them forage for additional food in exchange for some coin. It helped that Khae was also clearly a skilled hunter, if not fighter, and they had no bodyguard, a rare oversight for a caravan this close to the Frontier.

Unfortunately, it was on one of his hunting/foraging excursions that the caravan was raided. The bandits had loaded up one of the wagons with everybody's packs and a few boxes of provisions, as well as the chest that Khae traveled with.

He stopped atop the sturdy branches of a nearly hundred-year-old pine. He'd found them. There were three of them, huddled around a shoddy fire in the middle of a small clearing. A dwarf, a human, and a halfling, all clad in the black leather armor typical of rogues. Khae's jaw clenched at the sight of them.

Rogues. Again.

Khae wasn't raised to be a hateful person. Oberon had taught him to treat negative emotions like the wind: don't fight them and they'll pass by almost unnoticed. The scar on Khae's back was like a kite though, it pulled Khae with it whenever a gust of anger came over him. If it wasn't for his almost monastic upbringing, he could probably forgive himself for his knee-jerk hatred of rogues. It was two weeks ago that he was imprisoned in "The Tower of Midnight," the headquarters of the Roiland Rogues, led by the distinctly sadistic Mudd Roiland. Khae's crime? Trying to stop Mudd Roiland from hunting deer with magic missiles instead of arrows or bolts.

Even though they'd successfully pulled off a robbery, the rogues weren't heavily armed. Only a couple daggers between the dwarf and human, with a shortsword and shield beside the halfling. They were rifling through the stolen packs of the caravan travelers and discussing how best to get the chest open. Either they hadn't touched him yet or Barold had purposefully not revealed himself. That's all it would take though, a single touch, for that chest to be revealed as much more than a box. A single touch is how Barold trapped Indira after all. He was a mimic, a creature that disguised itself as tempting objects so it could trap prey with its adhesive skin.

Maybe our training is working.

Despite his hopes, Khae knew deep down that it was probably just dumb luck. Luck that was soon to run out. Indira, the fellow prisoner who'd led the escape from the Tower of Midnight, had barely managed to yank herself free and she had two decades of rogue training under her

many belts. There was no way these *amateurs* would survive Barold, but Khae wasn't so sure that Barold could survive them either.

The dwarf stood up and belched out "I'm taking a piss."

This is my chance.

Khae shuffled down the tree and crept his way through the shrubbery, considering the best way to handle the situation.

My poisons won't work on a dwarf, at least not fast enough. Strangling would be best for nonlethal, but it's risky. Maybe a dagger, instead?

Khae still wasn't trained enough with a dagger to ensure a silent kill, nor was he quite battle-hardened enough yet to stomach such viciousness in the first place. Especially not now, after he'd stared into the eyes of someone who lived that cruelty every day. They'd ducked into the injured and feverish halfling's room to avoid a patrol, but even half-dead Andrei the Assassin put up an intense fight.

The hard way was the only option. He positioned himself behind the dwarf, who'd propped himself against a tree and was slurring some words to a song Khae didn't know. He knew barely any songs actually, which only made Khae feel more like an outsider any time he stayed in a tavern or traveled with a caravan. It was like a whole other language everyone else spoke fluently and he only knew a few words of.

Khae pulled out his bow, flipped it around in his hands, and brought it down over the dwarf's head. He'd seen Indira use this move on one of the guards in the tower. He hoped he was doing it justice. She had moved with such purpose and confidence, that leather duster flowing with her movement like a bird's wings.

The bowstring caught on the dwarf's chunky neck and his mumbling turned into a quiet gurgling. The dwarf elbowed Khae in the stomach, but his drunkenness left his strikes lacking any real power. Khae propped his knee against the dwarf's back, pulling the bow more taut and getting himself out of elbow range. The dwarf struggled against the string, trying to snap it.

I beg you, Ehlonna, please let Oberon be right about this Giant Moose tendon.

His doubt was misplaced, as Oberon was always right. Giant Moose tendon indeed did make for the strongest bowstrings in the land, unbreakable by a drunk fool such as this. The dwarf's flailing slowed and his body slumped to the ground, unconscious. Khae shivered at the familiarity of being attacked from behind. With the blade still plunged in Khae's back, the assassin had leaned forward and hissed paranoid mutterings in his ear that Khae had long since forgotten. Sometimes in dreams he could almost hear them again and he feared that when he could hear those whispers again is when he would go mad himself.

One down, two to go.

The other rogues seemed to be unaware of their partner's extended absence. Khae would have to draw one of them into the darkness. He reached into himself, calling on his infernal magic. It was always uncomfortable connecting to his tiefling heritage, calling upon a people and a world Khae had no connection to.

Does Indira feel the same way?

She was the only other tiefling Khae had properly met, but he never got the chance to ask her anything about their shared heritage, about what tieflings were like as a people.

Why didn't she let them go with her?

He projected his energy into a simple sound, creating a "thud" about a dozen feet away. The human male perked up, "What was that?"

"Graven must have fallen over. That damn drunk," replied the halfling.

"I'll go get him."

The man sighed and slowly meandered towards the "source" of the noise. He was too tall to get a proper strangle-hold on, so Khae would have to switch tactics. He pulled one of his poison arrows from his quiver and notched it. The man walked further into the dark woods, calling out for Graven and cursing his drunken nature. Khae lined up the shot and took a deep breath. It was in these moments when his whole body was tensed in harmony with the bow that he felt closest to Oberon. That sagely druid had taught him how to hunt and it was a cruel trick of memory that Khae could almost feel his mentor's hand on his shoulder when he readied a shot. Everything he knew he owed to the old man's druidic teachings and Khae wanted to pay him back for that somehow, but every time he harmed someone he felt a little farther away from achieving that.

Forgive me, Oberon.

The string snapped forward and the arrow cut through the air, finding its mark. The small bundle Khae had replaced the arrowhead with exploded on a tree branch above the human's head, raining a small cloud of spores on him. He started coughing vigorously, his whole body swaying as his balance left him.

Fall down. Fall down. Fall down.

The man's willpower was impressive, as he managed to turn and stumble back into the clearing, finally collapsing at the base of the fire. The halfling and Khae both cursed, but for distinctly different reasons.

"Who's there?" the halfling shouted into the darkness.

She picked up her shortsword and shield, taking up a battle stance, while scanning the forest for movement. Khae let loose another arrow, but the halfling's shield caught it.

"There you are," she cackled. "Come out and play!"

Khae sighed. A month ago he would have just continued to fire arrows from the darkness, or even just run away, but that was before the tower. Before he was thrown in a cell by a blood-crazed and power-hungry monster. Before an assassin drove a dagger into his back. Before he'd met an honorable Dragonborn blacksmith, who held off a foe that he could never defeat just so the rest of them could escape. Khae pulled out the assassin's dual daggers, tipped with a poison even Khae had no cure for. He stepped into the clearing, his head bowed in prayer.

"Ah a tiefling, eh? I'm betting you're one of the local rogues, ain't yah? Well this is our loot so back off!"

"No."

"Excuse me?", she chuckled. "You think an imp like you can beat me? I'll have you know that I'm Sheall the Gorer and I'm-"

"You have something of mine," he interrupted, his eyes still to the ground.

"Well this is my loot now so b-"

She leapt forward in an attempted surprise attack. Her sword whistled as it sliced through nothing but air. Bewildered, Sheall whipped around, her eyes struggling to deal with

both the bright fire and the dark woods surrounding them. Khae now stood several feet to the left, his back up against a tree.

"You're fast, I'll give you that," she smirked.

There was a moment of rest, a second Khae gave to her so she could reassess her foe. Then the firewood popped, snapping the tension, and Sheall charged again, the fire giving light to the bloodlust in her eyes. Khae winced as he smashed his arm into her shield and their blades clashed.

"We don't have to do this. We don't have to fight," Khae half-heartedly pleaded.

"Oh yeah we do. You think I'm gonna let you live after you hurt my crew and came after my haul?"

She pulled her sword back and went for a side swipe, knicking Khae's cloak as he leapt back. She pushed on, slashing over and over, each strike sparking against Khae's blades.

Her skill's impressive. With that shield in the way, I can't get an opening. What do I do? What would Don do? What about Indira? Oberon?

Khae's distraction meant he wasn't paying attention to his position and Sheall took advantage of this. She brought her sword down for a finishing blow, accompanied by a ferocious "Yawp!" Time slowed as Khae realized he was surrounded on two sides by trees and on one side by the fire. There was only one way to go: into the flames.

Khae rolled into the fire and flung a burning log at Sheall, causing her to stumble. The flames licked at his feet but Khae felt no pain: a perk of being infernal. With Sheall's stance broken, Khae slide across the ground and twisted his dagger upward, slicing the leather strap she used to grip her shield. As Sheall leapt out of his range, Khae saw she wasn't smiling anymore.

"Damn tieflings. Always too clever for their own good."

She tossed the shield to the side and gripped her sword with two hands, a new look of determination on her face. This stance was much different than her previous one, a complete change to her style. Khae's eyes darted up and down her, trying to anticipate what her next move would be.

"Now you made me mad, kid. Not many folks live to make me mad twice."

Her back foot kicked her off the ground and a flurry of thrusts sparkled in the firelight. Khae circled the fire, his daggers flinging back and forth but he couldn't keep up this blocking forever.

She's so fast. Too fast. What do I do? Should I run, I can't give up I don't want to die.
Pain.

I'm back in the tower. I can feel the assassin breathing on my neck as the dagger violates my organs. Then the dagger's gone and there's blood everywhere. It's pouring from me, my life flowing from me like a mighty river. I miss the river. Oberon used to teach me druidic while we fished. I was happy then, maybe just as happy as I was with...

My parents' faces are a blur, but I do remember the feeling of my mother's arms and the sound of my father's booming

voice. What I remember most vividly though is father playing with a little mote of fire, twiddling it between his hands and tossing into...

The air was filled with smoke. I can't see anything. Mother's pulling me by my arm. It hurts. We run to the forest and she tells me to keep running, to never stop running, to never look back. I do look back though. I looked back and she was...

"Gone with the wind" was all the note said. Oberon had left again, but this time he didn't come back. I don't know if Oberon is dead or if he just abandoned me, but either way I was...

Alone again. So alone and so cold. I could feel my own blood pooling around me, like a warm bed. I desperately want to sleep. Just for a little bit. Just let me...

"Sleep well" was the last thing Myrk said to me. If only I hadn't gone to sleep, maybe Myrk would still be here. He doesn't deserve to be out there alone. He's so kind, almost as kind as...

Isra, she's pouring something down my throat. Out of the corner of my eye I can see...

Indira is out there somewhere, a wanderer just like me. Just like Oberon. Just like Myrk. Indira's blade pierced the assassin. Andrei's gaze looked past Indira and towards me. His face was pale and sweaty with sickness, but his eyes were aflame with madness and cruelty.

Then there was nothing, death extinguishing his violent fire. She did it. I'm not alone. I have them. Even Nemo and Don are patching up my wounds. Together we can escape. Maybe we can get out of here without killing anyone else.

Without killing...

Barold. They almost killed Barold.

Barold. The baby mimic who'd been trained by the assassin.

Barold. Who was weak and scared and alone. Just like me.

Barold. Who was so simple and pure in a complex world of manipulators.

BAROLD!

Khae's eyes flashed open. He was looking down at the sword. It'd merely grazed him. I was so sure that last thrust was going to kill me. How...?

He looked up. Sheall's eyes were wide with fear, but Khae couldn't see the rest of her face as it was wrapped with a slimy pink tongue. Their battle had brought them next to the wagon and Barold had grappled her before she could kill Khae. Once again, Barold had saved Khae's life. Sheall dropped her sword and raised her hands in surrender. Khae felt the sting of his new wound and the ache of his scar. A crimson wave of anger overcame him.

That tower took a piece of me. It took my innocence. No, my naivety. I've felt the fear of dying many times before, but in the tower I felt the cold indifference of death itself. Oberon was wrong. The world isn't basically good. Mudd Roiland made sure I realized that. So why shouldn't I take a piece of her? Take a piece of the world for myself? The universe has caused me nothing but pain, so why can't I inflict a little back?!

Barold croaked and Khae looked over. Barold's beady eyes weren't like that of a dog or a cat, and he didn't have a tail to wag or a head to tilt. Yet Khae could still read Barold more easily

than his own reflection. Barold was awaiting orders, so eager to please, to help. He was so... innocent. The kite's string snapped and Khae exhaled his tension.

"Just leave. Just go."

Sheall's eyes welled up with tears.

"Barold, let go."

Barold's tongue retreated, slinking back around Sheall's face and into his body, leaving a distinct slimy residue on her.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know it was alive. I wouldn't have taken it if I knew, I swear"

"I said leave. And pray that I... that we never see you again."

Sheall ran off towards the main road, stumbling over rocks and bumping into trees as she repeatedly looked back.

Doesn't she know better than to look back?

Khae pulled some beef jerky from his pack and tossed it to Barold, who caught it with his tongue, not unlike a frog. Khae, exhausted, plopped down on the wagon next to him and looked up at the moon. It was so pretty and full. Khae was reminded of a song Oberon had taught him. Apparently the Moon Elves sing it on nights like this. He absentmindedly started singing it quietly. Barold purred along, his gravelly rumbling pushing Khae to sing louder. When the song was over and Barold let out a very unmelodious croon, Khae laughed for the first time in years.

Khae liked having a family.