

In the concealed, underground passageways of Fenwater Abbey, Elil of House Efrix-Finchey rifled through stacks of parchments and letters she found laying on a table.

"The damned Hooded Spirits got me in to this," she swore angrily. Whispering to herself, Elil began picking through the papers, scanning the documents for names, dates, and locations. "I'm always the wretched little plaything of the Goddess. Always me. The one who miraculously walked out of the Fens alive and you - YOU, you, *you* - the one who got me into this mess, cousin, and you're now stone-dead, muck-deep Bullywug food-"

Tamrhook put a wary eye on Elil and, upon glancing at the suspicious dwarf, Elil lowered her voice to a mumbling growl. Tam scrunched her wide nose and squinted. "Aye. Elil. You gonna be okay?"

Elil shut up and bobbed her head up and down, as if to signal to the dwarf that she was done with the craziness. At least for the moment. "Elle. Call me Elle."

Tam's bushy eyebrows narrowed. "Hrumph. Is that what yer friends call ye?"

Elil nodded, still picking through the papers. "Some."

Tam fidgeted with her handaxe and shifted her weight to balance it between her two arms. "Well. I ain't your friend, Elil. Magicks and witchery ain't gonna erase these scars from your daggers an' bolts that I took from you last night."

Putting papers and parchments into distinct piles, Elil busily organized material finds from uninteresting information. Elil stopped, cocked her head sarcastically, red locks spilling across her shoulder. "If I apologized, or even explained, friend dwarf, would it matter?"

Tam shook her head and tucked in her chin. "Not likely."

Elil shrugged. "Very well. So call me Elil."

Siegride, Llewellyn, and Tolman were busy investigating a door at the far end of the room that had been reinforced and had a good lock. Gorbash waited nearby with his arms folded, waiting for the queue to throw his weight into the door. Élan stood watch at the opposing entrance, an arrow nocked in her drawstring.

"Dwarves are *not* battering rams, boy." Vongur lectured Gorbash from around his neck. "Runnin' headlong into locked doors isn't the way of a dwarven warrior, lad. It's the way of a goat!"

Gorbash sighed and folded his arms. "Moonpickle's gettin' away. Gotta do somethin'."

Vongur rolled his eyes. "Ach, youth. Listen. You'll out-live that girl by four lifetimes. Four! Just how fast and far can she run to outpace the longevity an' stubborn determination of a dwarf?"

Gorbash just gnashed his teeth.

Tam poked around the tables and tools and crates and measuring cups and mortars and pestles with her handaxe; she carved through a brick of the Black Lotus, cutting it in two. It was fresh. This lot hadn't dried yet. It had the consistency of a moist brownie and chunks of it fell to crumbs. Tam recalled watching the wild-eyed dreamer in the streets above in Rhackdalia, who only just days ago set himself on fire, his face smudged in the black soot of the Lotus. Then she looked upon the stacks of it - bricks upon bricks a meter high - packed for shipment. Disgusted, Tamrhook flung the halved brick across the room and returned the grip of her axe to her hand.

"The raw herb, the Lotus itself," Elil said aloud and maybe to Tamrhook or no one in particular, "is grown at the southern end of the island. This crop comes from Shyn-Levenson. These papers have dates, metrics, bounties in Crowns and favors. But most of all-", she said, holding up a single parchment, "they have names. Names are like debts. They'll help clear my family's name of this dishonor; shield them from House M'lahn."

"I'll hold on t'that," Tam said, snatching the parchment from Elil's hand. "I'll keep it safe."

Elil stood straight up and turned to face Tamrhook, boldly confronting the dwarf with her posture and body language. "I stupidly followed my cousin into this adventure and the Goddess has (in Her wisdom or Her humor, I don't know which) kept me from following her. Because of Sane's actions and my folly, only shame and despair is due my House. I've taken in your company to correct my wrongs. If you'll not take my apology then take pity on my intentions. Pride. Love of Family. Honor. Last I read, those ideas shouldn't be foreign to you, dwarf."

Tam's eyes glossed over somewhere between the words "shame" and "House". Tamrhook made a grunting noise and tucked the parchment away in her pack, then met Elil eye-to-eye. Tam saw the fight within Elil and witnessed the raw, sincere feelings of regret and fear. And when she spoke, Tamrhook's voice was as the echo of a deep cave. "When you *need* this, you will *have* it. Elil."

Backing down, Elil stepped away from the dwarf.

Tolman shook his head. "This will take me all day." Seigrade and Llewellyn turned to Gorbash, who was already shedding his weapons and getting ready to rush the door.

"Time t'be a goat!", he exclaimed. Vongur heaved a heavy sigh.