

CHAPTER TWO

"You bunch of useless fuck ups!" shouted the Mayor.

They had no chairs to speak of, so they sat on the ground, covered in scorchmarks and goblin blood, staring back at the former leader of the city, who had declared himself the leader of the cave, even though nobody had ever elected him. Truthfully, nobody else wanted the job.

He had the look of a man who used to be comfortably overweight, but due to circumstances had lost a lot of that weight due to lack of food. He paced back and forth in the cave he called his "office," behind a stone slab he called his "desk" in the tattered remnants of what he once called his "clothes." Most people in the cave who didn't wear leather like Mynti, Fidio, and Nixer had to make do with the clothes they had on their backs when they took refuge in the cave. Ledrith had an extradimensional pouch where she'd been keeping a few fresh sets of clothes for herself and Drue, but her magic had been able to keep their original set in good repair. Most people though didn't really trust her to do magic on the only set of clothes they had in the world, so even though she'd offered, nobody had let her mend them.

"First you," he pointed a furious finger at Fidio, "tried to help us grow some 'medicinal,'" he said in a sneering mocking voice, air-quoting, "mushroom crops, and got half the population of the cave as high as kites."

Fidio said quickly, "Well to be fair they do have some very recuperative properties and I did warn the others not to eat them too earl-"

"SHUT UP!" the Mayor snapped at him, and turned to Drue, again speaking in an angry mocking voice. "Then *your*... 'Concert' that was supposed to help calm people down and entertain them made three teenagers KILL THEMSELVES!"

Drue rolled his eyes, appearing bored. "They probably would have killed themselves anyway, that's not on me."

"BULLSHIT!" cried the Mayor. "I was *at* that concert and *I* wanted to kill myself just listening to you!"

Drue sighed and rubbed at one of his eyes. "Everybody's a critic."

The Mayor rounded on Nixer. "And YOU! I've had a lot of complaints about things going missing. I know it's you, and if you're EVER caught you'll be tossed outside with the ZOMBIES!"

"Leave him alone!" said Ledrith gripping the inky skinned bird-man's arm. "His people don't really have any kind of sense of personal property. It's difficult for him!"

The Mayor turned wide furious eyes on Ledrith, walking around his "desk" to come and face her, and though his manner became suddenly quiet, tension ran through his body like he was touching a live wire. He looked at her as if unable to speak for a moment, then said in a soft voice, "Difficult? You want to talk to me about... *DIFFICULT!?*" Spit flew from his mouth and Ledrith flinched looking both disgusted and nervous. "It seems like Every. Spell. You. Do." more spit flew from his mouth with each over-enunciated word he said through clenched teeth, "has some terrible unforeseen consequences," he finished with his jowls quivering.

Ledrith couldn't look him in the eye, but said in a quavering voice, "I *told* you, it's th-"

"AH!" barked the mayor holding up a finger between them.

"-the magic-"

"AH!" he barked again

“-field of th-”

“AH!”

“-the world a-”

“AH!”

“-after the moon fell,” she said in a rush sounding aggravated. She wiped at her face with her hand. “I’m figuring out how to adjust for the fluctuations, but-”

“But in the meantime,” he growled at her, “the toilets emptied into my wife’s wardrobe... cave. And now she only has ONE OUTFIT TO WEAR.”

“Just like everyone else,” muttered Mynti under her breath, but loud enough for him to hear.

He turned to her, with a manic, almost gleeful expression on his face. “And that brings us to today.”

She fixed him with a steely gaze. “They were stealing our food. We stopped them. How is that wrong? We’re freaking heroes!”

He smiled ironically at her and nodded, but his eyes were hard and he breathed heavily through his flared nostrils.

“They were taking what we agreed upon in...” his voice increased in volume as his face turned red, “...OUR...” he screamed the last word at full volume, “... TRUCE!”

Mynti’s eyes darted around the room and she bit her lip, looking a little sheepish. “Truce?” she asked in a small voice.

When the mayor spoke his voice was a little hoarse from the scream. “The one I mentioned in the last town hall meeting.” He stared bug-eyed at her, his lips pulled back from his teeth in a rictus grin.

Ledrieth gasped a little. “Oh,” She said in a quiet voice.

Mynti shot her a look. “You knew about this?”

“Well, you guys were distracting me with your arguing, and I missed part of it.” She shrugged.

They were quiet for a moment, then Drue said “I still say Silviana has the best hair in the cave.”

He hadn’t even gotten through the sentence when Mynti rolled her eyes and said over him, “Oh my gods, it’s Violeta, how can you-”

Nix chimed in “I like Rillia’s-”

And soon the three of them devolved into a verbal melee, until the mayor shouted, “SHUT! UP!” at them, quieting them instantly.

Drue muttered in a sing-song voice, “It’s Silvi-” but Mynri kicked him in the shins and he shut up.

The mayor closed his eye crossed his arms, pinching the bridge of his nose as he turned away from the group. “I’m honestly not sure what to do about you people. The goblin’s chief has asked that you be turned over to them, probably so they can eat you.”

They all shivered and looked disgusted at that, except Drue who just smiled and rolled his eyes.

“And normally I’d say we can’t afford to lose anybody, especially a mage. But with magic being so unreliable-”

"Actually I think I've got it worked out," said Ledrith in a rush. "The spells I tried in the mushroom cave wer-

But the mayor, without turning to face them, held up a finger for silence, and she trailed off.

"-you're actually almost *more* of a liability than you're worth. Which goes for all of you really. I've only mentioned the most recent problems you've had. I haven't talked about the so called remedies..."

"Those were sixty percent effective!" said Fidio. "And you can't prove they had anything to do with the deaths!"

"...The fights..."

"Training sessions!" said Mynti indignantly. "It's not my fault they were a bunch of pansies!"

"...the people who've complained about a shadow jumping out at them..."

Nix stammered in a small voice, "I-I wasn't t-trying to scare anybody, I just wanted to talk."

"...and the odd requests."

Drue sniffed. "I have..." he paused for dramatic effect. "...unusual appetites. I'm not going to apologize for that."

The mayor shook his head and sighed, sagging a little. He turned around, but didn't look at any of them directly. "The point is you're putting me in a terribly difficult situation. I have to think about the good of everyone in here. It's not like we can all just pick up and leave with all the undead roaming around, not to mention the Maelstrom."

He sat down on the flat rock that served as his chair and propped his head up on his hands, resting his elbows on his "desk." He dug his fingers into his thin hair. "But you lot are making it very difficult to figure out the best way to resolve this situation. There are a lot more goblins than there are of us, and *most of us* can't defend ourselves."

Mynti muttered, "Well maybe if I weren't training a bunch of limp-dick whiners with... no..." she looked up to see the mayor glaring at her from under his eyebrows, and trailed off.

He sighed. "I can't just hand you over to the goblins, and I can't just kick you out and leave you to your fate. So I don't know what to do with you. I mean what would YOU do if you were me?"

The five of them all looked at each other uncomfortably for a moment, then Drue said, "Beat us with whips and chains?" He tried, but couldn't keep a little smile from creeping onto his face.

They all looked at him with varying levels of incredulity.

Then Ledrith gasped a little and said, "Oh, *odd requests*. I get it now."

Mynti, Fidio, and Nix, realizing what she meant at the same moment, all said, "Ooohhh."

The mayor sighed and pounded his head on the desk for a few moments, when he looked up again they could all see a red spot forming on his forehead.

"I don't think a public flogging would be the best thing for morale right now," he said stiffly. He looked at Drue shaking his head and rolling his eyes. "For most of us anyway."

"Ugh," muttered Drue sniffing.

"The truth is I don't know how to deal with you fuck-ups," said the mayor. "You're becoming a liability. But if I don't think of something soon we're going to have problems. Like goblins-will-come-and-kill-us-in-our-sleep problems." He sighed deeply, as if trying to come to terms with an impossible situation, and they all just stared at him, not knowing what to say.

"The goblin chief has given us a few days to work something out. So you're safe... for now. I'm asking you to stay confined to your rooms until then. If you come up with any brilliant ideas other than the obvious, let me know." He crossed his arms and looked at them bitterly. "I could use a good laugh."

They walked back to the room they shared. Space in the cave was plentiful, and they'd had some basic supplies. Several trade carts had come in with their owners, including the one Mynti and Fidio had been on, and so the cave was subdivided into smaller rooms by frames made from the planks of their old cart, and some light airy fabric, too thin for clothes, that they'd been sent to sell. The other supplies had been distributed and used up over the last two years. They still had some burlap sacks they'd stuffed with straw to serve as pillows, and some fishing nets they'd been able to repurpose into hammocks. It wasn't comfortable, but it was the closest thing they'd had to a home.

Mynti looked close to tears. "I'm so sorry guys, it's all my fault."

Fidio went to her, shaking his head. "It absolutely is," He said in a teasing tone. "But... Let's be reasonable, we all went along with it." He put a comforting arm around her.

Nixer, standing where Mynti couldn't see him looked as though he were about to object that he hadn't wanted to kill the goblins, but Fidio shot him a look with his wide silver snake-like eyes and mouthed the words, "I will eat you!" at the bird-man, who subsided, then quietly stroked the gnome's scarlet hair.

"What do you think he's going to decide?" asked Ledrith in a querulous voice, as she sat on the floor, holding her burlap pillow.

"He's going to give us to the goblins," said Druenus from the other side of the gauzy curtain that separated his room from the rest of the cave. He sounded like he was rustling around looking for something.

"Oh come on Drue," said Ledrith. "How can you just..." she paused for a moment looking worried. "I mean... do you really think so?"

Drue emerged from his room holding a small black velvet sack with a drawstring.

"Of course. Only way to keep the peace. We screwed up, and put everyone in the cave in danger, now we have to pay the price. Sacrifice five to save three hundred and twenty-two."

"Three twenty-three," said Nixer in a small happy voice. "Rillia had her baby."

Drue turned his eyes to him lazily. "Really? Fine," he said and tossed something underhand to the inky black skinned bird-man. "I suppose her hair is pretty nice then."

Nixer looked into his hands and saw a small multi-colored mushroom. He looked up at Drue and smiled.

Ledrith looked from Nixer to Drue. "How can you be so casual about this? Who knows what those goblins are going to do to us?"

"There's nothing we can do about it now Sweetie." He tossed her a mushroom. "Might as well enjoy ourselves in the meantime."

She looked pensive, but accepted the mushroom with a sigh.

"I'm sorry guys," said Mynti, her eyes wet with tears. "I didn't mean to get you into this." She gave a little sob as Fidio coiled gently around her and gave her a hug.

Drue rolled his eyes and tossed her a mushroom which Fidio caught and handed to her. "Oh please," said Drue petulantly. "There's only room for one drama queen in this group. If it hadn't been this that got us killed it would have been something else. If it hadn't been you it would have been any of us."

"It's true," agreed Ledrith. "I've screwed up so many spells I'm surprised I'm still here."

Fidio shrugged. "Some of my elixirs were just a little peppermint oil and sugar water. And some of the people who took them... Well let's just say I'm surprised they haven't kicked the bucket yet."

Nixer pulled a black pouch that matched his skin and feathers perfectly out from under his grey tunic. He untied a strap and it unrolled into a flat band, which held several gold and silver items, bracelets, necklaces, rings, and other various items all studded with jewels. He looked up at them all sheepishly and said in his small voice, "I like shiny things."

Drue snickered. "Well well," he said, and popped a magic mushroom into his mouth. "What a fine little band of losers and fuck-ups we are." He pulled out another mushroom and wagged it between his fingers in a gesture of offer to Fidio.

"Nah, I'm fine thanks," said Fidio grinning. "Had a goblin for lunch earlier, I'm full."