

This is Gruzz speaking. It took Xarjun long enough with his story, it's about time that it's my turn again. That morning after our meeting with King Fitzgerald, where he gave us the mission of infiltrating the crashed dreadnought and retrieving the plans for the Arcziga Tower that were held within, we wasted no time in getting ready and setting out. The castle's servants prepared our supplies for us the night before, so we just picked them up after breakfast and went straight to the back exit. As the King promised, four of his soldiers accompanied us. These were no cheap mercenaries; they were clad head to toe in armor, and wielded both halberd and crossbow with decent expertise. Best of all, they were reasonable and followed our lead. It was no surprise that saving their King garnered such respect from them.

But we also had a surprise guest who insisted on coming with us. Janhorn had confronted us as we were leaving, saying things like, "I said I'm going to help you, and the time for that is now." Xarjun and Pae insisted that he stay and recover from all the shit he's gone through, and the rest of us agreed (Even Rosa, that slimy orange-haired elf), but Janhorn wasn't having it for a good reason. "I can't just stay here and do nothing to help," he said, "especially since I've been to that dreadnaught before. I've seen what's inside it, know what creatures inhabit it, and I've even got a good idea where the Tower's plans could be."

Orange-hair asked, "Are you certain that you remember that much about the dreadnaught?"

"It's been 50 years since I've been there, but I'll never forget such a place. Its crooked, cracked floors may not have felt my boots in a while, but one step in there and the paths will become clear to me."

"But it's dangerous!" Pae cried. "Can't you just tell us everything you remember?"

"You'll have to delay the trip till tomorrow or the day after just to hear everything you must know before going in there, and I understand that we all only have so much time to spare. Besides, you don't need to worry about me. I have seen over twenty four thousand sunsets, and I'll see many more before I lose the explorer's will. I traveled through a blizzard to help you, and I'll do it again if I must." His voice may have been high pitched, but his conviction shined in his words, as if he shared the proud spirit of many dwarves I respect. There was no saying no to him. We went to the servants to get gear for him, but he already had his own little backpack and winter gear prepared. So off we went out from the back entrance with a proud stride in every step. Led by us were eight camels, for the distance to travel was far, and we required haste. Thus began the journey of four forgiven criminals of Noam who found themselves becoming the town's saviors, along with their accompaniment of a four-man guard and the halfling who traveled the world.

Ah, wait, I'm getting a little ahead of myself. The start of the journey felt grand to say the least, but we were just starting out in Noam. The great dwarven chants and drumbeats that celebrate adventure would be a poor fit for this gloomy, silent town. As we snuck through the alley system; with Orange-hair and Xarjun at the front, Pae and Janhorn in the middle, myself in the back, and two soldiers at either side of us; Xarjun started a conversation with Janhorn. "So Janhorn, it would help if we got an idea of the dreadnaught before we get there. What's the biggest danger of the place?"

Janhorn thought for a bit. "The creatures, most certainly. Many of them I struggle to place a name on. In fact, I had only seen them on that boat. Undoubtedly, they were summoned to this world by dark magic." Pae shuddered loudly, while orange-hair's frown deepened and Xarjun looked down on Janhorn with great concern. The soldiers kept their eyes forward, though one kept glancing at him as he spoke.

I said, "That damn Lysbelle, no doubt it's all her fault. Couldn't help but test her summoning spells, I bet."

Janhorn said, "I told you, Gruzz, this was 50 years ago. Lysbelle wasn't even born by that point. Whatever brought them there was a separate entity. Perhaps another Beezle, but I have no way of knowing. These creatures did not leave their dark vast shore-bound abode. Together with the few native creatures that were brave or desperate enough to enter, they formed their own ecosystem, which teemed with incredible violence. What was available to eat barely satiated their gullets. Often I was witness to massive brawls where those sickening things would relentlessly devour one another. Some were many-legged and tall as you bigger folk." He gestured primarily toward the human guards. "Some were like bats, but had four wings and noses like mosquitoes. For you Noam folk, that means their noses were long and pointed. Then there were large beasts, mixtures of slug and snake with the size of a horse. They were rarer, but the packs that I saw were unstoppable." The color had drained from his face as he spoke, and his voice was a bit stilted.

"Are you sure you want to go with us," Xarjun asked, "with all that waiting for you?"

Janhorn shook his head and spoke more confidently as he looked Xarjun right in the eyes. "Don't encourage me to act on my fear. Give me courage to help you. This is a scary situation for all of us, and you'll be much worse off without my direction." He clenched his fists and moved with a more powerful stride.

Our discussion continued as we walked onward. Someone asked where Janhorn believed the plans could be, and with certainty he said that they would be kept up in the main cabin. It's a common practice to keep papers in there, even if they were a part of the cargo being sold, since up there they would be farthest from the water. The only problem was that this dreadnought was no sailing boat. It was massive enough to fit five lower decks, so tall that it dwarfed most of Noam's buildings, and long enough to stretch from one end of Noam's rich neighborhood to the other. Even worse, the dreadnought had crashed front first into the shore, and the back half where the main cabin was located was still out in the sea. To reach the cabin was a long hike and a heavy climb.

The next question asked was how to get in. Janhorn first told us about the way he got in: a small hole far up in the ship's side by the shore, which he entered by tossing up a grappling hook and climbing up. But climbing ain't our strong suites. Especially not on that dreadnought, which had much of its outside frozen over. Even if we wanted to, we needed cleats to climb up the ice, and by the time Janhorn remembered that important detail, we were already too far to turn back.

We asked him for more options, and after some thought he said there was one. Near the front was a bigger hole, and we only needed a short scramble up a slope of snow and debris to get into it. But there was just one problem: angry spirits were in there. Janhorn had seen the evidence of them from afar. There were moving

shapes in the darkness, like a great many men marching eternally in a circle. Swords and crossbows, barely visible and unglinting in even the strongest of light, hung from their belts or were carried in their hands. Out the front of the entrance, Janhorn could see the evidence of their deeds. The slope up to the entrance was stained with blood, and a few corpses were sparsely laid out at the front of it. This description made my spine tingle. "Ghosts need to know that it's time to get the hell on to the afterlife!" I said.

"Well there's no convincing them now." Janhorn said.

"I say we barge right through them! It's the only way!" I shouted.

Xarjun said, "Gruzz, don't tell me you forgot about the last time we fought spirits. We were useless against them."

I looked at him with a growl and tried thinking of a response. Then, I noticed Pae. The poor wizard had grown very pale as she looked at me with sad eyes. "There's some battles we can't win." She said quietly.

I sighed, then more calmly said, "Well, considering how old the ship is, I could probably just smash a hole in it. No need to fight more ghosts."

Xarjun asked, "Janhorn, are you sure those were the only ghosts in the ship?"

"I'm certain I would have remembered more ghosts if I saw them."

At that point, Orange-hair stopped and raised her hand. Before we could ask why, we got our answer: a silver-haired half-drow came around the nearest turn, with a little gaggle of those blue-skinned robe-wearing Xivorts following him. In fact, this was the same drow bastard we encountered the other day. He started to go in our direction, then his eyes met ours. He stopped and stood up straight in surprise, with his little friends following suite. All of us immediately drew our weapons; the half-drow barked at his Xivorts in elvish, and they quickly drew short swords and stood defensively in front of him. He frowned at us as he began to hover near the corner he emerged from.

"Fancy meeting you here!" I spat. "How's the ol' noggin?!"

He said, "I bet you still feel those knives in your knees, don'tcha?"

"Look." Xarjun interrupted. "Our mission here is not concerned with you, how about you just leave and we'll pretend we never saw each other."

"You underestimate me." The half-drow made a toothy grin as he seethed. "All you saw was a fluke, a rare folly. My words have power over your minds. Maybe we can't complete our mission now, but I can prove to you and my masters that I'm not just some mistake!"

Orange-hair immediately whipped out that lightning crossbow of her's and shouted "ALAKAZAM!" Lightning streaked from the crossbow and scattered all over the alley as it struck the half-drow's upper-left chest. The lightshow scared the camels, and they fled out into the streets. The half-drow made a pathetic scream, and as he grasped at the bolt he retreated behind the corner. That was our cue to charge in; myself, Xarjun, and two soldiers bore down on the abandoned Xivorts, who were still stunned from that lightning display. It was a quick flurry of weapons. One Xivort took a halberd to the chin and flew up in the air before landing hard on his back. Seeing an opportunity, I raised my hammer high and brought it down on him, splattering my face and the walls with blood. Another Xivort immediately shoved his short sword in my ribs, while another made a serious cut in a soldier's leg. Pae immediately froze those two to the ground. As we fought, bolts from the crossbows of the two other guards flew toward the Xivorts, as Janhorn stood cowering between them.

Orange-hair shot a more mundane lightning bolt into one Xivort's eye, and a soldier's bolt pierced the brain of another, and just like that all of the half-drow's allies were gone. And it was around this time he thought it was a good idea to step out in front of us. He stood stock-still as his frightened eyes analyzing the bloody carnage we caused. I laughed a little and took a step forward, and immediately he dropped to his knees and bowed. "Please forgive me!" He cried. "I truly am weak and a fool! I'm only following orders, I have no choice!" He looked up, tears rolling down his face as his face scrunched in an ugly manner. "Please... spare me! I'll make it up to you!" Suddenly, whispers of 'spare me' echoed again and again in my mind, but just before I could think something was wrong, they stopped.

Now, here's the funny thing about being charmed by that guy. It felt no different than being my normal self. When he cast that spell on me, I genuinely felt sorry for that pathetic piece of shit, and lowered my weapon and shield. One of the soldiers was also affected, and he said "How pitiful. I say we let this guy go, he's not worth the trouble."

However, everyone else was just unaffected. Another soldier stepped past his charmed friend and, with a shout, slammed his halberd into the half-drow's chest. He was knocked onto his back, blood gushing from his chest as his shaking arms reached at the wound, much to my and the other soldier's charmed shock. Another soldier ran over to the half-drow's feet and looked down on him. "How about we decapitate this fool and move on?"

Holstering my hammer, I went up behind him, reached up, and clasped my hand on his shoulder. He looked back with a slightly worried look. To his relief, I only said, "Hell no! He's harmless, and should be treated as such!"

Behind me, I heard Xarjun laughing. "Gruzz, being kind to his enemies? Now I know you're charmed." Suddenly, I heard a loud PLINK! I blinked, then groaned as my head started aching and the half-drow's magical words lost their control over me. I placed my hand on my forehead. With a quick glance back, I saw

that the other charmed guard was having a migraine of his own. "Very funny." I growled. "On second thought, I think I should go stomp his guts out."

"Wait!" Pae said. "We should interrogate him; he may have more information we could use!"

"Like hell I'll speak!" The half-drow said as he started to get up, while pulling a knife from his coat. It was surprising to see him get up after such a blow. He must've rolled with the swing.

Suddenly, Pae screamed "YES YOU WILL! AND YOU'LL STAY DOWN!" She aimed her orb at the half-drow, and it started to glow blue. The half-drow was frozen in shock, along with the rest of us for a moment.

I looked back at the drow, chuckled, then said, "She's been a little crazy lately. If you think I'm bad, I bet she's gonna be far worse if you don't do what she says." He looked at me. Suddenly, we heard a strange noise from behind the rightmost building. It was like the howl of a wolf caught in a heavy blizzard.

"What was that?!" The only remaining soldier by Janhorn said as he looked all around.

"No idea." Orange-hair said.

"Stay steady!" Xarjun shouted. Pae silently pointed her orb all around, her rage rapidly subduing.

Suddenly, a completely black figure dashed from the alley in front of us, its feet unmoving as its mere movement made that wailing noise. I stared as hard as I could into it, but there were no details I could make out. It was darkness melded into a twisted person-like shape. "What IS that?!" Xarjun said as it slid away from us, with its hand pressed against the wall.

After a moment, Pae gasped. "It's a creature from the Underdark, a Shadow! That Dark One mentioned them! It hates bright lights!"

Xarjun smirked. Without speaking, he suddenly stood up straight with one careful, fluid motion, as if in a trance. He pressed his mace against his chest and began to pray, while pitch-blackness started to extend out from under the Shadow's hand and across the wall.

Suddenly, the blackness shot out as if it were a shadow, traveling down to the floor and up Xarjun's face in the blink of an eye. He was facing away from me, so I couldn't get a good look at what was happening to him, but he suddenly lurched up and screamed, his hand reaching for his face. We all collectively yelled out our shits and damns, as Orange-hair shouted, "Quick, take the drow hostage!"

But at the same time, that little drow shit was whispering to Pae. But she quickly whipped around, and with expert aim with her orb, she fired an ice bolt into the drow's arm. While he screamed, me and the three guards went to grab the half-drow as he stumbled with a battered arm covered in ice, but he was a slippery son of a bitch. Two of the guards got between him and grabbed his arms, but he slipped right out of their grasps. A third swung his halberd down on him, but he dodged that one. I pushed between the guards and furiously swung my hammer at him, and he avoided the first four hits. I probably would've gotten him on the fifth hit, if a shadowy arm didn't suddenly wrap around my arm, whilst I heard that howling behind me. I turned to the alley we were next to: two more shadows were suddenly there!

I could hear that half-drow step back and start to chuckle, despite his injuries and the chunk of ice weighing down his arm. The Shadows stood still, with long thick shadow arms extending across the floor from their feet. "I'm so glad they arrived!" The half-drow cackled as one Shadow's arm wrapped around my arm and squeezed it tight, then started to point its curled fingers toward me. The other Shadow's arm overtook the guard behind me. "If I only brought Xivorts with me, I'd be a goner!" The guard started to gasp as the hand grabbed his throat; the hand on my arm rushed toward me, but I knocked it out of the way with my shield. The whole arm unwrapped itself from my limb and slithered back to its owner. The half-drow continued. "While you struggle to your death, I'm getting out of here!" Suddenly, a bright light came from down the alley, where Xarjun and the first Shadow were.

It was different from the divine light he usually gave off. It streamed out like thin fans from cracks in the ground, and it lasted for more than a moment. The Shadow slid shrieking out of the beacon, with several small glints in its body that were like scars. One guard used the distraction to slash the half-drow's leg, causing the fool to gasp and quickly back into the wall. Two of the guards started to surround him, while the third managed to wrench the Shadow's arm off of him and threw it off. The points on his neck that those dark claws dug into were rotting. One of the Shadows launched another arm at us, but I deflected it with my shield. "Go take care of the drow!" I shouted at him. "I've got these two!"

"What about the Shadow coming after us?!" He shouted.

I gave a quick glance down the alley. The Shadow had stopped and raised its hand toward us, but then it looked back upon realizing that the shining cracks were crawling towards him, as if it were merely a flat spider. "They've got it!" I shouted before charging right at the other two Shadows. One slid forward and raised a hand toward me. I stopped running and slid toward it, and as I slid I bashed it right in the arm. The arm, and only the arm, was knocked aside; the rest of the Shadow remained still. As I stopped, the Shadow stared at me, then suddenly flew right through me, and it enveloped me for a moment.

Immediately I was overcome with a burning sensation throughout my insides and outsides. My legs buckled as I faced the second Shadow, who stayed afar. Before I could move, it pressed its hand against the wall, and a shadow from its palm instantly stretched out, running up my body and onto my face. The shadow hand grasped me tight, heavily darkening my vision as I felt a burning pain from its fingertips piercing into me. I shouted and swung my hammer repeatedly in the air, as the Shadow stepped away and out of my sight.

My anger was so great that I charged forward blindly. That Shadow blended in well with the darkness covering my face, so it was just my luck that I bumped into it. I bashed it back with my shield, then clocked it right in the damn chin with all my might. The dark hand fell off me, and to my satisfaction I watched it twirl around dizzily. Suddenly, it raised its hand and scratched me right across the face. As I screamed in pain, there was a loud ghostly shrieking from the alley behind me.

I swung at it again, but to my surprise, there was nothing standing in front of me. Suddenly, I felt an arm creeping up my back. I turned quickly and saw the Shadow standing a few feet behind me, its shadowy arm stretching from its feet. Its hand took hold of my throat and squeezed. I gasped, dropping my hammer and grasping at the hand as it painfully dug its claws into my neck. The world began to spin around me as I struggled to no avail. Each moment felt longer and more painful than the last. Just as I was starting to fade, I heard a loud thunderclap, undoubtedly one caused by Xarjun. In this moment, I wished that we were fighting together side by side. It was plain to see that I was fooled into splitting up from the team. 'Damn me!' I thought. Rage enveloped me, and I grabbed the hand tight and tore it out of my throat. I threw it to the ground and tried to stomp it, but it quickly shrunk back into the Shadow's feet. As I gasped for breath, I said, "Is that the best you've got?!"

Suddenly, I heard a cry from one of the soldiers: "Oh shit, Gruzz!"

Another soldier said, "We're coming!" The Shadow turned, and past its shoulders I saw two soldiers running to my aid. They dropped their halberds, pulled out their crossbows, and fired. That damn shadowy arm emerged from the Shadow and swiped the bolts out of the air. As the Shadow raised its hand high in the air, the soldier yelled, "Gruzz, the others are running! You need to run too!"

"Like hell!" I yelled as I grabbed my hammer. Darkness started to cover the floor and walls around the soldiers.

"There's no beating these Shadows!" The other soldier yelled as he and his comrade loaded the next round of bolts in their crossbows. "And the drow has escaped! We need to regroup!"

I paused. "If everyone's already leaving..." I said quietly to myself, before looking out the alley.

"Go, Gruzz!" They cried. I looked back, and not a moment later, the Shadow swung its arm downwards. The darkness stretched out from all surfaces and converged on the soldiers. They disappeared in it and screamed in agony. Not a moment later, the dark bubble burst with that horrendous ghostly shriek I heard earlier. Both soldiers dropped to the floor, their bodies covered in rot.

Instinct took over. I mustered up the a scream from the bowels of my soul and charged. Images of my home flashed before my eyes. All because of that bastard Hurman, I was here, fighting for someone barely related to me. All my regret and frustration came out in that swing that went straight into the Shadow's side. It fell to the ground, and I began to repeatedly beat on it on its back and on its head, desperately trying to bring it

down and snuff it from this world for good. Eventually, the pain and exhaustion got to me. My arm felt numb. I lowered my hammer to the ground. Panting, all I could do was watch this Shadow in front of me start to get up, like all I did to it was nothing. With a weaker scream, I swung horizontally at it, but it grabbed my arm and dug its claws into my flesh. Black rot spread out from its fingertips. It then rushed me into me, and I was enveloped entirely a second time. My memory grew vague from this point onward. I stumbled, not seeing or understanding, feeling nothing but a soul-splitting pain. The last thing I remembered was my face crashing into the ground.

I heard bits and pieces of the battle as I laid painfully sleeping in the snow. Shouts, cries of pain, gasping breaths. There was a loud clang, as if a suit of armor toppled. Then, everything became very silent. All that I heard was one wheezing sound and a soft howl. Suddenly, there was a cry from above: "Cover your eyes!" Something landed in the snow near me, and then, there was a loud burst accompanied by a white flash of light. One of the Shadows let out a high shriek. I felt its presence rush past me, and its cries of pain became softer and softer.

Suddenly, I felt a scaly hand tap my face. My eyes opened, and I was greeted by Xarjun's ugly mug. And I'm not joking around when I say that. His face was nearly torn apart. Long claw marks and punctures covered it, and the wounds were black and festering. I turned my head and realized we were in a different alley. We were by a dead end, and hiding behind a dumpster. Orange-hair was sitting against the wall, wrapping a bandage around her arm, which was streaked with black scars. Sitting by her was two of the soldiers and Janhorn. The soldier that guarded Janhorn was unharmed, but was shaking uncontrollably as he stared blankly at the wall ahead. The other soldier was nursing rotting scars that covered his whole body. He was one of the men who came to my aid. Janhorn looked around at all of us with great concern, but by some stroke of luck he was completely unharmed. I heard some trotting, and turned my head to see that ghostly horse of Xarjun's walking around. Laying on its back was something covered in a blanket. Whatever it was, it smelt terrible. As for myself, I was still wracked with pain on my inside and outside. "Please tell me we won." I softly groaned.

"Well, we escaped." Xarjun said. "But only thanks to Neslin Beezle."

"What." I barely had the strength to react.

"I saw what he did." The scarred soldier said, his voice barely above a whisper. "My friend and I survived that burst of darkness, but before we could stand, the Shadow was on us. My friend had fallen dead to the ground from the Shadow's grasp, and in moments I too had that evil hand wrapped across my throat." He gestured toward his neck, showing the black marks the Shadow's claws had left behind. "Suddenly, a dwarf on top of a building yelled for us to cover our eyes, before throwing some sort of artifact near the shadow. Just as I raised my arm over my eyes, the thing exploded in a flash of light, and the Shadow retreated, its dark hand slipping from my throat."

"It was then that I showed up." Xarjun said. "I had barely driven back my own Shadow with Kord's holy light, and summoned my horse with the intent of a quick getaway, only to find that this Shadow had escaped before we could. I did not recognize Beezle at first. his coat billowed in the wind like a cape, as if its buttons had broken off, and he wore goggles and a facemask. But I heard his voice, and it was so familiar that I

shouted, 'Beezle?!'. In response, he removed his facial coverings, confirming to us that it was him. I wasn't trusting of him at all, and asked him if he was trying to pull any tricks. He claimed that he never wanted Noam under the rule of these dark creatures, and wished to take his company back from them, even if that meant sending us his aid."

"He can't be trusted." I said. "He's all in it for himself."

"Of course, I'm certain of that. In any case, he dropped us a bag of potions and gold--why the gold, I don't know-- and left. There was also a letter to King Fitzgerald himself, in which Beezle claimed that he's willing to put the conflict of the past behind him in order to help save Noam. Just before he left, I shouted out, 'Beezle, are there revival scrolls in the Tower?!' He stopped, and looked back down at us. He paused for a moment, as if judging whether he should tell us or not. He said 'Yes', then left."

"That means nothing, coming from him." I said. "Even King Fitzgerald's vainest hopes are more trustworthy than the word of Beezle."

"I'm willing to accept hope from any source." Xarjun said, "Especially since..." He closed his mouth, then looked back at the covered thing on the horse. I looked back at it and noticed a white hand dangling from it. There was green puss dripping from it.

"Who is that...?" I said hesitantly.

"Pae... I told her to run with Rosa, Janhorn, and that soldier; but she insisted on staying. She proclaimed that she'd fight to the bitter end if needed. For some time, she kept one of the Shadows at bay with a poison cloud she conjured, but once its hand grasped her throat, it was all over." He placed his hand on his forehead, and started breathing hard. "I ran to help her. If only I was a moment sooner..." I was silent. There wasn't much to say, really. Aside from some vain hope that we'd find another revival scroll, Pae was gone for good. I wanted to scream out, let out my anger and frustration and rant til the end of time, but I was just too hurt and exhausted.

"What I don't get," the scarred guard said with a slight twinge of anger, "is why you left William's and Thorne's bodies behind."

Xarjun lowered his hand and looked up at him. "I'm sorry. I only had time to grab Pae."

The whole group was silent for a few long moments. Everyone was looking down, or staring off in some direction, as we reflected on our failure. The scared soldier in particular was wiping tears out of his eyes. Orange-hair quietly said, "Some start to our mission, huh?" Another moment of silence passed.

"I think we should head back to the castle." Janhorn said. "We're in no condition to journey out there."

"And those Shadows may still be after us." Xarjun said. "None of them were slain in the battle."

Hearing that news made my heart burn like an oven. "Son of a bitch." I growled.

We briefly rested in there, spending the time patching up what we could, then we set out. I dulled the pain by drinking some of the Magma Whiskey I brought from home with me, so I was able to keep up with the others. Though I did have to lean on my hammer occasionally. I wanted to save the whiskey for celebration after I killed Hurman, but oh well. Damn him for running away from Noam just before it went to hell.

We arrived back at the castle without hearing another peep from those Shadows. The captain was surprised to see us back so soon, and boy did he nearly freak out when he saw the wounds on us. He immediately directed us to the medical wing, where we were put to bedrest for much of the day, as the doctor and his servants treated our festering wounds. Xarjun and I had the worst of it, while Orange-hair suffered the least. But Xarjun and I were tougher than the doc expected, because by early evening the infections stopped spreading and the pain was only slightly agonizing if you paid attention to it. Before the sun could begin to set, we were sent out with numerous bandages covering our bodies. Orange-hair was waiting for us outside the medical wing. She was leaning against the wall, letting her right arm hang loosely as she clutched it. She was staring up at the ceiling with an odd look, before noticing that we had exited. "Hey." She said. "The king's called for us."

"Do we really have to meet him now?" Xarjun said, exasperated.

"We can't afford to dilly-dally around." I said. "The Underdark's growing stronger, and we just wasted today."

Once we entered that throne room, we saw the King sitting hunched over on his throne with his palm pressed into his forehead. He glared at us as we approached. Any sense of regalia was gone from him. Nobody spoke for what felt like a long while. Even when we went up to his throne and kneeled before him, he did not speak. We passed worried glances at each other. Finally, he said, "You can spare me the news. Captain Matthew passed it to me." He lowered his hand and looked straight at us. "I expected better from you. I suspect you think little of that crafty half-drow, but I'm certain that he had that whole situation in his grubby palm because now I've lost three men and a day's worth of time! And if it weren't Neslin Beezle of all people, I'm certain I would've lost even more men! We can't afford these failures! I have only a handful of guards left, and it's looking to me like not even that will be enough to defend ourselves from the Underdark's current forces. Let alone when The Devastator arrives!" As he paused, I realized that my face felt hot, and I felt a scream of rage coming up. "Xarjun! Do you think you can reattempt this mission tomorrow?"

Xarjun said, "Yes, your highness. We--"

"That's all I needed to hear, you may remain quiet now! I will not send anymore men with you, I suspect if I do I'll just lose more men. This is your last chance, if you fail this time then I'll be certain that I've mistakenly put Noam's hopes on a trio of dunces! Do I make myself clear?!"

"Yes, your highness." We said.

"Good. Now get out of here."

We were silent until the guards led us back to our rooms. We immediately went into Xarjun's room to have a little meeting of our own. Once the door closed, my anger reached a boiling point. "Fuck!" I yelled as I grabbed the table and violently threw it to the ground. My whole body screamed out in pain from the exertion. I stood there panting, letting the rage and pain stew in me.

Orange-hair's voice soured as she spoke. "Damn that King. I thought he was a genuinely good person, but he's revealed his true self now. That bastard thinks we're his puppets."

Xarjun leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, closed his eyes, and sighed. After a brief moment, he opened his eyes and spoke more calmly. "He isn't mad at us. He's afraid. I saw it in his eyes."

"I could tell, but like hell is he going to treat us this way. Especially after we lost another friend." Orange-hair snapped.

"He's going through problems himself. It's not easy being in his shoes right now. His rule is tottering on a large precipice, and those Underdarkeans just need a good push to bring him down for good."

"He isn't the one who's just lost a friend." Orange-hair said.

"No, but he's lost his whole family and his trusted advisor." Xarjun replied. This quieted Orange-hair, and she looked away with a frown. Xarjun continued. "Who knows what's going through his mind right now."

We quietly sat around the room for a long time, reflecting on our failures and dreading tomorrow's mission. None of us were bothered to reset the table I knocked over. I found myself watching the sky out the window. The sky was grey initially, but over time it took on more and more of an orange tint as the sun began to set. By the time the sky was dark orange, I said aloud what was on my mind, "I'm tired of going slow through there. We need to go as fast as possible."

"Like if we were in a wagon?" Orange-hair asked.

"Of course!" Xarjun said loudly as he grasped his forehead, before slamming his fist into his bed. The mattress tore open, sending feathers and fluff into the air. "If we just took a wagon and got out this town as fast as possible, we would've blown past those Shadows, and Pae and those soldiers wouldn't have died. DAMNIT!" He got up and kicked one of the bedposts. It cracked but still stood.

"Woah, woah!" Orange-hair stood up and raised her hands. "I'd expect this from Gruzz, but not from you Xarjun. Please calm down!"

Xarjun looked at Orange-hair, then settled down. He placed his hand back on his forehead again and closed his eyes. After taking several deep breaths, he clasped his hands in front of his chest and continued to breath carefully for several more moments. At last, he opened his eyes and said, "I'm sorry."

Suddenly, we heard a knock at the door. "Dinner's coming in a few minutes!"

"Alright!" Xarjun said, before turning his attention back to us. "That's what we should do tomorrow. Take a wagon, and get to the dreadnought as fast as possible."

"But we can draw attention to ourselves that way." Orange-hair said.

Xarjun started to speak, then paused to think for a moment. "You're right, it's too dangerous that way. They could set up a trap up ahead, and then we'd be in even more danger. Damn, I freaked out over nothing." He shook his head. "Well, we should get ready to eat now. I pray to Kord that tomorrow won't be so unlucky for us."

We returned to our own rooms, and in a few minutes the maid came knocking with my meal. I took it and thanked her, and no sooner had I set it on my table and sat down, I heard a loud scream. "Help! Help! The stables are on fire!" Immediately taking my hammer and donning my armor, I stormed out of my room. Xarjun and Orange-hair had also stepped out.

"Where's the stables?!" I yelled at one of the guards. He silently nodded his head, before hurriedly leading us out into the courtyard, and around to the stables. Smoke was pouring out of the whole thing. Servants were rushing out, and guards heaving buckets of water were rushing in. Xarjun ran in to help, while I stood out there yelling questions about what happened and who did it. The most I got was 'I don't know!'

Eventually, orange-hair went over to me and said, "Give it up, everyone's too freaked out to understand the situation! I couldn't get heads or tails from anyone either!"

"I'm not gonna stand here twiddling my thumbs every time the castle gets attacked!" I growled.

"Then why not grab a bucket and help?!"

"That I will!" I holstered my hammer, and wrenching a bucket from a nearby guard (much to his dismay), I ran into the stable. By the time I got in there, the fire was already taken care of. The whole place was full of smoke that choked my breath and my sight. The most I could see were silhouettes of wagons, but their covers were missing and they looked rather skeletal. One fell apart before my eyes. Suddenly, Xarjun stepped in front of me and started to push me lightly, though he couldn't get me to move.

"There's nothing else we can do, we need to evacuate!" He said inbetween coughs. I was feeling half-suffocated myself, so I dropped the bucket and quickly exited the stable with him. We met back up with Orange-hair.

Xarjun, after managing to catch his breath, said, "Well, the wagons are done for, and all the horses and camels are dead. Whoever did this did not want us moving around." We paused for a moment.

"So soon after you talked about it?" Orange-hair asked.

"No way." I said. "It's a coincidence. A saboteur couldn't have been listening in on us."

"It's very possible." Xarjun said. "This is too coincidental."

We started asking around about anyone who was around the guest wing a few minutes ago. Our tale got a lot of people suspicious, and after word spread around castle for a bit, we got news that the perpetrator was captured. He was a halfling that cleaned the laundry. Someone had seen him dashing down the hall that lead to the guest wing, and taking a turn that led toward the stables. It's safe to say that unlike all the honest halfling workers at the castle, his true allegiance was with the Beezle Company. He must've been eavesdropping on us for a while; that's probably how that half-drow caught us so quickly! Then upon hearing Xarjun yell, he panicked thinking we were gonna slip past his dark friend's defenses, and burnt the damn stable down to stop us. What a fool. Last I heard he was being dragged to the dungeon to be interrogated and then executed. It's too bad that we didn't find him. I would've told him that his real boss would hate seeing him help the dark creatures that overtook his company.

For all this halfling's patheticness, he did put fear into us. We didn't talk about it, but I'm sure we were all thinking of it: we truly weren't safe in the castle. First the Xivort thief, then the Dark Ones attempting a rescue, and now a full-blown spy and saboteur. We had no idea how much of our plans they knew, but we would be in real trouble if a peep of them spread to their commander's ears. Still, there wasn't much of a choice but to press on and hope for the best. We had lost too much already to back out.

The next day, we set out at the break of dawn once more. The survivors from the last shitshow, Janhorn and the two soldiers, went with us. Even though the King ordered that we go alone, they insisted on coming with us. It was surprising seeing the scarred soldier offer his services to us, because he was wrapped almost head-to-toe in bandages. Then again, so were myself and Xarjun, so maybe he shared our toughness.

It was a cloudy day, with the sun's light almost entirely quenched by a thick sea of flat clouds. It was as if we were in a jar and someone placed a lid on it. We were far more tense and careful this time around. Orange-hair watched everything like a hawk as she sharply led us through the alleyways. She tried to have us walk through already-tread snow whenever possible in order to hide our footprints, and when we had to walk through untouched snow, she had one of the soldiers hide our footprints by sweeping his halberd behind us. We probably should've brought a broom with us for that, but it got the job done. On occasion, she heard something far-off crunch in the snow, and would stop us in order to listen. With this great degree of care and a lot of patience, we got all the way to Noam's south-east outskirts without another encounter.

As we found ourselves surrounded by the sparser and smaller buildings of Noam's outskirts, we loosened up a little. "We shouldn't have to worry about finding any Underdarkeans here." Janhorn said. "Much of the fighting has only happened in Noam's busier areas. Look, there's even someone outside." He pointed to a Goliath sitting hunched outside a run-down shop, with a lit pipe in his mouth. He watched us with interest as we passed by, almost forgetting to actually smoke his tobacco.

"Shouldn't we worry about him?" I asked. "What if he's a spy?"

"I doubt it." Orange-hair said. "There's confusion in his eyes."

After a good while, we finally got a clear view of expansive field of snow leading to the shore and blue skies, and all of Noam's buildings were behind us. We stopped there for a moment to just take it all in. The land of Northern Grezlant could be seen a little to the right of us, and by it was the docks. It was the first time I laid eyes on those places since I marched up here in a rage and met Xarjun, Pae, and Orange-hair. That was all just a month ago, and fresh in my memory, but everything was so different then. I felt pangs of melancholy, and quickly turned my attention to distract myself. "How far out is it?" I asked Janhorn.

"It's about sixty miles or so, if I recall correctly." He said. "It's a two day trip normally," he looked at Xarjun and I, "but seeing how fast you slowpokes move, it'll likely takes us three days."

"Hey!" Xarjun and I said.

Janhorn chuckled. "It helps to be honest."

"If only that damn halfling didn't burn our camels." I growled.

Janhorn ignored me, and walked further out. He talked as his eyes scanned the horizon. "Since we're only a mile out from shore, we won't have to worry about the snow being too deep. The wind pushes it either out into the sea or into the mountains. However, snow even a few inches deep will slow us down, especially for little people like me. Luckily, I asked the servants to pack some snow shoes with us. Let's put them on before we go out any further."

"What the hell are snow shoes?" I asked. Moments later, I got my answer after Janhorn put down his bag and pulled out from it a pair of flat, almost oval shaped nets. Their outer frames were carved from bright wood, and the many small strings that made up the network were made of an almost white material. There was a smaller wooden frame in each one's center, with leather straps attached to them.

"Ah, I see now." I said as I took off my pack and dug through it.

"What, don't have snow shoes where you're from?" Orange-hair asked jokingly.

"No." I pulled the snow shoes from my pack. "Back home, dwarves would wear these when crossing through the mountains, to ensure they were not swallowed by the snow. In my tongue they are known as *lhar-khostha*, which means mountain pass boots in Common."

"They seem a bit too flat for climbing." Orange-hair said.

"Goddamnit Orange-hair, I didn't say they were climbing." I snapped, and she chuckled at my response.

Once we all had our *kostha* strapped on, we went straight toward the dreadnought.

There ain't much to say about the hike during the first day. We just walked forward, kept walking forward, and oh yeah, continued to walk forward. Arcziga's a frozen wasteland, what else do you expect? The only moment of note happened many hours after we began the trip, when the sun was just starting to set. We were, what else, walking as usual, when Janhorn noticed something on the ground and stopped. "What's this?" He bent down and swept at the snow with his gloved hand. The rest of us crowded around to see what it was. It was the top of a scroll that was half-buried in the snow. Xarjun knelt down and took over the digging for Janhorn, and after a few moments he pulled out a stiff, partially unrolled scroll. He held it gingerly in his fingertips. The whole thing was covered in frost, and stuck at a bent angle. Xarjun tapped it with his finger a couple times to confirm that the whole scroll was frozen solid. There was no way we could unfurl it more than it already was.

"What does it say?" Orange-hair asked.

Xarjun flipped it around and looked at the front. "It's in dwarven."

"Hand it over." I said. Once I got a good look at the scroll, I started reading it aloud. "Let's see here. Ahem, it starts with, 'I, Thamoki Beezle, give'... er..."

"What's wrong?" The bandaged soldier asked.

I glanced over the rest of the writing. "...this is not well-written. It keeps misspelling words like *wuven* and *djer* in the same way, there's a few made-up words in there, and I can't stand this damn grammar. Some of the letters were written in an unusual way too."

Janhorn said, "So the writer, or at least the signer of this scroll, is related to the Beezles. An ancestor, I bet, considering how old the scroll looks. Can you show it to me?" I turned it around so he could see. After analyzing it for a moment, he said, "That script is Old Dwarven for sure."

"How old is that?" Xarjun asked.

"Well over a thousand years old, but it was still in use until around 300 years ago."

"So this scroll is at least three hundred years old. Huh." I said as I turned it over.

"I'm amazed it hasn't fallen apart." Orange-hair said.

I silently looked over the scroll for a moment, then looked up at Janhorn and asked, "How old is Beezle's company, anyway?"

"About... three hundred years old." Janhorn said, as realization crossed his face. He looked at the scroll in wonder.

"Could Thamoki Beezle be the founder of Beezle's Armor Company?" Xarjun asked.

"Or he at least knew the founder when he was alive." Janhorn said. "Gruzz, keep on reading. Let's see what else is on there."

"Alright, but I'm not going to translate the whole thing." I cleared my throat and read the scroll aloud. "I, Thamoki Beezle, give *oktu* the'... '*Glrfl Shlilgal Zrgytu*, my'... 'diamond of thought and being', the fuck does

that mean, 'to be at a later point his. In return, he will teach *oktu* myself the way of, ugh... 'Tuvlu and Parnion.' There's more text poking out there, but unless I can unfurl the scroll a little more, I can't tell what they are."

"That sure is something else." Orange-hair said. "Old texts are always weird. I mean, 'diamond of thought and being'?"

"I recognize that term." Janhorn said. "It refers to one's soul." Silence fell over us for a moment.

The scaredy soldier said, "Did we just read a contract to sell one's soul?"

Xarjun had pulled out the holy symbol under his jacket and was clutching it. "We'd best burn it."

"Not yet." Orange-hair said. "We haven't seen the whole scroll. We might learn more if we can figure out how to unravel it."

"I understand your reasoning, and I won't argue, but we must be careful. The words of the contract can tempt us into signing our own souls away."

I said, "No way any temptation's gonna happen when I can't even understand half the damn thing." I growled before putting the contract in my bag.

"Alright, that's enough about the scroll. We need to move on." The bandaged soldier said, and we agreed with him. So onward we marched.

That night, we set up camp with a fire and a tent. "It's not safe to start a fire." Xarjun had said. "We're signalling the enemy where we are."

"Would you rather freeze to death?" I responded.

"Gruzz has a good point." Janhorn added. So we kept the fire going.

Though it was silent outside (at most we heard a weak gust, thank goodness. This would be a terrible time to get hit by a blizzard), I had an uneasy sleep. Quick flashes of that disastrous fight kept popping up in my head. My mind was consumed with the struggle, the pain, and the failures. I saw Pae's puss-covered hand poking out of the blanket again and again throughout my struggles. Each time, the thought of what she might've looked like under there became more prominent, until it became too loud to ignore. Sometimes my mind tried to form a guess of the rotten state that the Shadows left her in, but I pushed the image away. I didn't want to throw up.

Suddenly, I found myself standing there, in that alleyway. One of the Shadows rushed toward me, its arms spread out. It was trying to envelope me. I raised my hammer high, and struck it dead in the head, and it fell. I looked down and chuckled at its limp body. Suddenly, the Shadow melded into the ground, turning into a flat circle as it moved under me. I didn't react fast enough; its hands popped out and grabbed my ankles. My scale armor crumpled like paper, and I felt its necrotic nails dig deep into my skin. I screamed and tried to pull myself out of its grasp, but it was no use. I was sinking into the Shadow. As it came up to my belly, I dropped my hammer and shield, then desperately pushed against the ground. My descent didn't slow at all, and soon I was covered in darkness.

I vainly struggled, unable to move or breath. Soon I lost my resolve. Stopping my resistance, I closed my eyes and accepted my end. Suddenly, a bright light shined on my face. I opened my eyes. The darkness was gone. I had been taken to a realm of heavenly blue light. And there in the distance, was Pae. She got sight of me, and I heard a delicate little gasp come from her, before she ran toward me. For some reason, I just stood there. A few minutes later, she got to me and wrapped me in a hug. "Gruzz, I missed you!" Then, placing her hands on my shoulders, she looked me directly in the eyes, her nose only an inch from mine. "Gruzz, please remember this: there is an old revival ritual in the dreadnought. You need to revive me with it, Gruzz!" The light brightened into a blinding white, and Pae faded away.

I sat up and gasped. I was in the tent, wrapped in a sleeping bag. Looking around, I saw that everyone was asleep, except for Xarjun. He was crouched down by the tent flap, gazing at me in shock. "Woah, you scared me Gruzz. Warn me next time you're gonna wake up like that."

For a moment, I was about to tell him the exciting news I learned in my dream. But as I took a breath to speak, reality set in, and I reminded myself that it was just a dream. My face dropped. "It was hard to sleep last night. I knew I shoulda brought some damn pillows with me."

Xarjun gave me a strange look for a moment. "Well, I'm gonna go prepare breakfast. Why don't you wake everyone up?" He exited from the tent and left the flap open. I groaned as the dawn's orange light reflected from the snow into the tent.

"Fine." I grumbled.

That morning was when we first sighted the dreadnought. It was so far that it looked like a black speck from where we were, and we would not have noticed it if it weren't for Orange-hair's keen eyes. As we hiked on, it seemed to gradually grow larger, until by the morning of the third day when we were within a mile of it. Janhorn wasn't kidding about its size. It jutted from the broken ice like a black cliff that forced its way from under the sea's darkest depths. The boat lay at a tilted angle, with half of its back having sunk somewhat into the blue water. When we were well within a few hundred paces of the thing, we formed a circle and talked

over our plan. The front entryway hole and the climb upwards were both discussed once more, but eventually we decided on an alternative plan: making a new entrance.

After removing our *lhar-khosthas*, we approached the ship's side. It sure looked a whole lot grimmer up close. The entire surface was mottled and uneven from black rust, which seemed to cover the whole ship. The hull was decorated with groups of strange plants which were perfectly preserved in the thick sheet of rough ice which spread across the whole ship. "What are those?" Xarjun asked.

"They're seaweed and barnacles." Janhorn responded. "I take it that you haven't been out to sea before?"

"I don't think any of us have." Orange-hair said. I nodded.

When we were done gawking at this spectacular catastrophe, Orange-hair got to work. She pressed her ear against the ship and tapped it with the hilt of her sword, in an attempt at finding a weaker spot that I could break through. She was very thorough, and moved like a snail along the wall. As I stood there impatiently with hammer in hand, it felt like the minutes were turning into hours, yet she just silently tapped at the wall as we watched her. Myself and the others kept asking, "Are you almost there?" or "Anything yet?"

But she would just say, "Shh. Not yet."

Eventually I couldn't take it anymore. For a moment my whole body quivered, and then I yelled out, "Hurry up, will ya?!"

She turned to me and shouted, "If you could just be goddamn patient, Gruzz! It's gonna take more than a few minutes to feel up a ship this size!"

Xarjun crossed his arms, and sighed while slowly shaking his head. "Any possibility of surprise is gone now."

I looked at him for a moment, and raged overcame me as I realized that he was right no matter what I said. With a yell, I pulled out a throwing hammer and threw it toward the ship. It crashed into its side, producing a loud GONG!

Orange-hair's angry gaze turned to surprise as she looked at where the hammer struck. "Hold on." She ran to the spot, placed her ear next to it, and tapped it several times. She turned to us. "This spot is pretty thin. Take it away, Gruzz!" She then muttered something I didn't bother to listen to, for pride overcame me as I went over to my hammer to retrieve it.

I said, "Heh, see that? You should've had me search for it."

Orange-hair said, "Just smash a hole in the ship, 'kay?"

I stepped in front of the hull, and hefting my hammer with both hands, I swung with all my weight. The wall went down in one strike, revealing a black void on the other end. I pulled out a sunrod and activated its gleaming light. I waved it around inside.

"What do you see?" Janhorn asked.

"Hmph. Just wooden floorboards and nothing else. Not even monsters."

"Let me take a look." Orange-hair said as she stuck her head in the hole. After a few moments, she looked back and said, "I don't see anything either."

Xarjun stepped forward while activating his own sunrod. "Let's go in, but be wary. We've made a lot of noise for the monsters on this quadrant of the ship. Janhorn, I don't think I need to tell you to stay between us." Janhorn silently nodded. The sight of the interior made him go pale. The scaredy soldier's legs were quivering. The rest of us, however, kept our wits about us.

Once everyone activated their sunrods, stuffed them in their belts or in their packs, and stepped into the ship, Xarjun asked Janhorn, "Which way do we go?"

Janhorn paused for a moment, then gulped. "Ah, yes." He whispered so lightly I could barely hear him. He thought for a bit, then said, "If we head for the front, we'll find a rope that will take us all the way to top deck."

"And what if the rope was torn out or rotted away?" Xarjun asked.

Janhorn breathed uneasily. "Let's pray that it isn't."

With no other clear options, we turned left and went on into the dark.

It only took a few steps for our lights to shine upon a gruesome sight. Mangled bodies were laying all over the place. Many had been picked right to the bone. Some were clearly humans, dwarves, or halflings. Others, not so much. It was hard to tell what was one of the creatures, and what was just a badly mangled person. The amount of bodies varied as we went forward while sticking to the wall so that we couldn't be blindsided from all four sides. Occasionally we would have trouble stepping around them. I accidentally stepped on someone's skeletal arm, and it snapped with a loud crunch. The scaredy soldier stopped and shuddered.

"Come on, keep your act together." The bandaged soldier said to his friend. "I hear that these monsters smell fear."

The scaredy soldier nodded his head and followed along at a hurried pace.

Some time later, Orange-hair suddenly stopped and raised her hand. "I heard something," she whispered.

"I heard it too." Janhorn said. "It sounded like... those spider things... scrambling away."

"They're running away?" I whispered. "Heh, sounds like they're afraid of us." I looked back at the scaredy soldier, who gave me a fearful look. "Come on," I said, "you really gonna get scared by something that fears you?"

"You should take after his precaution." Xarjun said as he continued to look forward. We went onward, and soon came upon a strange clearing in the carpet of bodies. In the center of this clearing was a pile of large four-winged creatures, all freshly killed with numerous chunks bitten out of them.

"What the?" I said.

"We must've come across something's feeding grounds." Xarjun said. "We'd best not stick around."

Suddenly, we heard skittering behind us for a brief moment. Quickly turning, we saw a set of four eyes staring at us in the darkness. Brandishing my hammer, I yelled out and stomped my foot, but the eyes did not move.

Janhorn's voice shook. "W-we'd better move before more of them show up--" Suddenly, a loud chittering came from the being in front of us, and it was responded to by a group of chittering behind us.

"Shit!" Xarjun said as we looked all around. The creature that snuck behind us and its four companions on the opposite side emerged from the darkness. Orange-hair gasped. They were tall as humans, but shaped more like spiders with four thin three-fingered arms extending from their shoulders, a bulb-like bottom that their bodies emerged from as if they were a spider centaur, four two-toed legs extending from their abdomen, and jutting fang-filled mouths that opened and closed sideways. Their whole bodies were covered in a dark brown carapace. To my surprise, they were armed with old, rusted weapons, and wore decrepit leather armor that was a size too big for them. The four on one side held dwarven axes, and the one by itself held a long spear, which had one of the four-winged creatures impaled on it. The hunted creature was coated in webs.

We all formed a circle around Janhorn. "It's a good thing Pae's not here, I bet this would've made her scream." Orange-hair said with a quick, quivering voice.

"This is no time to speak ill of the dead!" Xarjun shouted. "Fight with your all!"

Suddenly, the spear-wielding monster arched its bottom upward, and sprayed a web up into the air which landed on all of us. Curses and cries of frustration came from us as we found ourselves tied up in the sticky stuff, and we struggled greatly to free ourselves as the monsters advanced on us. With a shout of "ALAKAZAM!", Orange-hair fired an explosive burst of lighting at the group of four, but it barely slowed them. Xarjun stopped struggling and began to pray, channeling his oh-so-divine light from his pendant and blessing this battle as new and old steel clashed.

As the spear-wielder got into attack range, I raised my shield, which was struck by another blast of web. The spider creature took hold of the web as if it were a rope, yanked my defense aside, and stab me in the chest. The wound was shallow. "Come on, that all you got?!" I yelled. Suddenly, orange-hair broke free from the webs, and in the blink of an eye she slashed that thing in the side. It dropped the web and stumbled toward one of its friends. Managing to free my arms from the web net covering us, I began an assault on them, which they quickly defended against; the spear-wielding quickly stepping out of range as its friend took each of my blows.

As the ferocity of the battle grew, it was punctuated by a loud inhuman shriek, but nothing drew my focus away from my combat against the two spiders. The spear-wielder grabbed the web stuck to my shield and yanked it all around as it and its friend rained blows on me, but the skill of a bug is nothing against a dwarf, and they found their weapons either scraping against my armor or being blocked by my shield anyway. The axe-wielder managed to hook my hammer with its axe, and we stood at a stalemate. Simultaneously the other bug shoved its spear toward me, greatly annoying me as I deflected it with my restrained shield once more. "That's it!" Rage filled me, giving me the strength to wrench my foot out of the binding webs, and with all my effort I pulled my shield back. Then, I bit into the web rope and tore it from my shield, before spitting it to the ground. The spear-wielder immediately scuttled away. "Get back here, coward!" I roared. Wrenching my hammer down with all my strength, I tore it from the axe's grasp and threw its balance forward. With a leap that freed my other foot, I brought my hammer down hard on the axe-wielder's shoulder, snapping it, and followed the blow with several well-placed strikes to its body. It shrieked as its armor was torn apart, and its carapace was filling with cracks.

But the spear-wielder quickly returned, interrupting my beatdown by webbing my hammer. I shoved aside the creature who was still reeling from my blows and yanked back, pulling the spear-wielder toward me. It tried stabbing me once more, but its spear bounced off my shield, and so it dropped the web and kept hanging back. Before I could pursue it, the axe-wielder attacked me again, and we were locked in combat once more.

Suddenly, I was blasted with webs from behind, moments before the bastard spear wielder leapt onto my back and sunk its fangs into my shoulder. I felt a sting as several fangs slipped past my scale plating and pierced into my flesh. "Rrgh, bastard!" I shouted as I shook as hard as I could to get it off.

Then, I heard the scaredy soldier shout, "Gruzz, don't move!" I heard steel slice through bug flesh, and the webber on me screamed and fell off my back. It stood just in the nick of time for orange-hair to cut off one of its legs. As Orange-hair combated that beast, I looked back at the scaredy soldier and grinned, then I looked all around the battlefield. Two of the bugs had fallen, and the team was moving on to the rest. The axe-wielder I was facing took this opportunity to lunge at me fangs first, but I bitch-slapped him away with my shield. "Try harder, bugface!" I yelled before winding my hammer back and smashing it directly in the left shoulder. Purple blood spewed as it shrieked, and its gaze turned to its now crushed and crippled two left arms. Suddenly, Xarjun advanced on it as he yelled out a prayer, and it turned its attention to him. It scuttled back, avoiding my next swing, and with its two right arms it swung its axe at Xarjun, who deflected it with his shield. He raised his mace up high as thunder traveled from his arm to it, and with a thunderous blast he struck the bug over the head. More blood burst from its head, and it scrambled back and forth in a confused daze.

While the spear-wielder was kept busy by Orange-hair, the rest of us ganged up on the axe-wielder. It managed to shakily block one or two blows, but it fell quickly. The final beast saw that it was the only one left and bolted, narrowly dodging a slash from Orange-hair in the process. As it scuttled toward the darkness, Orange-hair raised her crossbow at it, but lowered it a moment later. She took a moment to take a deep breath, then looked back at us. "How are we all doing?" She asked with a smile. Orange-hair was completely unharmed, unlike the rest of us.

"Doin' just dandy." I said as I checked the hole in my chest armor. A light trickle of blood had come from it, but the wound no longer bled.

Xarjun took notice of it. "Let me take care of that." He said.

"No, this is just a little cut, I'm serious! Save your healing words." I responded.

"Uh, I'm pretty hurt myself." The scaredy soldier said as he clutched a long bleeding cut on his arm. His face was smeared with blood from a cut on his left cheek.

"Oh, let me take care of that" Xarjun said.

As he treated that soldier, the bandaged soldier looked around for a moment, then said, "Hey, wait a minute. Where's Janhorn?"

Suddenly, Janhorn's head popped out from under one of the deceased bird creatures on the corpse pile. "R-right here. Are they gone?" He said with a shaking voice.

"We've slain three, and the last one fled." I said.

As he crawled out from under there, he asked, "Are y-you all alright?"

"We've got some injuries, but nothing serious." Xarjun said as he bandaged the scaredy soldier's wounds. "We'd best pause for a few minutes to catch our breath."

Soon, we continued our walk toward the front of the ship. The dreadnought's atmosphere had shifted. What was once silent and asleep had become awake with many little tip-taps echoing out from the darkness. At first it was quite concerning, but as the silent crawling continued on and on without growing louder or softer, we got used to it. Our own silence was broken when Xarjun said, "I don't get it. Those things aren't like you or me, yet they were wielding weapons against us and protected themselves with armor. They were even working together."

"I c-can't really explain it." Janhorn said as he nervously tapped his fingers together "On recollection, they did seem to move in packs last time I was here, but I-I had never seen such i-intelligence from them before."

"Could they be another race, and not just monsters?" Orange-hair pondered.

"Monster or not, they're nasty." I said.

"All I know is," Xarjun said, "if they can cooperate like that, then the one that ran off may have been coming to get more of its friends."

The scaredy soldier quickly spoke in fright. "If more are coming, then these sunrods will just show them where we are! Shouldn't we turn them off?!"

"And leave ourselves in darkness?" The bandaged soldier responded. "Either way we'll make ourselves easy targets for them."

"If only this damn ship wasn't so wide open." I said. "Isn't this a holding area or something?! Why aren't there any crates?!"

Janhorn thought for a moment. "C-considering the ship's current tilt, I think all of the packages slowly slid to the back of the boat in the centuries since the crash."

"Damn it!" I replied.

Orange-hair added, "The good news is that with this wide open space, they can't easily sneak up on us either."

After some time, the left wall started to curve to the right. "O-okay." Janhorn piped up. "The rope should be this way." He pointed into the darkness.

"We'd better hurry." Orange-hair said. "It sounds like a lot of those spiders are approaching." This caused slight exclamations of panic from the group.

"Come on Janhorn, lead the way!" Xarjun said, and so we took off deeper into the ship, the black void and the numerous tip-tapping quickly surrounding us on all sides.

As we ran through the waves of bodies, with our feet occasionally crushing a back or a limb, some of the tapping and skittering was getting closer. "Why the hell are we running." I grumbled.

"We'd best avoid any unnecessary fights!" Xarjun responded.

"I can agree to that!" The scared soldier replied.

"Well we'll certainly have a great time climbing up the rope with half the dreadnought after us!" I snapped back.

Xarjun and I argued for some time as we rushed over the bodies, until our words were cut off by the shout of Janhorn. "There, the rope's in view!" Our attention shot forward, and there rapidly emerging from the darkness was a rope silently swaying to and fro, its top disappearing into a rectangular hole in the ceiling that was just barely lit by our magic torches.

We gathered around it. It was thickly covered in dust and something that was possibly mud or blood. Few traces of its brown twine poked out from the accumulated filth. "Finally!" Xarjun said as he grabbed the rope and pulled on it. It snapped. Many feet of rope fell in a spiral in front of our shocked faces and landed in a neat pile on the floor.

"Well shit." said I.

"Now what?!" The bandaged soldier asked.

Orange-hair suddenly spun around and drew her sword. "We'll think about that later." She said. "They're almost here!" We drew our weapons and formed a circle with Janhorn cowering in the center. Numerous

glowing eyes were watching us from the darkness; all were down low except for one, which remained at normal height. Soon, our foes revealed themselves. They had the shapes of normal spiders, but they were huge. Each spider was as wide as a wagon wheel, and as tall as Janhorn. The light from our sunrods gleamed off their shiny dark brown bodies as a horde of them skittered toward us. The tall four eyes remained in the back, watching the battle unfold.

They fiercely attacked us head-on, but despite their numbers we met them with an even fiercer defense. Hammer, mace, and blade drove back their leaping strikes, and nimble feet or quick shielding thwarted most of their attempts to catch us in blasts of web. One of the spiders even tried to catch Janhorn with a web lasso, but he swiftly backpedaled from the incoming string and hid behind Orange-hair. After we killed a few of them, with myself only taking one bite to the arm in the process (a wound that Xarjun quickly healed), Orange-hair shouted out, "Watch your right!" The rest of the horde was coming in from that direction, and was starting to circle around us.

The bandaged soldier ran to confront the charging newcomers, and gave them a greeting shot with his crossbow before lifting his halberd and standing against the charge. The scared soldier reluctantly ran to his aid, just before the spiders leapt on both of them. "Shit! Gruzz, take care of this side!" Xarjun yelled before running to their aid. Orange-hair went to aid them too, and thus I was left alone against an entire swarm. I didn't mind, since it was nothing I couldn't handle. After beating the spiders back with several strokes, they skittered a few feet away, and one spider from their ranks leapt at me. It oddly had a sack tied to its back. This one was quick. Several times I knocked it down with a quick strike and raised my hammer high up for the finishing blow, but it always recovered and jumped away in the nick of time. The bastard also managed to bite my hand. Then as I reeled from the bite, it sunk its teeth deep into my knee. It hurt like hell and sent me into a rage. I forced it on the defensive with a flurry of quick swings that had it skittering left and right to avoid it. It was so focused on my hammer that it failed to notice me raise my foot, until I crushed its head with a stomp. All the spiders on my side fled into the darkness. We would collect that sack on its back later, and it would turn out to be full of gold coins, old nicknacks, and flesh scraps, but that doesn't matter to the story. With half the spiders gone, I turned and ran to battle the rest of them.

After a good amount of those bugs were crushed, the rest fled as well, and in moments all became silent except for the tip-tapping heard all around the dreadnaught. I looked around for those tall staring eyes in the darkness, but they had disappeared. Janhorn, who had practically been running back and forth throughout the whole battle, was panting with his hands on his knees. "Hoo boy... a-are we alright?"

"I'm not, without a doubt... I'm in serious pain." The bandaged soldier said as he leaned on his halberd for support. Under the halberd was a spider he had cut in half. Several large holes were all over his arms, and one was on his face. The blood seeping from these wounds had stained his bandages a darkish red.

"We shouldn't have charged in like that..." said the scared soldier as he swayed back and forth slightly. He also had a few bite marks, but not as much as his friend.

"You better have Xarjun heal you." I said to the bandaged soldier.

"I already did, while those spiders were tearing into him." Xarjun replied. He walked over to the bandaged soldier and checked his wounds. "This doesn't look good. How are you feeling?"

"I can barely stay awake." He replied.

Xarjun breathed through his nose. "I'm sorry, but healing word isn't going to do much here."

The soldier's confused response was drowned out by my yell. "WHAT?! WHY?!"

Xarjun's eyes sparked with rage. "Moron, do you want to attract all the other monsters to us?! The reason my healing word won't work is due to how it works. Kord's divine light doesn't fix the wounds, it powers up the body's natural healing process. And that can only take place if the body has enough energy to perform it." He looked at the soldier. "I'm sorry. The most we can do is bandage you up and continue our march. Once we find a good place to rest and you have a long nap, your body will have enough energy for me to heal you."

The soldier huffed. "Looks like I'm staying in the back with my crossbow for now. Fuck." He pushed himself up, and with an intense look on his face he put his halberd away and pulled out his crossbow.

After a moment, we looked up at the hole we could have gone through if the rope was still intact. "H-how are we going to get up there?" The scared soldier asked.

Orange-hair said, "It looks just far enough that my grappling hook can reach it, but look around at the whole ceiling. It's covered in more holes than swiss cheese. I doubt it could support our weight."

"Well then, how the hell are we supposed to get up there?!" I shouted.

"I've got an idea." Orange-hair said. She pulled the sunrod out of her backpack and threw it up through the hole, lighting up the floor above us for a moment. Just before the sunrod landed back onto the floor, leaving the upper room shrouded in darkness, we saw the open hatch up there leading to the third deck. It was empty, and we couldn't even see the end of the remaining rope from here. "Shit." Orange-hair said. "I was hoping enough of the rope was left for me to grapple on to it." She went over to the sunrod and picked it back up. "There goes my only plan."

"Are there any other ways that we can go?" Xarjun asked Janhorn.

"W-well, there is another way up the next few decks if we go t-to back of the ship. The decks back there had collapsed, leaving a pile of cargo that we could use to climb up. The only p-problem is that many of the four-winged creatures roost there."

I said, "Like hell am I going to walk all the way back there, when we already busted our asses getting to the front. This is a big boat, surely they must've thought to include other ways to move between decks."

Janhorn said, "Th-there were more ropes and ladders, but age and these creatures have helped to destroy much of them. This rope down here was the only remaining way to travel to and from this bottommost deck. W-we should find more ways to go up w-when we reach the higher decks."

Then orange-hair stated, "I say we head back, but as we do so, we should search for more stable portions of the upper deck. If we find any holes in those areas, we'll be able to get up there with my grappling hook."

Xarjun responded, "Unless anyone has any other ideas, that sounds like our best option. In fact, Orange-hair, did you notice any holes in the ceiling on our way over here?"

"Sorry, but I was on the lookout for monsters, not holes."

"Fair enough." Xarjun stared off into the darkness and thought for a moment. "We should stick to the opposite side of the ship when we head back, just in case something's been tracking us."

Thankfully, it wasn't long before Orange-hair found another ceiling hatch in a more stable area. It was like the hatch we had come across before, except there was not even a remnant of a rope hanging from there. It was no doubt long chewed away by the monsters of the dreadnaught. With the grappling hook lodged firmly onto the edge of the hatch, everyone climbed one after the other. Xarjun and the soldiers started. They were unsteady climbers, so I had to give them a boost. Age had made Janhorn too brittle for climbing, so he clung to my back while I climbed up. Then I climbed back down to get Orange-hair, because despite having a grappling hook, she was a weak climber by her own admittance. After climbing back up with her clinging to my back, I was just about to make fun of her before Xarjun spoke business. "Janhorn, where do we go next?" Remembering the situation, I started to look around. It was not much different from the lower deck, with nothing to look at but piles of bodies all around.

"Th-there are several ladders on this deck and the ones above. Just follow my lead, and we'll soon be up." Janhorn said.

"Of course, if we find another hole, we can just use my grappling hook to get up." Orange-hair said with a cocky smile.

"If only you could climb it by yourself." I said.

"Hey!" She responded.

"Save the jeering for later." Xarjun interrupted. "We've still got four more decks to get through."

We continued silently, aside from myself occasionally joking at Orange-hair. We kept along the north-east wall and went back to the front of the ship. According to Janhorn, that was where the closest ladder was. After some time spent wading through the bodies, we finally found some new scenery: a large cargo box, strangely enough. It was taller than it was wide. The body of some large, black, disgusting worm was jammed under the end of it, preventing it from sliding down to the back. On the side of the crate was a dwarven word that I didn't recognize. "What the hell does that say?" I said aloud.

"It looks like old dwarven." Janhorn added.

We stopped to take a closer look at it. Out of all of us, only Xarjun was tall enough to see the top. "Hm, the lid's off." He said. Silence fill the air as he got a good look at it. "It looks like there's scrolls in there. I thought they kept all of the scrolls in the cabin."

Janhorn said, "They m-must've had too much to keep in the cabin. Those must not have been considered very important if they were kept so low deck."

"Maybe." I said as I stepped toward it. "It won't hurt to search; it may have the plans or--" Suddenly, as if it was waiting all these years for us to come along, the worm body compacted under the pressure of the box with a sickening squelch. The box tipped down slightly and started to slide down the floor.

At that moment, for some reason I thought of what Pae said in my dream: 'There's an old revival ritual in the dreadnought. You need to revive me with it, Gruzz!'

"Shit!" I shouted as I dashed toward the box. Xarjun quickly followed after me. Unfortunately, after only a few paces forward, the crate ran into a small pile of corpses and tipped over completely. Thus it was sent bouncing down the dreadnought, scrolls fluttering behind it as several of the dislodged corpses also rolled down to the back. I kept running after it.

"Gruzz, hold on!" Xarjun shouted. "Do you really think that box is worth going after?!"

"Of course! There were scrolls in there! That means there might be a revival ritual in there!" I looked back. The rest of the group was following after us.

"I doubt they're more than ordinary scrolls!" yelled Xarjun.

"Well let's see about that!" I retorted.

Suddenly Janhorn cried out, "Gruzz! Wait up! Wait up!"

Orange-hair then yelled, "This isn't what you're looking for!"

I tried to ignore them. I looked back at the toppling crate which was getting further and further away from me. The darkness was slowly swallowing it. It felt as if this void full of spiders, giant worms and who knows what else, was stretching two wide arms around me and beckoning me to envelop myself in it. It felt like I was running straight into the open arms of a Shadow. As my breath started to grow hoarse, I thought, 'Is this really worth it?' I stopped to catch my breath, and watched the crate tumble into the unknown. Silently turning, I walked past Xarjun and back to the rest of the group.

Janhorn was holding several of the scrolls, and he said to me, "These don't look like anything special. I can't read dwarven well, but they don't include any plans on them. Also, spell scrolls are written in elvish." He opened one of the scrolls to show me.

I snatched the scroll from his hand and read it. After a few seconds, I sighed through my nose in disappointment. "It's just a sailor's checklist. Great." I threw it over my shoulder.

Xarjun came to my side, a bit out of breath himself. He paused uneasily. Then he said, "Is this about Pae?"

"Yes." I quietly replied, before I began to walk back in the direction we were going.

There was another uneasy pause. "I'm sorry Gruzz." He said. "I'm hoping we'll find a revival scroll in here too, and I'm certain Orange-hair feels the same way. But we can't let ourselves go on a wild goose chase every time we find a crate of scrolls falling down the ship."

"I know that." I grumbled.

"If this ship does have a revival scroll, I highly doubt it'll be anywhere but the main cabin." said Xarjun.

So I said, "We'll see."

Soon the ladder to deck three was reached, and it was only a short walk before orange-hair found another hole and we climbed up that. The air was cooler up there, and the deck overall seemed cleaner with less

bodies and less damage throughout. Some areas still had significant destruction though, as we found when we came across a giant crate that had crashed in from the upper deck. It had smashed through the floor edge-first, and the boards around it seemed ready to fall apart. It was there that we heard a wet slithering. We stopped. "What was that?" Orange-hair asked.

Janhorn started to shudder. "Oh Avandra... I know what this is..." Suddenly, two giant black worms, the same kind that we found smooshed under the crate, appeared from behind the smashed box. Their faces split open like a four-petaled flower to reveal long cracked beaks, from which they were constantly salivating. Each quadrant of their split faces were tentacles with smaller beaks at the ends of them, and these appendages writhed with excitement as the worms slithered toward us.

"Oh my god..." The scared soldier said quietly. "Should we--"

"Bit too late to run!" I shouted as I wielded by hammer and shield. "We ain't letting some flower-faced monsters get the best of us!"

"Be careful!" Orange-hair shouted. "There's also something lurking in the wreckage!" Risking a quick look, I saw that hidden in the shadows on top of the crashed box was something small. Two hungry eyes glinted off the light of our sunrods as they stared at us.

The worms then leapt into action. Orange-hair dashed forward with blinding speeds toward one of the worms and hacked off part of its upper left tentacle, her ogre power glove flashing as it gave her strength to complete the cut, then she retreated back before the worm could retaliate. As she did so, we raised our weapons in preparation to take the worms head-on. Xarjun held his mace to his chest and began to pray quietly. "Make it quick!" I yelled at him as the worms neared. The wounded worm took a crossbow bolt to the face and was knocked to the ground by the scaredy soldier's halberd, while the other one caught my hammer in its beak. I struggled to wrench my weapon away from it, as it wound its tentacles back with the aim of piercing me. Xarjun quickly struck the worm in the beak, knocking it off my weapon, before shouting out some compliment or whatever to Kord. With a flash of his symbol through his coat, a web of cracks shedding divine light shone from the ground, causing the worm in front of me to cry out and reel back. "Quick, everyone, step into this circle!" Xarjun cried out.

"Like hell am I stepping closer to those things!" Orange-hair shouted out as she shot one of the worms with a lightning bolt.

"The light will repel them, and fix the worst of your wounds!" Xarjun yelled as he faced the two worms. The wounded one that had been knocked down had gotten up, and was staring into the light. It then leapt into the circle and slashed the scaredy soldier right in the neck, and he screamed as blood sprayed out from the cut. The worm slithered toward the staggering human, even as the light seared into its flesh. The other worm followed suit and leapt onto my raised shield, wrapping all four tentacles around it as it desperately gnawed the steel with its beak. I struggled against it, and bashed it with my hammer repeatedly, but it stayed on me even as it burned up in the light. "Shit! These creatures are dumb!" Xarjun yelled before intercepting the

tentacles rushing toward the wounded scaredy soldier with a lightning bash, which stunned the tentacles' disgusting owner. At the same time, the divine light moved off the worms, myself, and Xarjun and concentrated itself on the rest of the team.

Miraculously, the divine light began to fix even the bandaged soldier's horrible wounds, and with delight he ran to the stunned and wounded worm, and dashed it back to the ground with his halberd. I was less delighted with that damn stubborn worm all up in my face. While everyone focused their attacks on the wounded worm, I was stuck with the other worm struggling to swallow my shield. Suddenly, we heard a loud swoosh! The creature from the wreckage had leapt out, revealing itself to be one of the four-winged, stinger-faced creatures. It was bearing down on Janhorn, who everyone had left unguarded!

"Shit!" Xarjun yelled out.

"Janhorn, get back here!" Orange-hair screamed.

I decided on some more practical action. I wrenched my shield out of the worm and ran to Janhorn, and for my troubles the worm slashed me in the back. Gritting my teeth, I fought through the pain as I got in front of Janhorn in the nick of time and swung my hammer at the winged creature, which deftly dodged out of the way. "Stick with the others!" I yelled, and as Janhorn stepped back toward the group, I faced this new foe.

I stood poised as it fluttered about and sized me up with its shining eyes. Suddenly I dashed forward. It tried to dodge, but my hammer smashed into its back and slammed it down to the ground. It started to twist and turn on the ground, swiping its claws this way and that, so I quickly backed out of its range. It soon calmed down and started to jump onto its feet, so with a leap I tried to crush it into the ground. Next thing I knew, it had jumped on my shoulder and had stuck its stinger in my neck. "Get off!" I screamed before knocking it back with my shield.

As I felt a warm liquid trickle down to my shoulder, I swung my hammer again and again at the flapping creature, and it barely avoided my blows each time. Suddenly, one of the soldier's halberds cut through its wing, and as it reeled back Xarjun's web of divine light washed over it and set its wings aflame. Unlike the worms, this thing had a more reasonable reaction. With a loud screech, it dived away from combat, narrowly avoiding a parting swing from me, and ducked into a hole up in the ceiling. I turned around and saw that one of the worms was laying on the ground dead, its body split open and its white insides pooling out onto the floor, while Xarjun and orange-hair were struggling in combat with the last worm. Everyone on the team besides Janhorn was pretty wounded, and the final worm itself had so many cuts that it seemed ready to fall apart. I'm certain the only reason why the two soldiers were still alive was thanks to the web of healing light. Without a word, I ran forward and attacked the worm. After a rain of blows and bolts, I finally finished it by crushing its head.

After taking a moment to breath, I said "Goddamn" as I looked around at all the carnage we inflicted. We stepped away from the sacks of dead worm and took a moment to rest, with Xarjun mending his and Orange-hair's wounds with his healing word. The web of white divine light, meanwhile, faded away as the

soldiers rested on it. They were looking better. Instead of dripping or spraying blood everywhere, they were just tired and made that known with their heavy breath.

"Hey Xarjun..." the bandaged soldier said. "...I thought you said your light can't heal us."

"The light that healed you was different from the light of my healing word. It's... how should I say this... it's a power more closely related to the essence of Kord Himself." replied Xarjun.

Then Orange-hair said, "I haven't seen you perform this miracle much."

"Yes..." Xarjun thoughtfully looked down, and seemed to look confused for a moment. "...the words to this prayer just came to me, when we fought those Shadows. It's nothing that my elders have taught me..." Everyone was silent for a few moments.

"W-well," Janhorn piped up, "we should get going now. I don't want that winged thing coming back for us, or see if it brings any f-friends along." Several of us nodded in agreement as we got up and moved forward.

Some time had passed before we climbed up a rickety ladder to the fifth deck. The air was a bit fresher up there, it was chilly, and silver moonlight shone through the cracks in the ceiling. As we walked along the wall, we saw less bodies scattered about this deck. The skittering from the lower floors was naught but a whisper. Without any difficulty, we soon reached a ladder to the outside deck, which seemingly glowed in the moonlight that shone in from the open hatch above. With a short climb up with Janhorn clinging to my back, I finally stuck my head out into the cold fresh nighttime air. All around was a complete mess of spilled cargo and large wooden fragments, and bones were scattered about the place, but it hardly seemed to matter with the gentle wind blowing across my face and the stars twinkling up in the sky. After stepping off and letting Janhorn down, I stood there and took the vast sight in as the others joined me on the deck. We were about halfway from the main cabin. It loomed high up. There were two smaller decks and three sets of stairs, one at the center and one for each side, connecting each deck to one another. "Those plans better be in there." I said.

"Either way, it will be a good place for rest once we're sure it's clear of monsters." Janhorn said.

The bloody bandaged soldier said, "Aye. I feel like I've been in a long battle."

Xarjun said, "We're only halfway there. There's still the return trip we need to worry about."

"We could lower ourselves down with our rope." Orange-hair responded.

"How will the last person get themselves down?" I asked.

Orange-hair frowned. "Well-- we can think of that later."

As we began walking to the cabin, Orange-hair said, "Man, if those plans aren't in there, what then? Would this whole journey have been a waste?"

"No, even worse." Xarjun said dully. "We'd have to scour the lower decks for any trace of them."

"But that's suicide!" exclaimed the bandaged soldier. "We'd have to brave all the twisted denizens of this dark place."

Xarjun's response was, "His Majesty did not treat us well, to put it lightly, when we returned after our first failed mission. I can't bring myself to come back to him empty-handed a second time." Him, myself, and Orange-hair turned grim at the thought. Seeming to understand us, the rest of the party silenced any dispute they had. With heavy hearts and a lack of talk, we went on for a few minutes. Then, as we neared the leftmost flight of steps to the next step, a catastrophe took us completely by surprise.

A truly deafening noise sounded as all turned white, as if a thunderbolt struck us directly. Then all I heard was a peculiar noise that was like a droning high note played on a flute, and my vision was suddenly dark and incredibly hazy. In a few moments I found myself spontaneously wracked with pain. I had been knocked onto my back by a force great enough to fracture my armor, and for a few more moments I was unable to get up. The stars had been blotted out with smoke pluming out from the ship, and the rest of the team was lying all around me. The only one who seemed awake was the scaredy soldier, who was laying back on the steps, hyperventilating as he stared out toward the deck. Blood ran down from his forehead, and he clutched at a large jagged piece of shrapnel stuck in his stomach. He started to yell at us in a panic, but I could not hear his shouts over the whining drone. Once I felt the deck vibrating, I knew I couldn't lay around any longer. I pushed myself up, and soon after Orange-hair and Xarjun did the same. They looked around in a daze, and they too suffered from heavily bleeding cuts and shrapnel lodged in their bodies. Xarjun especially had it bad, with a blade-like fragment of metal impaled straight through his left hand. It's a good thing it wasn't his mace hand. I looked down at the party remaining on the ground: the bandaged soldier and Janhorn. A gasp I couldn't hear escaped my lips. The soldier had his left arm completely lopped off, and Janhorn's head was... it was gone.

I screamed his name, but my cry was lost to the ever-present droning. Suddenly Orange-hair clasped onto my shoulder, and I looked at her shocked face only a few inches from mine. Blood was trickling out her left ear. She yelled something, then seeing that I wasn't responding, she pointed to something behind me. I looked, and saw hundreds of the bird creatures streaming from unseen openings in the ship's hull. Then, the spiders and worms started crawling up from the hull and onto the deck, and I knew then it was time to go. We bolted up the steps, myself pausing only to pick up Janhorn's body.

As we ran towards the hopeful safety of the cabin as monsters gathered all around us, I looked behind. I was near the front. Xarjun and the two soldiers were behind us, the bandaged one being supported by Xarjun as they ran. Somehow he was still alive, and the light in his wide panicked eyes seemed brighter than ever. Far behind us and the swarming monsters, I saw something I couldn't believe. More than half of the ship from the front was simply gone, with only a massive plume of black smoke and still raining debris left in its wake. I turned my head back to the cabin and focused all my strength on getting there, before the monsters could catch us; before the deck we stood on could collapse under us.

We reached the top of the steps and rushed toward the next set of steps to the final deck. By that time the droning had lessened just enough that I could vaguely hear the screeching chaos that covered the whole ship. Halfway there, two of those worms slithered in our way and turned their disgusting maws toward us. At the same time, I heard a disgusting schlorp behind us, and turned to see a third worm slithering its way toward our flank. "Damnit." I cursed. Orange-hair immediately dashed away and drew the flanking one's attention with her crossbow, while myself and Xarjun braced against the incoming worms from the front while the injured soldiers hid behind us. I was forced to drop Janhorn in order to wield my hammer.

"Protect me!" Xarjun shouted. "I must recite the Beacon of Hope prayer!" He stepped back and raised his mace to his chest. With no time to protest, I raised my shield and prepared my hammer. The scaredy guard raised his halberd, and the quivering bandaged guard took aim with his crossbow resting on his friend's shoulder. A bash, a cut, and a piercing bolt met the rampaging creatures; and in response they lashed out with the sharp ends of their tentacles, which raked through me again and again. I fell to one knee, and the worms loomed over me. But just before they could sent their sharp tentacles on me again, Xarjun completed his prayer, and the burst of divine light emanating from his holy symbol caused them to briefly shrink back.

With a new wave of determination, I leapt onto the worms with a roar and forced them back with a quick series of jabs, before finally managing to crush the midsection of one, and it roared in pain. In its throes, however, it caught me off guard with a slash to the bicep, and as I reeled back the other worm's tentacles tore my throat open. Just then Xarjun bashed its tentacles away, and he hastily cast healing word not a moment too late. As my throat closed, and the worms were fended off by the guard's halberds, Xarjun said, "We're not losing you that easily!"

I gave a wicked smile as he cast healing word on me again, removing all but the least painful injuries on me. "No, not with you at my side!" With a great roar I renewed my assault on the worms, beating their tentacles back before they could reach me. Xarjun quickly ran to flank them, and smacked one over the head with a lightning-ized bash. Suddenly, I heard loud slithering coming from behind, and looked back just in time to see the third worm charging straight at us. It had left Orange-hair with deep gashes in her legs, and she was forced to retreat. Suddenly, the worm was met with a powerful halberd swing to its face. The blade hacked off the sharp points of one of its tentacles and knocked it onto its side. To my surprise, the weapon was wielded by the one-armed guard. My eyes were only on him for a second before I focused back on the worms in front of me, but I cannot forget that face of his: eyes wide in pain, mouth stretched open in an agonized frown with teeth bared, yet his vision was focused and his breath was controlled. Even with only one hand grasping his massive halberd, his determination was unshakeable.

The fight became a blur as myself and Xarjun battled against the two worms in front of us, while the soldiers fended off the flanking worm. Those damn slugs squirmed all over the place, forcing us to move constantly so we wouldn't be surrounded. My hammer struck them repeatedly, while Xarjun mixed it up with his ice breath and another thunderous blow, which sent one of the worms flying.

Before that worm could slither again, Orange-hair came back into the battle despite the blood pooling from her legs onto the deck below, and she leapt upon it and cleaved its head. But with that fortune also came bad luck, as the remaining two worms surrounded me. I tried to repel one with a shield bash, but it took the blow without flinching. "Alright then." I said. "Come get me!" They lunged at the same time, but I smacked the one behind me with my hammer while blocking the other's charge with my shield, and they were both flung back. Quickly gathering their bearings, they rushed toward me again. But I blocked them once more. Again and again they stubbornly tried to catch me in their slimy beaks, and each time I bashed them away with even greater stubbornness. Such was their tenacity that even as Xarjun struck them and Orange-hair inflicted serious blows on them, it only drew their attention away briefly before they lunged at me once more.

Soon Orange-hair slew another one, and then we all ganged up on the last one and rained blows on it until it was crushed to bits. Everyone immediately flew with haste to the cabin, not even a word spoken to one another. I paused only to pick Janhorn back up before quickly following after them. Monsters were all over the place, but thankfully no more lingered near the cabin, aside from some winged creatures that seemed too busy shrieking and flying in circles to notice us.

We burst through the double doors that led into the cabin, and as Orange-hair and the soldiers practically collapsed on their faces, I dropped my hammer and shield to close the doors, and Xarjun barred them shut with a plank of wood he pulled from a group of others in the corner by the door. Then, as I faced the door, I dropped to my knees and tried to control my breath. Janhorn slid off my shoulder and landed sprawling on the ground. For a good while we stayed still, listening to our panting and the muffled shrieks of panicked monsters. Orange-hair took the time to wrap several handkerchiefs around her wounded legs, though her frightened eyes were primarily on the door. Slams, creaks, and thuds sounded constantly from outside, but none were growing nearer. "What... what the hell was that?!" I shouted as frustration and regret gnawed at my heart.

Xarjun said, "I've heard of something from Shuyain, a distant land, that produced the explosive force of a lightning bolt when lit. Seen it in action a couple times myself, actually. I always knew it by the name thunderpowder." His voice was quiet, and he seemed distant.

"Damnit!" I yelled as I grasped my head with one hand. "Those Underdarkeans did it, didn't they?! They must've snuck in while we were busy getting up here! We should've paid more attention, but we didn't, and now Janhorn's fucking dead!" Everyone finally got a good look at his limp, decapitated body. His skin was already turning pale. A stillness overtook the room. The scaredy soldier covered his mouth. Everyone else just stared in disbelief. "How many more bodies have to be added to the pile before this godforsaken war is over, for Moradin's sake?! I can't take it anymore!" I felt my rage boiling over. My face grew hot, and I writhed in anger and pain as I pulled at my hair, trying not to let out my fury in a long, anguished scream.

Nobody spoke as I writhed like a pathetic worm in my own emotional turmoil. Xarjun just shook his head; indifference in his eyes. "We'd best patch ourselves up, then look for those plans. If we happen to find two revival scrolls, then, well, good for us." I glowered up at him as he wordlessly turned and started helping patch everyone's wounds. There was no time to wait for his healing words to recharge, not when those monsters could bust the door down every minute, so he just patched everyone up the conventional way. First he covered up the bandaged soldier's bleeding stump. "It'd be best to cauterize that, but we have no time." He said. "At least you seem to be managing it well." Then after fixing up his own left hand, he helped the scaredy soldier pull out that piece of metal in his stomach and stitched up his wounds. After him was Orange-hair, and Xarjun made sure that the handkerchiefs around her legs were on tight. Finally he turned to me and began to stitch and cover up the gashes left in my body.

"How can you act so calmly when Janhorn is dead?!" I growled.

"I guess I'm getting used to it." Xarjun said. "I mean, I've died, and Pae died..." His voice began to quiver. "...and, well, Fulcewind died before me... and several comrades of ours at the same time as Pae... so many have perished in this war. You need to get used to it, Gruzz. We all need to..." He trailed off.

I looked him in the eyes, and realized that I misinterpreted his gaze. There was a dull emotion in his eyes. It didn't change, not even slightly, whether he was looking at my wounds, or Janhorn, or the floorboards. He wasn't making much eye contact either. Xarjun's expression reminded me of what my great-grandpa told me, while he was black-out drunk and barely able to stand. He told me, 'I'd rather feel empty than risk the pain of sadness once more!'

Once he finished, he stood and turned to the others. "Let's search now, and quickly, before things get worse."

I jumped onto my feet and grabbed the back of his coat tightly, and yanked him back a bit. "Hold on now. Don't be like this. The rest of us can still make it, and as long as we find some revival scrolls, we can bring back the people we lost! So I'm not losing hope, and neither should you!" I looked around Xarjun at the rest of the team, who stared at me with surprise (or was it confusion?). "That applies to you too!" I yelled at them.

Xarjun let out a quiet chuckle which was practically under his breath. He then looked down at me, with a stronger light shining from his eyes. "This ain't a good time for speeches." He wrenched his coat out of my grasp. "We need to go, before the rest of the ship collapses under us." As they started to head deeper into the cabin, I picked up Janhorn, and with no better options for carrying him, stuffed him in my backpack. He didn't fit all the way unfortunately, and his little legs ended up dangling out of my pack. After taking my hammer and shield, I followed after everyone.

The dim cabin consisted of several different small rooms. The first one we were in was scantily furnished, with nothing more than a welcome mat, those aforementioned wooden beams, and an empty rack by the door's right. The place was musty and dust lay in piles. The lightest step would kick clouds of dust into the air and nearly send us into sneezing fits. Moonlight streamed in from a single small window at the very end of the room. There were three doors in this welcome room, aside from the double doors that led outside. We

went through the centermost door, into a wider room. There was a wooden table in the center, upon which was laid a quilt with a design of multiple different colored squares inside one another. Many chairs surrounded the table; a few were knocked over.

The left wall was covered in horribly faded charts and maps, including a large map of what appeared to be a great chunk of the known world. There was dwarven text on these postings, but the severe effects from aging made them impossible to decipher. On the right wall were some more postings, but most of the space was taken up by various shelves and cabinets, many of which were left wide open. Immediately we went to search them, but we didn't even need to. Right in front of us, by a broken shelf whose bottom had collapsed, was a pile of books that the shelf once held. And right on top was this thick book with a black leather cover and the words 'Arcziga View Tower' emblazoned on it in old dwarven. "That's it." I said. Xarjun scooped it up and opened it.

As he flipped through the pages, we all gathered around him. Sure enough, there were sketches of room layouts from page to page in there, along with some massive sideways projections of the Tower. Accompanying the sketches were paragraphs of old dwarven, only half of which I could decipher. But all we needed were those layouts. It was thankfully in good condition. While the pages turned a disgusting yellow, most of the text was legible, and the maps were as clear as day. "Thank goodness, climbing up here wasn't a waste of time and..." Xarjun sighed as he closed the book and carefully put it in his pack.

"We'd best go now, we got what we came for." said the scaredy soldier, and before we could respond he started to head toward the exit.

"Hold on!" I yelled. "We need to check if there's revival scrolls about, pronto!"

The scared soldier turned to us, and gave a sad frown. "Please..."

"Yeah, Bartholomew's right!" The one-armed soldier said as he walked over to his friend's side and turned to face us, his more determined look contrasting with the latter's fear. "This whole ship might give way any minute now! We can't risk--"

"No." Xarjun said. "We'll look around. If there were revival scrolls here, it would be a waste to miss out on them." The bandaged soldier got this real frustrated, almost malicious look as he started to speak, but Xarjun immediately interrupted him. With a thrust of his finger toward the soldier, he shouted, "No, I'm not going to argue with you! That's undoubtedly a waste of time, and it solves nothing!" He pulled his hand back and clenched it into a fist. "If you want to get out of here faster, you help us. Or you can take your injured selves out there and brave the hells of this boat if you so desire. That's the end of it, I don't want to hear anymore, now let's get searching!" The bandaged soldier reeled back with a pathetic look in his eyes.

As Xarjun began to search, Orange-hair looked at him for a moment with sad eyes, then shook her head. She began searching with the same gusto as Xarjun. I too began to look around the shelves. Meanwhile, after a long pause, the scared soldier said. "Wh-what should we--"

"We help them." said the bandaged soldier. "We are their escorts, after all." And so they joined us in the search too.

We threw all the papers, scrolls, and books off the shelves and ripped the drawers out of their compartments, but even after piling every single document and chart onto the floor, no magic scrolls were found. The only magic thing I found was this little statue that had fallen behind one of the shelves. Its base was circular, and curved upward into a rectangle that widened near the top, and from the top it curved up into a spire. Embedded in the center of the rectangle was a gem that gave a soft, green glow. Then we split up and searched all the other rooms. The only door in this meeting room was back out to the welcoming room, so we went back and went through the left and right doors. The left door led to the latrine, nothing useful there. The right door led to a hallway that in turn led to several bedrooms. Each of us focused on one or two rooms. After I upturned the first bedroom to the right, I met with everyone in the hallway. "I've got nothing." I said. Everyone else echoed my statement. I looked up at the ceiling. "Surely there's--"

"Gruzz, I'm sorry." Orange-hair said with a sad frown. "We've searched this cabin from top to bottom. Our hopes were high, but the reality is that there's no revival scroll here."

I was silent for a moment. It felt like my heart hit the floor. "Maybe there's one in the lower decks of--"

"Searching the decks is too risky. The chances of an important magical artifact being kept down there is too unlikely to be worth the risk." Xarjun said.

"We can't revive anyone if we hit the graves ourselves." added Orange-hair.

My fists shook as I gritted my teeth. The soldiers took a step back from me. Xarjun and Orange-hair took a look at each other, before Orange-hair said to me, "We have to go, before we lose the chance to leave at all." Her voice turned stern as she added, "Save you temper tantrum for later."

I huffed and closed my eyes for a moment. "Fuck you. Let's go." I threw down the little magic statue I had taken, and it cracked loudly. A bright green shine came from it, and we all shielded our eyes from it.

"Oh god, what now?!" The bandaged soldier said.

"Get away from it!" Orange-hair said, and everyone except myself started to back away. I was up against the wall and didn't have any room to retreat.

I grumbled. "So this is it, huh? Dying from my own stupidity. Looks like I'm never seeing Noam again." With my supposed last words spoken, I found myself enveloped in an intense green light. Then, just like that, I felt

a chilling breeze wrap around me. I fell an inch or two, and heard a crunch as my feet landed in snow. I uncovered my eyes and saw one of Noam's buildings right in front of me. 'This is some trick' I thought, but as I turned around, I found to my shock that there were more buildings around me, and the vast frozen field lay in front of me, and the black sky with its dark clouds and twinkling lights was above me.

The rest of the team had come here too, and they were completely in shock and awe. The bandaged soldier had dropped to his knees and stared forward with his jaw dropped, and Xarjun and orange-hair stood near each other, looking absolutely unsure about their surroundings. "How the hell did we get here?!" Xarjun said.

"Wait, the magic item!" Orange-hair said, before looking near my feet. There lay the cracked artifact. Its glow had disappeared, and it had been burnt black. Before our eyes, more cracks spread throughout it, before it collapsed into a black powder that was carried off by the wind.

"To think that they had a warp artifact in there." said Xarjun. "I'm surprised Thamoki or any of his crew didn't use it already."

"They may have lost it." Orange-hair said.

"Well, this proves miraculous to us." Xarjun kneeled down and clasped his hands together in prayer. "Oh Kord, thank you for your miracle."

"That was just luck, Kord didn't do anything." I snapped. "If he really wanted to help us, he'd actually send some revival scrolls down for us. Or stop letting all of our friends get killed!" Xarjun looked up at me with an angry glare, and then Orange-hair stepped between us with her arms stretched out.

"Okaaaay, let's get back on track," she said. "We can still get ambushed on the way back to the castle, and we can't let Janhorn's death be in vain."

Xarjun sighed and stood up. "Let's go."

As we walked down some obscure street, we soon started talking about what happened back there. I said, "I'm glad we happened upon that artifact, but if there's one regret, is that I lost the chance to find the bastards who followed us. We may never avenge Janhorn's death."

"Could his killer have been that half-drow?" asked Orange-hair.

Just the mention of him caused Xarjun's mood to sour heavily "We'll have to ask him next time we meet."

The bandaged soldier piped up. "I'd like to know how he managed to obtain enough thunderpowder to blow up half the dreadnaught."

"I suspect there was magic at work there." Xarjun replied. "Their spells that we encountered thus far are dark and sinister. Such destructive force would fit well with the evil we've seen."

We pondered for a while longer, but we quieted down as we reached Noam's denser portions. The alleyways were our friends once more as we snuck our way back. As we went, we eyed every shadow with suspicion, and even lit up our sunrods in particularly dark alleys. I hated having to sneak around in fear of living shadows and ambushes, but I think I've already ranted enough about this horrible war we unwittingly took part of. But our streak of luck continued, because throughout the long walk we encountered not a single enemy. No Shadow, no Dark One, nothing to worry about. It's a good thing too, because after all the fights and walking we went through that day, most of us besides myself and Xarjun were ready to drop by the time we reached the castle's back entrance. The guards there took one look at the injuries and bandages and blood that covered us, and they immediately called for aid. Next thing we knew, we were all forced on stretchers and carried to the infirmary, much to my annoyance.

Yawn... ah, I've been talking for a while, haven't I? Yeah, looks like I talked til dawn. I'd better wrap up this story then, so I can get some shuteye. We met with the King the next day and presented him with the plans, and that sure brightened his mood to say the least. He had stood up from his chair, and with a royal gleam in his eyes and a confident smile he said, "First the Adventurers of Avandra arrive last night, and then you bring the key to our success. The tides are at last turning in our favor." But he couldn't be too positive, so with a sterner look he added, "Understand that this is not the end of your troubles. No, you must fight harder than ever. Battle knowing that the Misbegotten's minions have spilled the mortal blood of Janhorn and your wizard Pae. Any risk of failure cannot be allowed. Noam must survive at any costs." That was a real bright turn in that speech there. Anyway, a meeting was held during lunch that day to discuss information and strategy. Me, Xarjun, and Orange-hair were all there; but I did not pay attention because it was awfully boring. It was just a whole load of blah blah blah.

However, my mind wasn't idle. Many emotions welled up in me as I thought of the incoming battle to decide Noam's fate. I felt anger for all the pain and losses inflicted on us. Then there was anticipation as I thought of what's to come. And lastly, there was... *sigh*... nevermind. There was just anger and anticipation. As I sat there with my cheek resting against my fist, I wondered which one of us would be the next to fall.

Alright, that's all for now. Goodnight. If you want to hear more, go talk to Orange-hair.