The morning after that mission in the mine, I woke up from the best night's sleep I had in a while. After six nights spent in that cold cave with the harsh howling of the blizzard acting as a demented lullaby, finally being back in the comfort of a bed was total bliss. For once, I didn't care that I was enslaved, nor that we betrayed the one man who could possibly have gotten us out of this enslavement, nor that Xarjun was about to do something really stupid. I sat up with a yawn and rubbed my eyes, then I looked out the window. The morning light shone through it, casting my room in a comforting yellow glow. The thought of Xarjun's plan slowly came back to me, giving me only a second to appreciate my comfort. Everything soured as I remembered, Xarjun was going to confess to Fulcewind that we betrayed her for Beezle. Sure, we then betrayed him right back, but you know what that says about us? That we're untrustworthy people, who secretly swap sides for the most unexpected reasons. If I were her, I'd throw us right under the wagon. I quickly got out of bed. I had to stop Xarjun.

First I went to Pae's room. We were the only girls and elves on the team, so with that connection I felt she would’ve been the easiest to get on my side. I knocked on the door, and she opened it. "Yes?" She said with a yawn. She clearly wasn't ready for the morning yet. Her eyes were half-closed and had dark circles under them, and her hair was all fritzy.

"Sorry to bother you, but I need to talk about something." I said. "Mind if I come in?"

"Come on in." She said before stepping away from the door. After closing the door behind myself, I sat on the edge of her bed while she sat in a chair.

"I have a question Pae." I said. "Do you think telling Fulcewind about..." I paused and looked toward the door, listening for guards. Then, with a lowered voice, I continued. "... do you think telling her about our betrayal will do us any good?"

The question seemed to have fully awaken her. Her eyes opened fully, and she looked about the room in discomfort. After a few seconds, she quietly said, "I'm afraid of her reaction, but I agree with Xarjun. The longer we delay in telling her, the worse her reaction will be. And she'll find out eventually."

"No she won't!" I said in a hushed tone. "We can act like that never happened!"

She took a long, thoughtful breath, and spent several more seconds thinking it over. "We could. In fact, it would be ideal if she never knew. But I fear the repercussions we'll face if she finds out later on."

We argued for a bit longer, but it was no use. I gave up and left the room. With some hesitance, I went over to Gruzz's room. He was an asshole who I hated talking to, but even without Pae by my side, all I needed was his volatile personality to help make Xarjun bow down. I knocked on his door. "Who is it?" He answered gruffly.

"It's me, Rosa." I said. His big feet rattled the floor for a couple seconds, then he opened the door.

"What do you want?" He asked. He was fully awake and ready to face the day.

"I need to talk to you about something." I said.

"About what?" He interrupted.

"Look, can you let me come in first?" I asked.

The look in his eyes changed slightly; there was a glint of suspicion in them. "Sure." He said.

I stepped into his room and closed the door behind me. Neither of us bothered to sit. "It's about Xarjun's plan to confess to Fulcewind." I said quietly.

"You mean how we betrayed her for Beezle?" He asked a bit loudly.

"Shhh! Keep your voice down!" I pressed my ear against the door. To my intense worry, I heard heavy footsteps and the clanking of metal pass by the door. Thankfully, I heard no pause in the footsteps as the guard walked past our door, as if he either didn't hear our conversation or had no interest in it. I sighed in relief. I looked back at Gruzz. "Look, we're at serious risk here. The only reason we're not branded as criminals is because of Fulcewind. If she knows that we betrayed her, she'll have every reason to--"

"Yeah yeah, you talked about that many times when you were arguing with Xarjun." He interrupted. "Look, you gotta stop being a coward. You have to stick to your decisions. We went to Beezle's side because we wanted freedom, and we changed our minds because he's an asshole. If Fulcewind can't understand, then fuck her."

I was exasperated. "But-- did you even listen to me? She has power over our future."

He sighed. "You're right, but fuck you. You may like to hide in the shadows, but I don't. I'd rather face Fulcewind head-on, and even give her a piece of my mind if necessary, than to keep it all in the dark like I'm a goblin in a sewer."

"BUT--!"

"Shut up! This argument is over!"

I ground my teeth. "Well fuck you Gruzz!" I stomped out of the room, slamming the door shut on the way out. The guards by the door stared at me as I went all the way back to my room and slammed the door closed. I stayed in my room, fuming. I didn't manage to calm down until after one of the guards delivered breakfast to my door. I went over to my desk and ate in silence. I shouldn't have been surprised about Gruzz. That's how he handles every issue: head-on and without an iota of tact. I felt a huge knot twist into my chest. Time was running out. Xarjun was going to confess to Fulcewind, and everyone but me was just going to let it happen. How could they not see how much of a bad idea it was?!

Even though I had already argued with him for a long time beforehand, I decided to try talking to Xarjun one last time. Even with nobody else in the team backing me up, I had to try to get him to change his mind. I thought long and hard over what to say to him as I got ready for the day. As I exited the shared bathroom for this section of the guest wing, I found him returning his tray to the guards. "Xarjun." I said as I went over to him.

He turned to me. "Yes?" He asked.

"We need to talk."

He sighed and looked down on me. He went over to his room, and I followed after him. The moment I closed the door behind myself, he said, "No." Needless to say, our conversation went nowhere.

Several hours came and went, each hour impounding an additional level of stress on me. When Fulcewind came down with her guards to lead us to the meeting, I was barely able to get myself to move. We went into a small secluded meeting room. It was a plain area with a rectangular wooden table big enough for twelve people. There was a small fireplace with a warm fire going. There was no window, not even a small shuttered vent to let light in. The aforementioned fireplace and a fancy candle stand were the only sources of light in the room. Laid on one end of the table was a small buffet consisting of chicken & beef pierced on sticks, and some salad. We took a plate of food and sat on the other half of the table; Fulcewind sitting on one end while we sat on the other end. She said with a smile, "First of all, I want to congratulate you for holding on out there. Keeping your wits in that cave for six days is no easy task, even with Janhorn's assistance."

We accepted her compliment.

"You're welcome." She responded. "Now, Falfyr and the fishermen have been taken to a safe location and are being given time to recuperate from their difficult experience. Because of that, we haven't yet had the chance to talk to him about his role in our fight against corruption. Did he read the letter I gave you?"

"Yes." Xarjun said.

"What did he think? Is he willing to help?"

"He's reluctant to be in the trial, since he would have to publicly announce his act of thievery." Xarjun said. "But I had a good talk with him about it. I'm not sure if he's fully convinced yet, but I did learn why he stole the treasure. It turns out none other than Beezle himself had trapped him in impossible-to-pay debts."

"Oh, I see..." Fulcewind said with a grin as she rubbed her hands together. "That just makes his testimony even more useful. So, as far as I understand, the treasure they stole was ultimately lost in the mine. Did you ever learn why Beezle wanted to get it back so badly?"

"It's a family treasure." Xarjun said.

Fulcewind said, "Ah, I see. So it's not greed that made Beezle overstep his bounds, it was insulting his family and their history. Now we know what buttons to push to make him screw up." She paused for a moment. "I don't believe I have any more questions to ask. Is there anything else of note?" The group was silent. I felt knots wind up all over my body, including a big one in my throat. We all snuck glances at Xarjun; he remained quiet. I wanted to scream, 'Come on, just tell her already!', but I knew better than that. Fulcewind said, "Well, seems not. Let's--"

"I do have one thing to add." Xarjun said. "It's something we should have told you much earlier." Fulcewind's happy expression dropped. She looked at each of us with an analytical eye, and at this moment she finally saw the tension we were experiencing.

She placed her arms on the table and gently clasped her hands together. "Tell me." She said.

It felt like an eternity had passed by the time Xarjun was done with his explanation. The normally stoic guards were looking about the room with unsure glances. They kept looking to Fulcewind, but she was just sitting there, eyes closed, and a disappointed frown on her lips. She opened her eyes. "So, you were so desperate for freedom, that when Beezle promised to somehow free you from this job, you agreed to become his double agents. At least you haven't had the chance to deliver any important information to him. I understand why you did it. Part of me is even glad that you did it; he wouldn't have allowed you to rescue my spy otherwise. However, I'm also greatly concerned about your enthusiasm. Please tell me, and be honest: is it your desire to rid Noam of its corruption, or are you only in this for your own benefit?" She looked at me and said, "Let's start with you."

With a long exasperated sigh, I put my elbows on the table and pressed by clasped hands into my mouth as I carefully chose my words. It was my intent to lie, and claim that I oh so wanted to fight the corruption and I

totally didn't want to just go back to my normal life. But as these words and ideas formed in my mind, I realized something. I looked straight up into her eyes, and I spoke directly from the heart. "When I started out in this team, I only did it for myself. I didn't care about Beezle and every little sin he committed. I just wanted to survive without someone breathing down my neck. But, all these missions I've experienced with the team has slowly turned my point of view around. Beezle and anyone who works under him has been able to get away with so much. Even the freaking lady that sponsored a monster-summoning cult hasn't had to pay for her crimes yet. It's only a matter of time before he lets something even worse happen. His whole company needs to be torn down before that happens."

Fulcewind just stared at me, with an almost bewildered look. But that wasn't all to her expression. In her surprised eyes, I saw a glimpse of excitement. She looked over at the rest of the team. Pae said, "I agree with Rosa. I want to stop Beezle."

"Same here." Gruzz said.

"I won't be satisfied until he's in a grave." Xarjun said.

Fulcewind gave a warm-but-worried smile as she twisted her clasped hands together. "I see, Beezle only made you more eager to stop him when he ordered you to execute Jones. For a moment, I thought I made the mistake of hiring common criminals who care only for themselves, but I was wrong. You're some of the best people for this battle, and I'm thankful for that. However, I can't be sure if the King will be as happy as I am. Let us focus on our lunch for the time being. When I am finished, I'll talk to the King about our conversation."

"Wait." I said in desperation. "Please don't talk to him. Can't we just keep this our little secret?"

Her smile dropped. "Absolutely not." She said. "He has to know, it is my duty to tell him."

"But-- if he doesn't like what he hears--"

"I don't want to hear another word from you about this. There will be consequences if he you keep asking me to commit treason. Do you understand?" I shut up and nodded. "Good." She leaned back. "Now let's go back to eating. By the way," She looked at Xarjun. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but we can't kill Beezle. For justice to prevail, he must be put on trial and forced to publicly answer for his crimes. Otherwise we will only encourage this city's culture of corruption."

Xarjun sighed through his nose and nodded. "I understand." He said.

When Fulcewind sent us back to our section of the guest wing, we all congregated in Xarjun's room. "That went better than I expected." Pae said.

"It's not all that better." I said glumly. "The King's going to throw a fit, I know it."

"Stop being so negative, orange-hair." Gruzz said. "What's he going to do, throw away his best corruption-fightin' team?"

"I agree with Gruzz." Xarjun said. "The King seems to be an understanding man. He'll understand our motives and continue to work with us."

"We hardly know him." I said. "Nobles, they can seem kind and forgiving at first, but one wrong move and they're more vicious than a rabid dog."

"We won't know for sure how he'll react." Pae said. "I hope he does understand..."

"All we can do is wait and find out." Xarjun said.

We hung out in Xarjun's room for a few hours. All of us were silent, and the tension was growing. There was a knock on the door. "Ms. Fulcewind wishes to see you." We heard a guard say. Xarjun went over to the door and opened it, and we were all beckoned out into the hallway. Out there, Fulcewind and her guards stood patiently.

"We have some news for you." Fulcewind smiled. "In simple terms, you're free to leave." We were taken aback. I felt incredible whiplash, as in one moment, I went from utterly afraid to completely glad. "Let me explain." She said. "King Fitzergeld and I had a long discussion about your... temporary betrayal, for lack of a better term. He wasn't happy, but slowly he understood how and why Beezle talked you into such a thing. He decided a big part of it was that you felt trapped, so he ordered me to allow you to leave the castle. You may be out as long as you like. All we ask is that you stay in Noam, check into the castle every mid-morning, and inform us of your current residence if you plan on staying outside the castle. Though, considering you've directly betrayed Beezle, you should stay on your guard when you're outside the castle. And of course, remember to keep it a secret that you're working for us."

"I... I have no words." I said. "Thank you."

"No problem." Fulcewind said. "When you want to leave, ask the guards to escort you to the back exit. Make sure you always come in and out of there. Anymore questions?"

Pae asked, “Will his highness let us stay in Noam once our jobs are done?”

“He’s considering it.” Fulcewind said. “If you stay well behaved, then we’ll be able to trust that you’ll never again perform the horrible crimes that brought you here. If you gain that trust from us, we’ll be able to let you stay in Noam. Do you understand?”

We all nodded our heads or said “Yes ma’am.”

“Do you have any more questions?” We had none, so she said. "Well, have a good day." And with that, she and her guards left.

After watching her leave, we all looked at each other. "Well, I don't know about you, but I'm headed out." Gruzz said before he approached the guarded exit.

"Count me in." Xarjun said before following after him.

"Me too." Pae said before heading forward. With a smile, I silently followed everyone.

As we exited the castle and walked through Noam’s crowded and snow-covered streets, I said, "That definitely turned out better than expected."

"And you thought we'd be in trouble." Xarjun said with a smile as he stretched his arms over his head.

"Well I didn't know both of them would be so understanding." I replied.

Pae said, "I think our rescue mission proved to them our drive and dedication."

"So, now that we're out, what should we do?" I asked.

"I've got some personal errands." Gruzz said. "I'll see ya later." And just like that, he went off on his own, disappearing into the crowds a moment later.

We watched his exit in curiosity for a moment. "Well, anyone else need to go on personal errands?" Xarjun asked. Pae and I shook our heads. He said, "How about we just wander around the town? Heck, Rosa, maybe you can show us some interesting places."

I said, "I sure can. Ever wanted to see the largest snow pyramid in the world?"

As we started heading on through the afternoon foot traffic, Pae whispered, "I'm worried about Beezle. What if he tries to assassinate us?"

"I'd like to see him try." Xarjun said. I nodded, but I couldn't stop myself from sharing Pae's worry. I found myself glancing at every window and every passerby that we came across. For most of my life, I always thought of alleyways as the most dangerous parts of the city, but the advice Mrs. Aeceran gave us the night before had a lasting effect on me. She was right, these crowded streets provided the perfect environment for assassins. Being stuck in that guest wing became more appealing in my mind.

Thankfully, we didn't run into trouble while we were out, leaving us free to enjoy the sights and shop around. Pae kept trying to get us to go to a library, but she changed her mind when I told her the only library in town was owned by the Beezle Company. We ate at a small little place I always love going to, the Moonstone Inn, then we headed back to the castle to rest from our little day trip. As the guards led us back to our section of the guest wing, we found Gruzz moping as he sat on a couch outside our rooms. "Hey, Gruzz, what's the matter?" Xarjun asked.

Gruzz sighed as he sat up and looked at us. "Did I ever tell you why I came to Noam?" We shook our heads. He angrily pointed at his beardless face. "It's become some asshole did THIS to me!"

"I thought the oozes destroyed your beard." Xarjun said.

"I'm talking about before that! My beard, it was long and bushy, until that asshole cut it off! I went all the way to Noam in pursuit of him, but what did I find after I finally tracked him down? He already moved to some other town!" He placed his face in his hands. "I won't be able to pursue him until after we sort out this mess in Noam, and who knows how long that's going to take?!"

I found it strange. Why go through all this effort just to get back at someone who ruined your beard? It's just going to grow back anyway. Xarjun, reading the expression on my face, said, "Don't laugh. In dwarven culture, having a big beard is considered something to be proud of. And trimming that beard is considered absolutely disrespectful."

"You wanna know the worst part?" Gruzz said. "Some wizard came up to me and tried to rip me off, claiming he could just cast a spell to regrow my beard as long as I ponied up 250 gold pieces. I nearly gave him the money too, till I saw through his charm and snatched that gold right back. There are assholes all around me...

I'm just sick of it all!" He was pretty much inconsolable, so we ended up retiring to our rooms, leaving him to mope out there for hours on end. Eventually, he also retired to his room.

The next day, sometime after breakfast, Fulcewind summoned us to her office. As we entered her room, we saw her sitting at her desk with her hands clasped in thought. She looked up at us and said, "Hello team. I have a new mission for you."

"What do you have for us today?" Xarjun asked as we sat in our chairs.

"You'll have to sneak back into the Arcziga View Tower for this one." She said, causing a deep feeling of dread to arise in me. She continued. "A Zebulunite leader has come to Noam and is going to talk with Beezle for reasons we do not know. Your job is to spy on their meeting so we know those reasons."

"A Zebulunite?" I asked.

"He hails from Zebulon, a tribe from Pearlena that devoutly worships a dragon god."

"Which one?" Xarjun asked.

"They call him Bahamut." She said.

Xarjun said, "Ah, the god of justice."

"So he's a worshiper of justice?" I said. "Does that mean he's here to stop Beezle?"

"For all we know, Beezle could be using this opportunity to trick him into thinking we're the ones that need to be stopped." Fulcewind said. "That is, of course, a worst case scenario. Even then, that leader, whose name I should mention is Malchus Theophilus, could not immediately take action against us. He has brought only a few guards with him."

I said, "So I see why we need to spy on them. However, I hate to be the one to bring it up, but we're pretty iffy on sneaking around in there. Half of us are either gigantic or really noisy." I gestured to Xarjun and Gruzz, who gave offended glances but quickly seemed to understand that I was only speaking the truth.

Fulcewind said, "Yes, that is a great concern to me. We don't want you getting caught again. What we need to do is strategize, and carefully this time. There is someone in there who can help you.. During the

mid-afternoon, when the meeting will take place, a spy of mine works a shift at the tower's front desk. If you need help or information from him, simply tell him that he needs to pay off his balance, then slip him a note describing what you need. He'll understand."

"What can he do to help us?" I asked.

"Well, you can ask him to look the other way, for instance. Or you can have him give misleading information to the guards about you. He won't do anything major, since we can't risk him compromising his position." Fulcewind said.

Gruzz asked, "Why the hell are you having us do the spy work when you already got a spy?"

"Well, Gruzz," Fulcewind said in annoyance, "he is not high up enough in Beezle's ranks to even be allowed to stand outside his meeting room door. And as I said, my spy can't risk compromising his position. Even if I wanted him to, he's unwilling to take the risk. Are you telling me you'd rather back down?"

"Hell no!" He shouted before slamming his arms on the table. "I'll make sure this mission succeeds!"

Fulcewind didn't flinch; in fact, she smirked for a moment. "Now hold on Gruzz, try not to go berserk on us. You can't just fight your way to the meeting room." She said.

"Perhaps," Xarjun said, before pausing for a moment to think. "We could use fighting to our advantage. While Rosa and Pae sneak in there, we can cause some chaos to draw the attention of the guards."

"That's a good idea, but I'm not so sure I like it." Fulcewind said.

"We only need to distract them long enough for Rosa and Pae to get themselves hidden in the meeting room." Xarjun said.

"Beezle might find that suspicious." Fulcewind said.

"Come on, does he really know us that well?" I asked.

"He did figure out just enough of ourselves to manipulate us." Pae said.

"Consider this." Xarjun said. "Two of the biggest, meanest brutes who betrayed you recently suddenly bust in through your front door with murder in their eyes, and after fighting a bloody battle against your neverending

waves of guards, they run out of there before they can be overtaken. Does that sound like a part of some bigger plan?" As Xarjun described this scenario, Gruzz started to rock back and forth in excitement.

"It'll at least make Beezle cautious." Fulcewind said. "He may move the meeting to someplace more secure, or even postpone it."

"That's a good point." I said. "We can't risk a big show like that." Gruzz quickly lost his excitement.

Xarjun said, "I've heard many good things about the Bahamut tribes, and one of them is that they won't back down easily from conflict. I bet that if Beezle tells Theophilus that we were there because of the meeting, then he'll just become more motivated to have the meeting at the original time."

"You seem eager about fighting them." I said.

"We don't have any better plans." He replied.

"It's certainly far from the best plan." Fulcewind said. "We want Paladin Theophilus on our side."

"He doesn't have to know we work for you." Xarjun said with a devious smile. "It is a secret after all." His smile suddenly dropped. "Wait, but Beezle does know we work for you. He can just tell that to Theophilus. Shoot."

"It was a good idea." Fulcewind said. "But don't worry. We have plenty of time to brainstorm."

For a moment, everyone was silent. Then, I had an idea. "Pae and I could try disguising ourselves." I said.

"That won't work." She said. "My sources tell me that they haven't seen any elven or eladrin workers. They're mainly halflings and dwarves." Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Fulcewind looked up on the door. "Yes?"

"I have an urgent letter for you!" A voice on the other end said.

"How urgent?" She asked with a little alarm.

"Time is of the essence!"

"Let him in." She immediately said to the guards. One of them opened the door, and in came another guard with a brown envelope in his hand. Written on the front was, 'To Tayana, From Mother' and below that was 'URGENT'. Fulcewind's eyes widened as she saw those words. She took the letter, opened it up, and read it silently for a moment. As she read the letter, her face turned deathly white.

"What happened?" Pae asked.

"It's... it's about my father. Someone had broken into his home and slain him with a dagger. I... I'll have to go there after this meeting." Fulcewind said.

"So soon after we saved Falfyr...?" Xarjun said. "I think Beezle had something to do with it."

"Me too." Fulcewind said.

"I think it's a trap." I said.

"I'll bring more than enough guards with me." Fulcewind said. She folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. "Forget that. We need to continue planning. This is more urgent." She said, though her face was still deathly pale and she had a frightened look in her eyes. She looked up at one of the guards and said, "Send half of your team to my mother's house. Make sure she's safe." He nodded, then left the room. The guard who delivered the letter gave a small courtsey with his hat, then left as well.

"You know, I still want to start a fight there." Gruzz said.

Everyone except Pae responded with, "No, Gruzz!"

Turning back to Fulcewind, I said, "Do we even have to spy on the meeting itself? We could follow Theophilus around after the meeting, to see if he reveals any important information while he's talking to his guards."

"That is a sound idea." Fulcewind said.

"I could stay close to them, and everyone can follow from afar and assist me if needed." I said. Fulcewind simply nodded, not adding anything to the discussion.

"I like this plan, Rosa." Xarjun said. "It's much simpler, and we won't put ourselves in the middle of enemy territory."

"Does anyone have anything else to add?" Fulcewind asked. We all shook our heads. "That's good. This meeting is now over. Good luck." She got up and ran out the door. The remaining guard looked at her, then at us, before following after her. We sat there silently for a moment.

"Poor Fulcewind." Pae said.

Xarjun gripped the table. "If it turns out that Beezle was indeed the one who had her father killed, I don't know if I can stop myself from killing that bastard." His fingernails dug deep into the table, tearing huge gashes into it.

I stood up. "Don't let yourself act hastily." I said. "Now come on, let's go!"

“Hold on.” Pae said. “I’m going to need a moment to prepare my Sleep spell. I think we’ll need it for this mission.”

The streets of Noam were busy as usual when we set out. Gruzz decided to wear that ratty brown and red coat that he got from Lyestin, that mercenary we killed in the mine. It had been so badly damaged that he ended up fashioning it into some sort of cloak that he wore over his usual coat, which looked rather ridiculous on him. Despite that, he insisted on wearing it due to its supposed protective properties. Anyway, the sky was still clear, but in the distance we could see a big thicket of clouds slowly drawing closer. However, they weren't as thick as the clouds from last week’s blizzard, thank goodness. It was a long walk from the castle to the tower, and it felt even longer since I was constantly worried about getting assassinated. I was so focused on Beezle being my enemy, that I had forgotten that him and his cronies weren't the only people we needed to worry about. Our travels were interrupted when three large dragonborn stepped out from an alleyway and blocked our path. They were massive beasts that put Xarjun's height for shame. Red scales covered them, and they had their hands dug into the pockets of their brown coats. The center one had a dull scar across his snout. It took only one look for me to recognize them. They were the Tiamat Devils we meet a few weeks ago. The scarred leader grinned. "Found you. Long time no see."

The dragonborn to his right said to Pae, "Hey, little elf thing, you know you owe us a real diamond, right?"

"Great. How bout we run on three?" I muttered to the others.

"Not this time. We've faced worse." Xarjun said as he stepped forward, brandishing his shield and mace. Gruzz silently joined him, sliding his shield onto his arm before pulling out a shiny new warhammer.

"Oh, you'd better try to run away this time!" The leader yelled as he swiftly pulled his longsword out of his coat with a slashing motion. "Either way, you four will make excellent sacrifices when we catch you!" Xarjun

and Gruzz immediately went into battle stances. 'Great.' I thought as I pulled out two daggers. I glanced at Pae for a moment. She had whipped out her orb and dagger, and was intensely staring the dragonborn in the eyes. Then, with a battle cry from both Gruzz and the leader, the short dwarf leapt at the tall dragonborn. Gruzz's hammer bounced off his shoulder without making him flinch, while his longsword cut across Gruzz's arm, which was covered by his cloak. As Gruzz landed on the ground, the leader said, "Little dwarf, you can't hurt me."

"Neither can you!" Gruzz shouted. He moved his arm out from under his coat, revealing that there was no fresh cut on him.

"Heh." The leader smiled as his friends, having finished equipping their shields and longswords, went to attack Gruzz. Suddenly, a force orb from Pae flew over Gruzz's shoulder and violently shattered on the leader's side. Shrapnel and blood went flying; the left dragonborn blocked the wave of shrapnel with his shield, but the other got several large shards stuck in his sword-wielding arm. "Grah!" All three of them shouted as the force of the explosion pushed them back. Gruzz started laughing, while the leader looked on unamused as he grasped his bleeding side. He growled as red and yellow sparks flew out of the gaps in his teeth.

"Shit!" Xarjun shouted. He glanced at me and Pae. "Quick, behind me!" He shouted just as the leader roared and shot a big wave of fire out his mouth. Pae and I quickly dived behind Xarjun as he kneeled down and raised his shield. The fire hit, then a moment later, everything cooled down as the fire passed us.

We stood up. "You okay Xarjun?" I asked him.

"Just a little singed!" He said. Suddenly, I noticed a moment too late that one of the dragonborn had jumped onto the traffic-jammed road and was headed straight for us. And I was closest to him. He shot a wave of fire out his mouth; I hit the floor, and the fire rushed over me. I heard Xarjun scream in pain as the fire hit him.

"Get that damn wizard!" The leader shouted as he and the other dragonborn clashed with Gruzz. As I stood, this dragonborn dashed forward and slashed my shoulder. I cringed in pain as I stepped back, raised my knives, and prepared to dodge his next blow. But then, Xarjun dashed around me to get toward his back. He saw Xarjun coming, and turned his head toward him as he raised his shield in the same direction.

I waited until Xarjun, with his mace empowered by his prayer, made his move. He slid his shield behind the thug's and yanked it out of the way, allowing him to strike the thug's longsword-wielding hand. The power of the prayer did its work; as the thug stumbled back in pain and turned his full attention to Xarjun, the light from the sun seemed to hone in upon a single point in his back. I lunged in and jammed my dagger into that point; and he screamed as my dagger pierced deep into his flesh. I then slipped on one of my magical gauntlets, and calling upon its power I pushed my hand against his back. The much larger dragonborn felt as light as a potato sack thanks to the gauntlet; he rapidly stumbled into traffic and bashed his head on an incoming wagon. He fell over as the wagon stopped. But it wasn't a clean attack for me. As I pushed him, he

had slashed my arm. I grasped my new wound, and then an incidental wave of fire from Gruzz's fight hit me and Xarjun full force. I got knocked flat onto my face.

Before the pain of the burns could really set in, I heard Xarjun say, "May her wounds be mended".

As divine light washed my burns and cuts away, I said, "Will they stop it with the fire already?!"

Xarjun said, "That should be the last of it, but stay aware. He isn't down yet." I looked up. The thug was getting up without showing a hint of pain.

I quickly jumped to my feet and looked back at Gruzz. He had his hands full; as he blocked one dragonborn's attack, the leader went to swing his sword at Gruzz's exposed side. "I'll help Gruzz, make sure this guy can't get to Pae!" I shouted before springing toward the other fight.

The leader's sword cut Gruzz's arm, this time drawing blood. Gruzz immediately retaliated with a swing toward his head, but due to the dwarf's height his hammer instead hit the leader's shoulder, again causing no noticeable affect on him.

"Can't you see?! You can't win against the Tiamat Devils!" His lackey yelled as he swung at Gruzz, who blocked it with his hammer, the force of the blow throwing him back. As the leader went in for the kill, he was too excited to realize I had gone behind him. For someone who acted so tough, he sure squealed really loud when I jammed my dagger into his lower back. In that moment, I heard loud screaming from Xarjun's and Pae's battle. I took a quick look. The thug they fought was covered in glowing shards; Pae's dagger cloud was many feet behind him, blocking off part of the road. He ran straight past Xarjun, who slammed his mace into the dragonborn's gut, causing him to stop in place and vomit blood. But then with a great battle cry, he slammed his sword directly into Pae, cutting her deeply and knocking her to the ground.

Suddenly, I heard a loud crack as Gruzz threw all of his weight and then some into smashing the leader's wounded side. His body tilted far, but he still stood, and then he slashed at Gruzz, only for his sword to scrape against Gruzz's shield. I went for another backstab, but the leader's lackey caught me by surprise, cutting a large gash in my shoulder. As I backpedaled, I noticed what was going on in the other battle. Xarjun was knocked down, and the dragonborn was headed for Pae as she lay on the ground, ready for the finishing blow. Suddenly, Pae turned into a blur as she zoomed away. As the dragonborn's sword stabbed into the sidewalk, Pae zoomed past us. She came to an instant stop several yards away from us, and she quickly stood. There was a red bleeding line across her stomach, which she pressed her arms against. In a flash, she raised her orb and cast cloud of daggers on the leader. Hundreds of swirling daggers formed around him, and he roared as they cut and stabbed into him.

At the same time, Xarjun stood up and faced the enraged dragonborn. "Damnit!" He shouted. Waves of light shot out from him as the rope-like scales on the back of his head flew about. "Kord, I beseech you to bless us in this terrible battle!" With that, a wave of light shone from the holy symbol hanging from his necklace. We were all bathed in the light’s holy splendor.

A wave of determination flew through me. I couldn't control myself. With a battle cry, I lept right onto the dragonborn that hurt me and shoved my dagger in his left eye. He cried out and threw me off of him, and I impacted the ground pretty hard. However, I leapt right back up and came face to face with the leader's back. It was an easy opportunity, but I wanted to do more damage. "Over here!" I cried out, and as he turned to look at me, I jumped onto him and ran my dagger across his throat. Blood spurted out, and he collapsed at Gruzz's feet. Gruzz jumped onto his back and went for the one-eyed lackey, who had barely pulled himself together and was about to defend himself, when suddenly another swarm of daggers appeared around him. He screamed as cuts opened up all over his body; he turned his focus to Pae and dashed right at her, only for Gruzz to bash him right in the spine with his hammer. He screamed again and fell to his knees just outside the dagger cloud, only for Pae to form another dagger cloud around him. He struggled and screamed as Gruzz and I ran over to finish him off, but he put up a hell of a fight. He kept weaving around and blocking Gruzz's hammer strikes, and all this movement kept me from being able to slip my dagger through a crack in his armor. But at last, the cloud of daggers wore him down. The blood loss was too great, and he collapsed as the daggers faded away.

We then looked over at Xarjun. He wasn't doing too good. His opponent had hounded him with multiple strikes that he could just barely block each time. Several long cuts were in his body. Noticing the defeat of his opponent's friends, Xarjun smirked. He backed away, narrowly avoiding another strike, and put his mace away. His opponent swung at him again, but Xarjun grabbed him by the wrist and twisted, and the dragonborn yelled in pain. Xarjun then spun him around so that he'd face us, while pulling his arm taught with his free hand and shoving his shield into the bad guy's back. "Get him!" He shouted. I immediately ran over and lunged two knives toward his chest, but he raised his shield, and I bounced off of it.

We all ganged up on him, myself trying to stab him while Gruzz bashed him with his hammer and Pae cast cloud of daggers on him, but this berserker wouldn't let up! The hits he took hardly phased him, he kept blocking my stabs, and then he managed to wrench his arm out of Xarjun's grasp. He jumped out of the cloud, narrowly avoiding another swing from Gruzz, and then skewered Xarjun through the stomach with his sword.

"Xarjun!" I shouted. He was stunned. Then with one swift motion, the thug yanked the sword out of him before he raised his sword up. Gruzz and I ran to stop him, and Pae cast another dagger cloud, but we weren't fast enough. The sword hit Xarjun's neck, and blood spewed out of the cut as he fell to the ground. Gruzz and I immediately assaulted the damn dragonborn, but even when we had him up against the wall he still kept fighting.

"That's it you Tiamat motherfucker!" Gruzz shouted in the midst of the fighting. "Take this!" He stopped swinging and rushed toward the dragonborn's exposed side, only to get cut through the side in the process. He paused, then weakly swung his hammer at the thug, who parried the attack and slashed Gruzz across the shoulder. But in doing so, the thug fully turned toward Gruzz. I tackled him to the ground and out of the dagger cloud, jamming both of my daggers in his upper back while I took a few cuts from the dagger cloud. The impact was rough for both of us, but he almost immediately started to stand. "No! Stay down!" I yelled. I let go of the knives, pulled out another knife, and stabbed it directly into his spine. He fell with a groan, but started to get up again. I pulled out the knife and started stabbing him repeatedly in a great fury, yelling "Stay

down stay down stay down stay down!" over and over again. After about forty stabs, Gruzz pulled me back by the shoulder.

"That's enough. I think he's dead." He said as we stared down at his wound-ridden body.

As I stared down at my messy work while panting, Gruzz went to Xarjun and administered first aid by pouring a healing potion down his throat. I slowly brought myself to look around. We just wanted to get to the tower nice and quietly, but here we were, blood splattered and surrounded by dragonborn bodies. Unsurprisingly, a crowd of shocked witnesses had gathered a safe distance from us.

The healing potion, while not enough to put Xarjun back in top condition, was able to stop his wounds from gushing blood. As Xarjun awoke with a coughing fit, Gruzz looked up at me and said, "Now what?"

"We need to move before the guards apprehend us." I said. I looked over at Pae. She was drinking from a healing potion. "Are you okay?" I asked her.

"I'm better now." She said before wiping her mouth.

I looked down at the dragonborn I slayed, and picked a large sack of gold and a dimly glowing bridle off his belt. "At least this fight wasn't a total waste." I said.

As Gruzz lifted Xarjun to his feet, he said, "Yeah yeah, let's get out of here already."

Suddenly, we heard two men behind us shout "Halt!" I quickly stuffed the items I stole in my coat. We turned around and saw two royal guards emerge from the crowd. They stopped before us and shouted "What in the name of Avandra happened here?!"

With Xarjun still partially out of it, it was up to me to talk our way out of this. "Well, we were attacked by these three thugs and were forced to defend ourselves." They looked down at the stab-riddled body by my feet.

"Well," One of them said as they both walked toward us. "We're gonna have to take care of this. Now all of you, leave this area!" Reading the confused expression on my face, he whispered, "We know you're on a mission right now. Go, before any of Beezle's men see you. We've got this." And so, we scrammed.

We retreated into an alleyway for 10-20 minutes in order to patch ourselves up. With Xarjun's healing words, that was quickly taken care of. However, there was another problem: we were spattered in blood. Especially

me, I looked like I had been drenched in red wine. After some searching, we found a bathhouse. It was a pretty fancy place; it had high prices that we never would have been willing to pay if we hadn't accumulated a good amount of wealth. Needless to say, we were the only lower-class people there. We were in and out of there pretty quickly, taking as little time as possible in order to wash the blood off ourselves and our clothes. Xarjun and I were the first to be done. As we waited in the front room for Pae and Gruzz to finish up, I said to Xarjun, "I can't believe those thugs were brazen enough to attack us out in the open. What's the deal with those Tiamat Devils?"

"They worship a god with an insatiable greed." He said. "Not only do they let her inspire them to do wrong, they have gone as far as to perform dark rituals for her, at least that's what I could tell from their mention of sacrifices."

"You believe they weren't just trying to scare us when they said that?" I asked.

"No matter how serious they are initially, those who worship dark gods find themselves performing their religion's evil rites." He said.

I nodded. "I figured that as well. They're far prouder and more determined than any gang I've seen before." Pae and Gruzz soon came into the front room, and so we quickly left, with Pae pausing only so she could tip the front desk person. As we went out into the street, I showed the bridle I stole to Xarjun. "By the way, got any idea what this does?"

Xarjun took it and looked it over. "I dunno. Pae, what do you think?"

She took a quick look at it. She said, "It looks like a conjuration item. I'll have to study it later to see what it conjures."

"Thanks." Xarjun responded.

He tried to give it back to me, but I said, "Ah, no thanks. I'm no good at either conjuration or horse riding. You can keep it."

"Alright then." He said before stuffing the bridle into his coat. We proceeded to return our focus to our mission.

Eventually we were less than a block away from the tower, and had a view of the entrance that was somewhat obscured by the buildings. We could see that it was guarded as usual by armored dwarves, and a horse-drawn wagon had stopped by them. I pulled the team toward a nearby tavern with seats out front. It was an active place, with all sorts of shady dwarves, dragonborn, elves, humans, and other races coming in and out

frequently. As we sat on one of the benches, Xarjun quietly said, "Good idea. We hardly look any different from these suspicious sorts."

"Wait." Pae whispered. "Does that mean we're the untrustworthy sort of people now?"

"Well, it depends on who you ask." Xarjun said.

"That means for the most part, yes." I whispered. Pae looked glum at this revelation. We proceeded to discreetly watch the tower's entrance. A group of three dragon-like humanoids were greeting the guards. They couldn't have been dragonborn. Not only were their statures smaller than Xarjun's, one of them had red wings. This winged creature had black scales, and he wore a set of flowing light-blue robes. He was the one talking to the guards, so I assumed he was Theophilus. The other two were covered in gleaming white plate armor. With their eyes so well hidden that the eye holes in their armor appeared to show only an endless black void, they had the appearance of stiff, soulless statues. Hanging from their belts were sheathed swords that had a distinct draconic design. The blades were wide and had uneven edges. As we watched Theophilus shake the guard's hands, I whispered, "What are they?"

"They’re corrupted dragons known as draconians." Xarjun said. "From what I’ve heard from one of my elders, these draconians had escaped from the clutches of the evil masters who created them, and they ended up going to Caraton to join the Bahamut worshipper tribes. In time, they formed the 12th tribe, Zebulon."

"So we're looking at actual dragons right now." Gruzz said.

"They're no more dragon than myself." Xarjun said. "I don't mean that in a rude way. It's tragic how the draconians came to be. They were not a natural race created by a gods; the first of their kind were unhatched dragons whose forms were irreversibly changed before they were born, thanks to individuals who wanted to raise them as corrupt soldiers."

"Enough of their lore." I whispered. "We need to pay attention." By the time Xarjun was done talking, the draconians had filed into the tower, while a servant boy was sent out to drive the wagon to a nearby stable.

"Let's hope that meeting doesn't take a while." Gruzz said.

A couple hours passed as we laid low. It was pretty dull. Some people bugged us because they thought we were either job givers or takers, but it was easy to brush them off. At some point, we had Xarjun come in to the tavern to get us meals and drinks, and it was while we were eating out on the bench that we saw the Zebulunite's wagon be driven back to the front entrance. "Hey, looks like the time has come." I said as I pointed to the wagon.

"Finally." Gruzz said.

"How do you think you're going to sneak up to them?" Xarjun asked.

I confidently said, "We'll note which way they're going and try to get ahead of them. When they're over a block from the tower and end up in a sufficiently crowded area, I'll roll under the wagon and cling on to the bottom-- shit." I put my hand on my head.

"What's wrong?" Xarjun asked.

"I just realized it would have been way easier if I snuck into the wagon while it was at the stable."

"We'll have to work with what we've got." Xarjun said as the entrance opened, and the Zebulunites filed out and got into the wagon. "We'd better go now." He said before returning our plates and utensils to the tavern. We then set out. As we left, Theophilus poked his head out of the carriage and looked in our general direction. I was worried that he would notice Xarjun, considering how freaking tall that dragonborn is, but a moment later I realized his attention was not on us. Rather, it was on a fight that had broken out between a couple dwarves not far from us. For a moment I wondered if he and his men were going to step out of there to break up the fight, considering they were supposed to be paragons of justice, but instead Theophilus went back into the wagon, which went trotting off a moment later.

I kept my ears keen as we ran across a street adjacent from the one the wagon was going down; it was difficult to hear the wagon's wheels over the city's bustling sounds, and I nearly would have sent the team off in the wrong direction if Gruzz and Pae didn't look down an alleyway and notice that the wagon had taken a turn. Soon, after I was certain that we had run far past the wagon, I lead the team down an alleyway that connected the two adjacent streets. Up ahead, we could see a great crowd.

I peeked out. Between us and the approaching wagon were throngs of people and other wagons going about their business. This was perfect. Not only was it impossible to discern anyone from the crowd, the traffic made the Zebulunite's wagon slow to a snail's pace. "Alright, everyone get back so they can't notice you." I whispered. "I'm going in." As the team retreated back to the adjacent street, I stepped out and quickly blended in with the crowd. As the wagon drew closer, I dropped down, crawled backwards as the horse and front wheels passed by me, then rolled under and grabbed on to the underside. It took only a few seconds, and nobody so much as acknowledged me while I did it.

It took all I had to keep myself from chuckling. What an ingenious plan, and it worked out splendidly. I put my ear up to the wagon and listened. To my disappointment, it was silent in there. 'Come on!' I thought. 'Surely they have something to say about that meeting!' The minutes passed, and their silence continued. I resolved to stay patient. Perhaps when they arrived at whatever inn they were staying at, they would start talking to each other. But at some point, I started to have an uneasy feeling. The noise of the crowds became less and less. I peeked out the small gap between the carriage and the ground. We were going into the bad part of town. Why the hell would Beezle let his guest of honor stay in shit-town? I tried to tell myself that Theophilus simply had a vow of poverty and refused to stay in anything less than the worst conditions, but

that seemed all too unlikely for me. The more likely reason was that despite my stealth and the concealment from the crowds, they had somehow noticed me, and were headed to a quiet part of town to safely dispose of me. The thought was enough to make me let go, causing me to land on the ground. The wagon soon passed over me. I quickly noticed a nearby alleyway, and silently scrambled toward it. Once in there, I pressed my back against the wall and panted as I listened to the wagon. It kept moving. I then looked around. We weren't in the bad part of town yet. The buildings here were of decent quality, and there were a few people out and about. Still, I knew more than anyone that this road we were going down was a direct trip to criminal town. Eventually, the rest of the team entered the alleyway. "What did you hear?" Xarjun asked. Then his and Pae's expressions dropped as they noticed my state.

"Nothing." I said. "Nobody spoke the entire time I was under there. I think they saw me, and were planning to take me somewhere quiet to do away with me."

"Worshippers of Bahamut, sinking to that level? I doubt it." Xarjun said.

Pae said, "But it is suspicious that they're going out here."

"Let's keep following them." Xarjun said.

With myself having calmed down, we went after them from a safe distance. Initially we had lost sight of them, but with the lowered volume in this portion of the city, I was able to track them down by following the sound of its wheels turning and their horse's hooves crunching in the snow. Eventually, we found ourselves deep in the poor part of town. We were in a place I've never been before, but had heard rumors of. They call it The Place Fitzergeld Forgot. No matter where you looked, the only buildings you could find were dilapidated and boarded up. Not a single soul could be seen or heard besides us and the wagon, but I knew that if you so much as stepped foot in one of these buildings, you'd end up in a place mired with blood, drugs, and disgusting pleasures. We stayed in an adjacent street and tried to keep quiet, but of course Xarjun and Gruzz's armor kept clanging too much for that to be possible.

Eventually, we heard the wagon come to a stop. I turned to the group and raised my hand to tell them to wait, then I went through a connecting alleyway and carefully peeked out at the wagon. They had parked the wagon in an alleyway on the opposite side of the street. To my surprise, I saw three humans step out, two wearing hide armor while hefting draconic swords, while the third wore the same kind of light blue robe that Theophilus wore.

As the last human out stepped out and the wagon's flap closed, I got a brief look inside it. The gleaming draconian armor I saw on Theophilus’s guards was piled on the floor. The two hide-covered humans proceeded to bend down and look under the wagon, and expressed shock at not seeing anything under there. At that moment, the robed human's eyes scanned across the street. I ducked my head into the alleyway. Then, I heard a shout, "She's over there!", followed by loud footsteps coming right for me.

"Shit, guys!" I shouted to my teammates. Immediately Gruzz came bounding down the alleyway, hammer and shield already out. I pressed against the wall and let him pass. He stopped just outside the alley, almost shocked to see a group of humans instead of draconians.

At the same time, the robed man said, "Men, hold on!" They stopped in their tracks. I could hardly see the situation since Gruzz was in the way.

"Who the hell are you?!" Gruzz shouted. "Have we been trackin' the wrong wagon?!"

“I'd like to say yes, but I think such a lie would be too obvious." The man said. "There's no way around it, seems we've been caught. Look, Gruzz, how about we just talk for a moment?"

"LIKE HELL I'M GONNA TALK TO YOU!!" Gruzz shouted before charging in.

"Damnit!" The man said before jumping in the wagon. "Get in!" He shouted to his men. With this act of cowardice, I grew confident in my ability to take them on. We had to capture them so we could get answers as to what the hell was going on. I charged past Gruzz and toward one of the guards; he wasn't expecting me, and took my dagger straight to the gut. I then pulled out a second dagger and swiped it across his forehead, causing blood to drip down to his left eye. He panicked, thinking that I had taken his eye out, and stumbled back from the wagon. At the same time, Xarjun had come out from the alley and was running full tilt toward the wagon. I saw the other guard climbing into the wagon; acting quickly, I swiped at him, but my dagger merely cut across his hide armor. He responded by swinging his sword at my head, but I fell back in the nick of time.

"Come on man, get over here!" He yelled to his teammate, whose attention snapped to the wagon while he covered his left eye with his hand. Xarjun ran straight at the injured guard, who noticed him. He acted quickly, pulling out a small axe and flinging it into Xarjun's shoulder, which stopped his charge. The guard proceeded to dash past me and onto the wagon while I was distracted by the sudden attack.

We heard the reins snap, and the wagon whipped around and took off out the alleyway and straight towards us! Xarjun and I jumped out of the way, but the side of the wagon bashed into Gruzz's arm as it went past him. "No, don't let them get away!" I shouted as I started to hopelessly chase after it. Suddenly, I heard Pae’s voice shout "Sleep!" as the wagon passed by the alleyway. A purple mist shot out of there and enveloped the wagon. The horse whinnied and slowed drastically. We immediately ran for the wagon while it was slowed. A guard opened up the flap and glared at us, but even with his arm covering his mouth, the spell still made him woozy. Xarjun got to the guard first, and with a cry of "With this strike, feel Kord’s wrath!", his mace shone with a blinding white light as he swung at the guard. The moment the guard blocked it with his sword, lightning from out of nowhere struck the mace. The guard was blown back deeper into the wagon.

I leapt on to the wagon without hesitation and got a good look at the interior. It was just the three humans; their robed leader asleep at the driver's seat, the guard I injured laying down in the corner struggling to stay

awake, and the guard Xarjun struck. He was slowly getting up. I immediately lunged down on him and shoved my knife into his neck, but he pushed his arm against my arms, preventing the knife from going in deep enough to kill him. He then kicked me back, knocking the wind out of me, then jumped up and made a horrible battle cry as he slashed my arm. As I struggled against the pain, to my horror I saw the other guard get up and raise his sword. With a wide and unsturdy swing, he missed completely, and then fell to the ground and started snoring. His friend gave a disappointed look at him, then turned his attention back to me and raised his sword. Suddenly, Pae threw her force ball right into his face. He screamed as a bunch of shards got stuck on his face; several more shards pierced into the driver's body, who remained sound asleep. I have no idea how none of those shards even got close to me.

"Careful Pae!" I shouted, right before she fired an ice bolt that just barely hit me, and ended up missing the guard.

She lowered her orb. "Sorry!"

The wagon horse broke through Pae's magical weariness and started running at full tilt. Gruzz managed to jump on in the nick of time, and almost immediately stumbled from the bumpy ride. The guard swung at him, but Gruzz deflected it with his shield as he brought himself to a stop. "Take this!" He shouted as he wound his hammer far back, to the point that it was touching the wall behind him. The guard tried to get out of the way, but I shoved both my knives into his back, holding him in place for just one moment: enough time for Gruzz to swing with all his might. The hammer missed the guard's head, but instead smashed into his arm so hard that most of it was torn right off with a sickening snap. In the moment, I nearly lost my lunch, while the guard started screaming his head off. He dropped, sliding off my knives in the process, but stayed on his feet. He slashed Gruzz's leg. He grunted and lowered his shield, as the human stood tall and stabbed forward with all his force. Gruzz's armor was pretty strong, but that didn't stop the sword from going a good inch or two into his chest. Gruzz's eyes widened, and he coughed up blood. Just before I could attack the guard, I noticed something bad. The other guard and the robed human were waking up!

Meanwhile, Xarjun and Pae were trying to run after the wagon, but it was just too fast for them. I don’t know exactly what they said to each other in this moment, but I’m sure it went like this: Pae said, “We’re going to get left behind!”

Xarjun said, “If only we could just conjure a horse!”

“Hold on. That bridle--”

“What do you mean?!” Xarjun pulled out the magic bridle. He paused. “Oh of course, it’s obvious it would conjure that.”

Anyway, back to the fight. The robed human took one look outside, and realized we were headed toward a wall. "Shit, goddamnit!" He yelled before grabbing the reins and making the horse go left. With the other guard starting to get up, Gruzz and I quickly ganged up on the first guard. One hammer to the shoulder and

one backstab later, he was down, though he left his sword in Gruzz's chest. The second guard quickly looked between me and Gruzz. Choosing Gruzz, the guard jumped at him. Gruzz tried to block, but he was woozy with that sword still stuck in his chest, and so the guard managed to get a deep cut in his shield-wielding arm. The wound started to gush blood.

Gruzz backed into the corner and raised his shield. The driver pulled out a short sword and slashed at him several times, but the shield blocked each blow. Suddenly, divine light shone over Gruzz; his cuts quickly closed, and the sword was pushed out of his chest. We all looked out of the flap. Xarjun was there; he and Pae were riding on a ghostly horse that looked almost transparent. The bridle I gave Xarjun was attached to the horse, and its reins were gripped tightly in his grasp as he kept up with us. I flashed them a grin before I backstabbed the guard. He shoved me back in frustration, but his attention quickly turned to Xarjun. He ran toward the flap and swung at the horse, slashing it across the chest. It made hardly even reacted to the damage, which freaked the guard out.

Meanwhile, Gruzz raised his hammer up high and yelled at the driver. "Stop this damn thing now or I'll crush your head in!"

The driver immediately freaked out. "O-okay! I'll surrender, I'll surrender!" He shouted as he commanded the horse to slow down and stop. He then raised his hands.

Gruzz smiled. "Good."

The guard looked at him in shock. "But Zor--"

"Please surrender too! We have no choice!" The driver said fearfully. The guard looked very disappointed as he dropped his sword.

Gruzz put his warhammer away and lifted the driver up by the collar as Xarjun got on. Pae handed him a length of rope, which he used to tie the two humans together. After relinquishing them of their weapons and setting them in a pile, he set them down in the corner. "Well that worked out." Gruzz said. He kicked over one of the piles of armor. "But what the hell is going on here? We thought this wagon was full of draconians."

The driver suddenly sniggered.

"Got something to say?" Xarjun asked.

"Oh... maybe I shouldn't." He said.

"Tell us!" Gruzz yelled before kicking him in the stomach.

"Oof!" He went, but despite the blow, he hardly seemed to be hurt. "Alright, alright, you win. This is a trap, you see. We're just bait. With some teleportation magic, the Zebulunites and ourselves switched positions. Now while we've been distracting you, they're coming in for the kill!"

"Shit!" Xarjun said before immediately running out. "Pae, we've got company!"

"Gruzz, keep watch over the hostages!" I shouted before hiding by the flap and peeking out of it. Xarjun and Pae, the latter still on the horse, were out by the wagon, keeping watch over the street and rooftops.

We watched and waited for a few moments, but there was nothing. "Let's get going." Xarjun said. "Everyone keep an eye out. They may be hiding just around the corner." As Pae got into the wagon, Xarjun said to the ghostly horse, "Alright Jenkins, go along with the wagon, alright?" I would've smirked at his choice of a horse name if it weren't for the intensity of the situation. Pae took the reins of the wagon, and then we rode off. Both humans were looking awfully unhappy.

"So," I said to the driver. "Let's get this out of the way: Beezle wants us gone, doesn't he?"

"I won't tell you who my client is." He said.

Gruzz lifted his foot, but I raised my hand toward him and said, "Wait." Turning my attention back to the driver, I said, "It's Beezle, isn't it?"

He shook his head. "I won't say."

Gruzz proceeded to kick him in the stomach again. Again, it hardly affected him.

"I'm not going to let you bully me any longer." He said.

Gruzz growled. "Don't make me get out my hammer."

"Alright, alright!" He said. "She's Wendy Gazgee, a halfling accountant recently fired from the company. She sent me to assassinate you in order to get back into Beezle's good graces." At this point I took a knife and stabbed his shoulder. He shouted in pain and stared back at me with a confused look.

"I can tell you're lying." I said. "Speak the truth, why don't you?"

"Uh-ah-" Flustered, he struggled with speech for a moment. "I can't really say..." I twisted the knife, causing him to suck in air through his teeth. "Fine, fine. I really don't know much about him, alright? He isn't even part of the Beezle company!"

"Tell me his name." I said.

"He called himself Brulselle Artyn! He's a dwarf, and that's all I know!"

I yanked the knife out of his shoulder. "I believe you." I said. "Now, next question--"

"Uh-" Pae said. "I think I see Beezle's troops out there." Myself and Xarjun quickly looked out the wagon's front opening. We were in a somewhat more populated part of Noam's bad area, so it wasn't too surprising to see people out and about, but it was obvious that the people approaching us were on a mission. They were four dwarves who moved in a close-knit pack. Each wore heavy coats, which failed to hide the glinting chainmail they wore underneath. At that moment, we made eye contact, and they stopped. A moment passed. They then pulled out large crossbows and fired on us. I hit the deck as I heard the bolts whizz toward us. One smashed into the restraints that kept the horse attached to the wagon, breaking a bolt and setting the horse free. Another bolt whizzed over my head. In the chaos, I heard Pae scream, and looked up to find that two bolts had lodged themselves in her chest. She squirmed off the seat and behind cover, as Gruzz immediately roared and leapt out the wagon to fight the guards. Xarjun crouched down and quickly went to Pae's aid, pulling the bolts out and healing her.

I noticed the robed driver smirking. While bolts flew through the wagon and Pae fired back at them with a couple ice rays, I crawled to him and said, "You bastard, this isn't a win for you! You're our ticket out of here!" I grabbed him and pulled him up to his feet. I stepped toward the opening while holding a knife to his throat. "Nobody move, or he gets it!" I yelled. Unfortunately, they hardly paid attention to me. The front two dwarves had been frozen to the ground by Pae, and were being mercilessly beat on by Gruzz with slow but powerful strikes. One of the front dwarves had it especially bad; his right arm was dangling like a sock in a wind storm. The back two ran around their frozen teammates to get a good view of Gruzz. They loaded their crossbows, raised them, and fire two bolts into Gruzz’s back. He screamed in pain, and faltered in his string of attacks.

As one of the beaten and panting dwarves raised his own hammer, Xarjun said, "Let me help." as he stepped beside me. He took a deep breath, then roared "LISTEN UP!"

The fighting stopped; all dwarves looked toward us. I pressed my dagger against the driver's throat and yelled "I said don't move, or I'll slice his throat!"

He weakly said, "Hey, guys, it's me, Zorus. Please listen to her..."

"That's a strange name for a human." Gruzz commented despite the situation. The other dwarves ignored him, and looked up at us with unsure glares. Pae took the opportunity to lift her orb up and channel her next spell into it as she hid behind cover, in case this attempt at a deal fell through.

Xarjun said, "You should all just run off." He stepped out of the wagon, his foot making a loud thump as he landed on the floor. "We've dealt with your kind before, you won't be any different."

The two non-frozen dwarves quickly loaded their crossbows and took aim at us. One focused on Xarjun, and one focused on me. "Don't be so sure." The dwarf aiming at Xarjun said. "We've shot down plenty of folk like you."

Zorus said, "People, people, let's just do the sensible thing! Just trade me and the guard in return for your safety."

"How about HELL NO!" Gruzz screamed as the dwarves around him tensed.

"Shut the fuck up Gruzz, do you want further injuries?!" Xarjun yelled.

"Please forgive him, he's got a temper!" Pae yelled as she hid behind cover. I'm not sure if the dwarves even heard her.

"Oh, I'm willing to stop fighting." Gruzz said. "As long as we fulfill our mission!" He gestured his hammer wildly at the dwarves. "How about you tell us what the fuck is going on with the Zebulunites visiting?!" I don't get why he expected the dwarves to answer. Why would Beezle tell anything to his hired hands? Also, two of them were in too much pain to speak.

"We don't know anything about him." The dwarf aiming at me said without looking away.

Xarjun raised his eyebrow. "That sounded like too much of a stock answer. Are you lying to us?"

"You keep asking questions, I'll shoot." The dwarf said.

"No no, please don't." Zorus said nervously.

Xarjun said, "Here, let's make a deal. If everyone here tells us what they know about the Zebulunite's visit, we'll let Zorus and his guard go." I wanted to add that we also get to go free if we let them go, but the dwarf interrupted me.

"I told you, we know nothing." He said.

"You clearly know something." Xarjun said.

Gruzz was getting more and more frustrated. He made a straining noise as his impatience grew. "Hey, tell your friend to calm down, or else I'll have to shoot him." The dwarf aiming at Xarjun said.

I shared Gruzz's frustration, but didn't show it. The easiest route was to just give our hostages away, assuming they didn't up and betray us immediately afterward, but no way could we convince Gruzz to lose our chance at finding out what the hell was up with the Zebulunites. We needed to figure something out, and fast. I noticed Pae looking at me. She had stopped channeling energy into her orb and placed it down. With a wave of her hand, a bundle of cloth appeared in her palm. She unfolded it to reveal a crude hand puppet with Zorus's likeness. She placed it on her hand and mimed Zorus speaking with it, while she silently spoke at the same time. It took only a few seconds for me to figure out what she was trying to convey. I smiled at her. She smiled too, then waved her hand again to make the puppet disappear.

"Would you rather that your friend die?" Xarjun asked them.

"Would you rather that you all die?" The dwarf aiming at me asked. As he spoke, his eyes shifted from me to Xarjun. The dwarf aiming at Xarjun also had his eyes on him, and the two dwarves confronted by Gruzz were too busy looking at him (and trying not to scream) to look at me. It was now or never. I signalled to Pae by constantly looking between her and Zorus. She then lifted her orb and cast her spell.

Imagine everyone's shock when Zorus suddenly blurted out, "Damnit, just tell them what you know already!" Even Zorus was shocked; it was not his lips that spoke the words, rather it was only Pae's magic doing the talking. I immediately clamped my free hand over his mouth before he could object.

"Alright, that's enough interruptions from you." I told him.

"I'm sorry, we can't just let them in on the plan! Beezle will kill us!" The dwarf aiming at me said.

"You know, the plan has failed at this point." The other dwarf said. "How much would it hurt to tell them?"

"You're right." The first dwarf responded. "Fine! We'll tell you all we know if you promise to let Zorus and his guard go free."

Pae stuck her head out. "And will you let us go if we free them?" She asked.

"Certainly." He said with a suspicious tone.

"I don't trust you." I said. I pressed the blade a little more firmly into Zorus's neck. "Be more sincere, or he dies."

"Just let them go!" The tied-up guard shouted.

The dwarf sighed. "Fine then. I promise that when Zorus and the guard is returned, you will be free to leave."

I said. "Good. Now tell us why the Zebulunites are here."

"They aren't." The dwarf said.

I cocked my head to one side. "Excuse me?" I felt Zorus desperately gnawing on my hand, but it was quite ineffective and easy to ignore.

"The Zebulunites never came here. That was false information that was spread around."

"But we saw them." Xarjun said. "They were here."

"Those were Zorus and his guards. They disguised themselves."

"I can see the two guards being disguised since they were covered in armor." I said. "But not their leader. He looked like the real thing."

The dwarf opened his mouth, then sighed out of reluctance. "Can we let that disguise method be a secret?" He asked.

"The deal was to tell us everything you know." I said. "Tell us." Zorus bit me as hard as he could. It was still ineffective. I looked at him and said, "Stop that."

The dwarf lowered his crossbow slightly, and it took him several seconds to gather the courage to speak. "Zorus is a doppleganger. He can change his appearance, in other words." I looked at Zorus in surprise; Pae was also looking at him. She opened her mouth to speak, but quickly shut it tight. Zorus glanced at her for a bit, then closed his eyes and reluctantly sighed through his nose as he accepted the reveal of his dirty secret.

"Heh, so that explains everything." Xarjun said with a smile. "So all of this was an attempt at assassinating us?"

"Yes." The dwarf said.

"And do you happen to know why a certain someone named Brulselle Artyn ordered our assassination?"

The dwarf gritted his teeth. "Haven't we answered enough questions from you? Just give us our men already!"

Pae said, "If you can all answer that question, we can give Zorus back to you." She looked around at me and Xarjun. "That's something we can all agree on, right?"

I nodded, and Xarjun said, "Yes." Gruzz didn't seem too happy to be making any deals with these people, what with that smoldering glare he was giving us, but he kept enough sense to hold back and stay calm.

"Fine then." The dwarf said. "Now I'm not telling you where he is or what he looks like because, fun fact, he's a friend of ours and we cannot bear to put him in danger by telling you such information. All I'll say is that he wants you dead because he's certain you killed Gwaen Lyestin. She was someone special to him."

"Huh, she was the mercenary leader in the mine." Xarjun said.

"It's no surprise that fight's coming to bite us in the rear." I said. "She's a pretty well known mercenary, and pretty popular with the men. Anyway, the hostages. How should we do this?" I asked Xarjun. I looked over at where the wagon horse was for a moment. "Seems the horse ran off."

"We still have my horse." He said, before whistling. We heard hooves beating from down one of the alleyways. A moment later, we saw the ghostly horse emerge from it and run on over to Xarjun. "The damage to the harness isn't something we can't fix." Xarjun said. "We can hook this horse up to the wagon, then take off the moment we free our hostages." And that's exactly what we did; the moment we got Jenkins clamped to the wagon, we pushed Zorus and his guard out, then immediately whipped the wagon around and took off the way we came. I looked back at the dwarves, human, and doppelganger we left and flashed them a devious smile. Just a moment before we went down a turn, I saw that all of them just standing there and watching us leave. They had absolute defeat plastered on their faces.

We found an alternate route back to the castle and went down that way. Such a good success felt great, but it was too early to celebrate; more assassins could be sent after us. As I sat down, I took note of one of the weapons we had taken off the hostages: the short sword that Zorus wielded. It had an interesting design and a strange aura, and the sight of this made me curious enough to pick it up and examine it in detail. The hilt was shaped to appear like interconnected branches, and set in the center of it was a blue gemstone. I looked

around, and saw that nobody else had really noticed what I was holding. Figuring that I might as well take it, I put it in my bag before anyone could object. I then looked over at the draconian armor spread about the wagon. "Xarjun, do you think this Zebulon armor is genuine?"

He had been staring out the back flap, and looked over to me as I spoke to him. His eyes then scanned over the armor for a moment. "I dunno. I've never seen a Zebulunite before."

"I bet we could sell these for a good amount of coin." I said.

"Suit yourself." He said, before he looked back out the back flap.

We reached the castle without incident, and when we met the back door guards, we immediately requested that we see Fulcewind. Unfortunately, we found out that she was still over at her folk's home, and the guards didn't know when she would be back. We told them the short version of today's events, and they suggested that we stay in the castle for our own safety. Gruzz was adamant against this, and yelled about how he didn't want to live in fear. But he didn't really have anything better to do, so he stayed with us in the guest rooms all day. In there, back in the confines of that cramped space, we waited for Fulcewind to return. Lunch came and went. She wasn't back. Several times we heard servants and messengers asking around for Fulcewind, just outside the hall. Even after the tenth of these people went by, she still wasn't back. Then, dinnertime came. As we ate in our rooms, a team of guards came to us. With grave faces, they said the king wanted to see us. This set me on edge.

As we stepped out of our rooms, we found the king already in the hall. I remember vividly how the old man looked at that moment. He stood tall before us, his white cape and jeweled crown seeming to glow in the dim light, making us all feel short before him. Yet in this great image of majesty, his face was completely different. It was pale, and plastered with uncertainty, like something powerful had suddenly sucker-punched him, and he had no clue when it would strike again. "I have unfortunate news to bring." He said. "Royal Advisor Fulcewind, her mother, and all the guards she brought with her... were found dead just an hour ago."