

Game of the Ancients Part II: Sarlona

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/10565145) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/10565145>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	F/F , Gen
Fandoms:	Dungeons & Dragons (Roleplaying Game) , Dungeons & Dragons - All Media Types , Eberron
Relationship:	OC/OC
Character:	Original Characters
Additional Tags:	Intrigue , Adventure , Epic , Female Protagonist , Multiple Protagonists , Lords of Dust , Order of the Emerald Claw , Breland (Eberron) , Riedra (Eberron) , Khorvaire (Eberron) , Sarlona (Eberron) , Inspired (Eberron) , Human Protagonist , Elf protagonist , Changeling Protagonist , sword and sorcery
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Game of the Ancients
Stats:	Published: 2017-04-08 Updated: 2017-05-26 Words: 41,079 Chapters: 15/?

Game of the Ancients Part II: Sarlona

by [MasterGhandalf](#)

Summary

Sequel to Game of the Ancients Part I. Thyra, Len and their companions have defeated their enemies and recovered the artifact called the Key - but it has proven to be only one part of a set that was scattered around the world. They must journey to the ancient continent of Sarlona to retrieve the next piece, but the path will not be an easy one. The Lords of Dust still scheme from the shadows, agents of the Lich Queen seek the artifacts for themselves, and the dark forces that rule Sarlona would see them all put into an early grave.

Prologue and Dramatis Personae

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dramatis Personae

Arlan d’Cannith: Mercenary artificer (male human)

Thyra Entarro: Adventuring sorceress (female human)

Yhani Eshenali: Priestess of the Undying Court and Wandering Blades second-in-command and medic (female elf)

Ganhakhad: Monastery elder (male kalashtar)

Ghazaan: Warrior, Wandering Blades (male hobgoblin)

Haund: Priest of the Blood of Vol (male human)

Havaktri: Psion, Wandering Blades (female kalashtar)

Harsk: Scout, Wandering Blades (male shifter)

Inharanath: Riedran lord (male Inspired)

Irinali: Emerald Claw necromancer (female elf)

Kharvin ir’Sarrin: Warlord and Emerald Claw operative (male human)

Len: Captain, Wandering Blades (female changeling)

Rinnean: Stealth expert, Wandering Blades (male elf)

Saeria Athlinnan: Emerald Claw bard (female half-elf)

Shaikatari: Assassin (female Empty Vessel)

Tarazanthan: Agent of the Lords of Dust (male rakshasa)

Prologue: A Lord of Dreams

The vast war camp lay across the land beneath the evening sky, arrayed in perfectly even rows ordered by company and battalion, as per the instructions of those who commanded it. Soldiers thronged between the countless tents as they went about their business, their uniforms neat and postures straight, for they were the warriors of a nation that prized efficiency and decorum from all who served it. Above their heads flapped the dark banners that marked that nation – Riedra, the monolithic, the unassailable, risen from the chaos of long ago wars under divine guidance to unite nearly all of Sarlona under one perfect rule.

Shaikatari didn't spare the banners a glance as she walked beneath them, making her way towards the center of the great camp. Though her clothing was plain and functional and a hood concealed much of her face, still the common soldiers ducked out of her way when they saw her and gave sharp, respectful bows. She wasn't one of the Inspired – not yet, at least – but still, Shaikatari was of the Chosen, one of the special families bred and trained from birth to host the ancient spirits who guided Riedra, and that birthright set her far above those among whom she now walked.

Everything in Riedra came back to hierarchy and order. The Inspired ruled absolutely, with the Chosen directly beneath them; changelings and humans filled out the ranks of the empire's people, and other races might also serve in specific roles – all save for the arch-heretics, the kalashtar, who sought to undermine all the Inspired had created and deserved only death. Order and hierarchy, determined by birth, by bloodline, by fate. Without it, the priests taught, Sarlona would surely fall back into the chaos of the great wars, a new dark age from which there would be no awakening.

At last, Shaikatari arrived at the great tent that stood alone at the center of the camp. Two guards stood by its entrance with spears at the ready; the Chosen approached them and cast back her hood, shaking out her pale lavender hair as she did so. The guards nodded once, for she was expected, and one of them pulled the tent flap open and gestured for her to enter.

Inside was a great empty space that could hold all of the camp's upper officers at need; for now it was empty save for a great wooden desk at one end, and the map of Sarlona that stood behind it – and the man who even now stood with his back to Shaikatari, regarding that map intently.

"Your Excellency," Shaikatari said, striking the center of her chest with her fist in salute, "I have come as requested. I await your will."

The man turned slowly to regard her, and the Chosen nearly gasped in spite of herself. It was said that it was impossible to tell the difference between one of the Chosen and one of the Inspired with a look – after all, they came from the same bloodlines, the only difference being that the Inspired hosted the *il-atlas*, the true rulers of Riedra, within them and the Chosen did not. How, after all, could mortal eyes detect the presence of an invisible spirit? And yet looking at this man – at Inharanath, Lord General of the Tenth Legion – Shaikatari *knew* that he was more than mortal. His fine robes, elegant aristocratic features and long, dark hair were impressive enough, of course, but not uncommon among the high families. But it was the air about him that singled him out, for there was a weight to him, a power and depth in his gaze that no human could match. This was what it meant to be Inspired.

"You have come," Inharanath said, his voice even and perfectly controlled. "That is good. Your superiors have spoken well of you; they say that you are skilled, loyal, and prompt in the carrying out of your duties. I am pleased to see that this is, at least in part, true."

"Thank you, Excellency," Shaikatari said as the general seated himself behind his desk. "What is your command?"

"I have received disturbing reports, Shaikatari," Inharanath said, lacing his fingers before him. "They come from among the barbarians of Khorvaire, from one of their... *universities*,"

he laced the foreign word with distaste, “that speak of something that concerns me greatly. It seems that there is a weapon buried somewhere beneath our land, dating from an earlier age when darker powers ruled this world. An expedition will soon set out to seek this weapon, for what purpose I have been unable to determine. But reports indicate that there is to be a *kalashtar* among this group.”

He paused a moment, to let that sink in. Shaikatari drew a sharp breath at the thought. She didn’t understand everything about the *kalashtar*’s enmity with her people – there were still secrets that she, who was still young and had seldom hosted one of the *il-atlas*, was too junior to know – but she didn’t need to. They were anarchists, worshippers of strange powers who sought to undo all that the Inspired had accomplished out of jealousy and spite, and that was enough for Shaikatari. An assassin, after all, needed to understand how the enemy thought, but only insofar as it helped to slay them better.

“And so you fear that the *kalashtar* may deliver this weapon to Adar, to use against us,” she mused out loud. “I believe I understand.”

“It is a true possibility,” Inharanath said. “But whatever their plans, we have determined that this expedition must not be allowed to succeed. Or rather, to succeed only in part. We will take a small force, you and I, and investigate this matter. If the weapon is something that will benefit Riedra, we will take it. If not, we will destroy it, or bury it so deep that it may never be found until the very continents shift.” He smiled thinly, without warmth or mercy. “And in either case, the barbarians must not be allowed to report back to their masters what they found. Them, young assassin, you may kill, every one.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello again, everyone, and welcome back to my attempts to write an ongoing, epic storyline in the Eberron setting for Dungeons and Dragons. This fic is the sequel to *Game of the Ancients Part I: Khorvaire*, and if you haven’t read that one I recommend giving it a look first, or else the events of this story won’t make much sense.

The Inspired are, quite possibly, my favorite villain group in the entire world of Eberron, and Riedra is a deeply unsettling example of the “Evil Empire” archetype. They only got a few cursory mentions in the first fic, and so far as the overall storyline I envision is concerned they’re ultimately a secondary antagonistic force, coming in behind the Lords of Dust and even the Emerald Claw for the position of big bad. Nonetheless, this particular story is primarily set in Sarlona and so they’ll get their chance to shine. I deliberately wanted to avoid writing from the perspective of one of the actual Inspired, to keep them more ominous and mysterious, so instead we see through the eyes of an Empty Vessel (or “Chosen”, as she thinks of herself). Shaikatari was created in part for this purpose, and we’ll be seeing a lot more of her throughout Part II.

The “barbarian” expedition mentioned are, of course, the main characters from Part I, who will remain protagonists for the rest of the series; we’ll get back to them next time. And of course, the Emerald Claw aren’t done with things yet either, and the Lords of Dust still have their plan hovering in the background. Needless to say, things are going to get very interesting when they all crash together. I hope you’ll join me for the ride, and wish me luck!

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 1: Stormchaser

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sharn, City of Towers. A mighty metropolis created by magic, composed of immense spires that rose high into the sky. Sharn, the jewel of Breland and, though it was the capital of no nation, it was perhaps the most famous and important city in all of Khorvaire. Sharn, home to sprawling slums and decadent mansions and everything in between, center of culture, commerce and knowledge across a continent.

It was also a center of transportation. Near the base of one of plateaus on which the city rested, on the shore of the delta called the Hilt which opened into the Thunder Sea, stood one of the great docks in all of Khorvaire. There were those who said that sea travel had been rendered obsolete by the lightning rail and airships, but for those who sought long-distance journeys, particularly across the oceans, sea-going vessels would always have their place.

One such vessel was the *Stormchaser*, owned and operated by Meren d’Lyrandar, a minor scion of a Dragonmarked House that was well acquainted with travel in all its forms. The captain, a tall half-elf just barely into middle age, now sat in his cabin aboard his ship with his hands folded on his desk, intently regarding the woman who sat across from him. She was lean, her frame spare and her clothing plain, her long dark hair pulled into a tight braid that hung to her mid-back. Human, with an ethnically-ambiguous face that could blend into a crowd in a dozen nations and an age that might be anywhere from twenty-five to forty, though Meren guessed she was closer to the former than the latter. Still, there was a certain hardness to her, and a military bearing her plain shirt and trousers couldn’t conceal; the captain would lay good odds that she’d been a soldier, and he rarely gambled unless he thought he’d win.

The woman’s name was Len, and Meren would have been correct in all his assessments save that she wasn’t human, though this was something she revealed to very few – and she was also a captain, albeit of warriors rather than ships. She was assessing Meren even as he was assessing her, and nodded slightly to herself. He seemed like he’d be just what they were looking for.

The Lyrandar scion lowered his gaze from Len to the bag of coins she’d pushed across the desk to him, then spoke. “This is quite an impressive sum of money, Mistress Len,” he said. “And I suspect you wouldn’t be showing it to me so casually unless you had more where it came from. My House is wealthy but I, alas, am not. You said you wanted to hire me and *Stormchaser*. May I ask what for?”

“It’s Captain Len, actually,” she said casually, “and I’m not wealth either, unfortunately, but I have a patron who is. We’d like to hire you for a voyage. Seven passengers, and no questions asked.”

Meren raised an eyebrow. “May I at least ask where to?”

Len smiled thinly. “Sarlona.”

Meren stood and turned to face the map of Eberron that hung on the wall behind him. “Sarlona,” he repeated softly. “Not exactly an easy journey, I’m afraid. Not as bad as if you’d asked to go to Argonessen, of course, but still... not easy. What do you know about the political situation there?”

Len grimaced. “More than I’d like to,” she said. “I have a friend who’s a kalashtar, and she’d never shut up about the place if you let her. It’s a bit hard to untangle what’s actually true and what’s just Path of Light mysticism, but I know about Riedra and the Inspired, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Yes, the Inspired,” Meren said. “I have nothing against them personally. Few people do, the kalashtar of course being the exception. I’ve even run into some of them at family events a time or two, and found them nothing but polite. But they don’t like visitors. As far as I’m aware, all official business between Riedra and the Five Nations starts at their end, not ours; almost no one is allowed to actually land in their empire, and the few who are get watched from the time they set foot on shore to the time they leave, and attempts at evading that... don’t usually end well. I don’t know what your business in Sarlona is, but I have a feeling being babysat by Riedran agents carefully controlling everything you can see and do wouldn’t be helpful.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Len said with a wry laugh. “But would it be possible for you to drop us off in Adar instead?”

Meren stroked his chin. “Hmmm. Far as I know, there’s even less contact with Adar than there is with Riedra. I certainly don’t know of any ports along the Adaran coast. But I have to admit, there’s something intriguing about the idea.”

Len smiled to herself; she’d been counting on that adventurous Lyrandar spirit, and it seemed she’d awakened it in the captain at last. “What if I told you that one of your passengers is the kalashtar friend I mentioned?” she asked. “She traces her roots to Adar. She can direct you to where you need to go, and smooth things over with the locals – her people. The kalashtar don’t terribly like outsiders either, but I think you’ll be better off with them than risk angering the Inspired. And,” she glanced down at the pouch of money on the desk, “like I said, I’ve got a wealthy patron, and he’s very interested in making sure this trip succeeds. You help us, there’s a lot more galifars and dragons where those came from.”

Meren turned back to face her; he seemed to consider for a moment, and then he smiled and held out his hand. “Maybe I’m a fool for this,” he said, “but I admit the idea of being one of the few outsiders to see Adar has its appeal. Never let it be said that Meren d’Lyrandar turned aside from a difficult voyage. And your offer is, of course, most generous. Deliver us payment, and safe harbor in Adar, and you have yourself a ship.” Len stood and took his hand, smiling in return. “Now,” he said, “let’s discuss the specifics of your payment.”

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Later that afternoon, having left the captain of the *Stormchaser* with the details of their voyage and his reimbursement worked out to the satisfaction of all parties, Len found herself perusing the bazaar in the district of Upper Dura, not far from the neighborhood where she and Yhani kept their modest apartment. The satchel slung over one of her shoulders was already slightly heavier now that it had been this morning; Len had just come from a bookshop where she'd purchased a new mystery novel by a writer she enjoyed as well as a thin, nondescript volume that contained a number of combat spells that seemed like they'd be more than useful additions to her repertoire. For now, she was merely browsing.

Sharn was a diverse city – perhaps the most diverse in all Khorvaire – and it seemed that all races and types were represented in the crowd that thronged through the bazaar. Humans, elves, dwarves and gnomes were present, of course, as well as stranger beings – steel-plated warforged who had a martial aspect no amount of casual shopping could erase, a band of hobgoblin warriors from Darguun who scowled at the humanoids around them seemed to expect the crowds to part before them as if it was their natural right. Len had even caught a glimpse of what was either a minotaur or someone in a very convincing costume, his horned head towering over the crowd. Eberron was a world of many races, and sooner or later it seemed that all of them ended up in Sharn.

A flicker of motion caught the corner of Len's eye, and she turned to see a pale figure in a hooded cloak brush past her. A changeling, grey-skinned and white-eyed, barely past her mid-teens by the look of her, lean and wary. Len paused for a moment and blinked; when she opened her eyes again the girl was gone. Unsurprising; no one could blend into a crowd like a changeling. Len knew that better than most. Fifteen years ago, give or take, and she'd been that girl, or someone much like her; though Len knew that she still wore her customary human face, inside she too, for good or ill, would always be a changeling – always be apart.

Shaking the disturbing thoughts out of her head, she made her way through the crowd and came up short in front of a jeweler's display. Len had never been the sort of woman who had a passion for that sort of thing, though she owned a few pieces for the rare occasions her work demanded she appear to be someone who wasn't entirely disreputable in respected society, but here a necklace had caught her eye. An understated piece, it hung on a thin gold chain and was worked into the shape of an ancient Elven glyph – Len wasn't as good at reading them as she'd like to be, but she recognized this one easily enough. Eternity.

"How much?" she asked the gnome who sat on a high stool behind the counter, gesturing at the necklace.

"Very reasonable, I assure you," he said, smiling. "Thinking of buying a treat for yourself, mistress?"

Len smiled wistfully. "Actually," she said, "it's for my girlfriend."

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Len stepped into the main room of the small apartment to find Yhani seated in front of the ancestral shrine she'd set up by one of the walls. The shrine itself wasn't much to look at, really – just a short-legged table covered with a plain white cloth, with a small tree in a pot at its center. Around the tree were carefully-arranged portraits of distinguished-looking elves;

Yhani had tried to teach Len her family tree, but the names and deeds of all those ancient ancestors of the family Eshenali had blurred together. The largest portrait, however, was one the changeling did recognize – Yhani’s paternal great-grandmother, a regal-looking woman whose eyes somehow seemed alive even in black and white ink. A pair of candles at either end of the table that burned with a faintly sweet aroma completed the shrine.

Yhani herself was wearing her customary white robe and sat with her legs folded beneath her and her silver-blond hair spilling unbound down her back. Her hands were resting on her knees and her eyes closed; she was deep in prayer or meditation and Len knew there would be no point in disturbing her until she was done. Still, she stepped forward carefully, removed the gold necklace from her bag, and placed it gently on the front of the shrine, a faint smile playing on her lips.

Then Len paused as she regarded what lay between Yhani and the images of her ancestors – an unsheathed scimitar on the ground before her. Len frowned; her lover was more than capable in a fight, but she didn’t consider herself a warrior. If she was praying with her sword out, it probably meant she was asking for guidance or a blessing in battle, and that was something she did only when she was troubled or afraid. The priestess must be more concerned about their coming mission than she’d let on.

Len shook her head; there was nothing she could do about it for the moment. Making her way quietly into the bedroom, she sat her bag down on the bed and fished out the thin spellbook she’d bought before dropping down beside it. She’d barely begun going over the first spell, running her finger over the words while silently mouthing them to try and be certain of the pronunciation, when the sound of footsteps distracted her. Looking up, she saw Yhani standing in the doorway, the necklace held lightly in one hand.

“When last I looked,” the elf said lightly, “my ancestors were not in the business of distributing jewelry to their descendants. Therefore, I must assume that this gift came from another source. But who could it be?”

“It’s a mystery,” Len said with a smile; standing up, she walked over to Yhani and kissed her lightly. “But I’ll have you know that there’s a certain gnome down at the Bazaar who is one necklace poorer and several galifars richer, which might be the clue you need to unravel it.”

“Len, you did not need to,” Yhani said. “But nonetheless, you have my thanks. It is lovely.” She reached up and carefully fastened it behind her neck, letting it hang free, a bright line of gold standing out against the white fabric. Leaning in, she kissed Len lightly on her cheek.

“I knew you’d like it, ‘Hani,” the captain said, “and besides, we now have a ship chartered, so I felt like a little indulgence was in order. Captain Meren was just like Zanthan said he would be – hungry for gold and for glory. Well, we got him the first, and I think I managed to convince him we could provide the second.”

“Both courtesy of Professor Taras Zanthan of Morgrave,” Yhani said. “Under other circumstances, I might wonder at that man’s seemingly inexhaustible resources. But I took the liberty of speaking with some of his colleagues, and they have nothing bad to say about him that they shared with me. We have worked for worse clients, I think.”

“So long as he pays what he’s promised and doesn’t turn out to be the vengeful reincarnation of Karrn the Conqueror, I’ll work for him,” Len said. “Haring off to Sarlona on a wild griffin chase isn’t normally my idea of a fun job, but... dammit, ‘Hani, every time I have second thoughts I remember the Mournland and that tiger-headed bastard. This isn’t just some sort of con – this is real, and I have a feeling it’d pull me back in even if I tried to back out. At least this way we’ll be walking into things with our eyes open.”

“And I, of course, cannot let you go into danger without *someone* sensible to guard your back, my bold soldier,” Yhani said, with a twinkle in her eye. “But I do think you are right – one way or another, I think we are part of this. Though Rinnean has, at last count, informed me no fewer than six times that we are all mad and will get him killed before this is over.”

Len rolled her eyes. “Rinnean is still just sore that a pile of reanimated bones got the drop on him – he’ll live. At least Harsk manages to take everything in stride, and Ghazaan would go anywhere with us as long as the pay’s good and there’s fighting at the end. Thyra and Havaktri, last time I talked to them, are both ridiculously enthusiastic about this journey, but that’s not surprising. You want normal conversation and a sense of self-preservation, don’t go to a kalashtar, a Flameite, or a druid, or so they say.”

The real reason why Thyra was so determined to undertake this quest remained unspoken between them. Even now that girl seemed to be at the crux of everything uncanny about this whole affair with the Lords of Dust, and there were things about her that Len didn’t like voicing aloud.

She shook her head to clear it. “Well,” she said, “at least we can get everyone together this evening and tell them we can set sail by the end of the week. At last, we can get this business ready to go. Destination, Sarlona.”

Len mimed raising a glass for a toast; a moment later, Yhani followed suit, but there was nonetheless something wary and determined in the priestess’s clear eyes.

Chapter End Notes

For our first couple of proper chapters, I wanted to give something of a sense of what the daily lives of our main characters are like when they’re not doing battle with ancient evils, starting with Len and Yhani. Showcasing a bit more of their relationship under more-or-less normal circumstances, and thereby deepening both characters, was definitely something I wanted to take the chance to do before everyone sets off for Sarlona, and I also wanted to take the opportunity to show Len chartering a ship for the journey. I didn’t do much with the dragonmarked houses last time, but they’ll have a

somewhat more prominent role in this fic – in this case, for facilitating getting from point a to point b over the ocean, Lyrandar.

I was a bit torn on having Len use a modern, colloquial term like “girlfriend” to describe her relationship with Yhani, but ended up going with it. Eberron is a fairly modern place, as fantasy settings go, and Len isn’t someone who stands for much ceremony. Yhani, on the other hand, is a very precise speaker who wouldn’t be caught dead using a term so casual – she barely even uses contractions!

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 2: Shadows and Flames

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The small chapel was empty in mid-afternoon on a workday, with sunlight slanting through the stained-glass windows depicting pivotal scenes from the history of the Church and onto the empty rows of pews. That the chapel was consecrated to the Silver Flame would be obvious to even the most casual observer, for silver was the dominant color in the banners and on the flame-styled decorations around the windows and doors. At the front of the chapel was a small altar upon which sat a brazier; within it burned a fire that was never permitted to go out and had been tinted with powders or magic to burn with a distinctive silvery hue. It was not the true Silver Flame, of course – even the great Flame beneath the Grand Cathedral in Thrane, said to mark the site of Tira Miron's last battle, was only a manifestation; the true Silver Flame was everywhere, and nowhere, even as were the evil forces it had been created to contain.

On the wall behind the brazier was a painting that depicted a young woman in gleaming armor; she wore no helm, so that her beautiful, determined features and flowing hair were plainly visible. One of her hands was raised in blessing; the other rested on the hilt of a sword that pinned beneath its tip a writhing shape of darkness. This was Tira Miron herself, prophet and first paladin of the Church; pinned beneath her blade was her enemy, the demon Bel Shalor who was also known as the Shadow in the Flame.

A cloaked figure quietly entered the chapel and walked towards the altar with careful steps, as if she still half-expected the sanctified ground to turn against her. Reaching the front of the room, she knelt before the altar and lowered her hood, revealing a youthful face framed by blonde hair that was newly cut short; Thyra Entarro looked up at the portrait of her namesake, and began to pray.

It wasn't a prayer with words; Thyra didn't even know what she might say anymore, but it was nonetheless a supplication and a need for blessing. Once, there had been a time when she had thought she might join the priesthood of the Flame herself, become a cleric battling evil and bringing light to dark places, but that had been before she discovered that she carried the taint of ancient fiends within her own blood. Thyra had made peace with that truth, to the extent that she could, but she still knew in her heart that her life had been set upon a different path and there would be no return to the dreams of her childhood. She might – she hoped – continue to follow the cause of the Flame, but she would never serve the Church as a priestess.

Nonetheless, she feared still that the demons – the ancient creatures called the Lords of Dust – were not finished with her, and hoped that somehow she could accomplish enough good to make up for whatever dark destiny she had been born to. And so she prayed, for blessing and guidance,

The Flame didn't respond with words, of course; the Keeper of the Flame and some of the Cardinals were supposed to be able to communicate with it through Tira Miron's spirit, but Thyra expected no such privilege. The Flame wasn't a person, the way the gods of the Sovereign Host were said to be; in the strictest sense, Thyra wouldn't even consider it a god. It was the embodiment of an ideal, and a power that enabled those who would strive for that ideal, not something a mortal human being could interact with. And yet, as she prayed, she felt comforted, as if merely knowing that the Flame had existed since ancient days and would still be there long after Thyra Entarro was gone reassured her.

Someone coughed behind her; Thyra jumped to her feet and spun, cloak whipping behind her, only to relax when she saw that it was only an old man in priest's robes. "I'm sorry to bother you," he said; like Thyra, he had a slight but audible Thranish accent, which struck her as comforting somehow. "I was just coming to check on the fire; I didn't realize anyone was here. I'm Father Tathin."

"Thyra," the young woman said, bobbing her head in a slight bow that the priest returned. "I didn't mean to get in your way, Father; I just needed to take a moment with the Flame. I'll be going now."

She moved towards the door, but Father Tathin held up a hand. "You seem troubled, young lady," he said. "People who come in here at odd hours usually are. Is there anything I can help you with?"

Thyra chuckled darkly. "I'm sorry, Father," she said, "but I really doubt it, and we'd be here all day if I tried to explain. Let's just say that my life lately hasn't turned out at all to be what I'd expected; I think I know what I need to do, but it's still just so overwhelming I feel like I'm completely out of control. I'm probably going to be leaving Sharn by the end of this week, and I don't know when I'll have a chance to find another chapel, so I thought I'd take a minute to pray and get my thoughts together."

"Well, this is a good place for it," Father Tathin said, smiling. "I don't know what you're going to be doing, and I won't bother you about it – it sounds like something private. But if you would answer me this – wherever you're going, will you keep the Flame in your mind and heart, and Tira Miron in your memory? Will you hold true to her example and succor the needy, protect the innocent, and thwart the guilty? In short, do you think this business of yours will leave Eberron a better world than it was before you began?"

Thyra paused for a long moment, remembering Taras's words about the Key and what it could potentially do, and the thought of thwarting the Lords of Dust, perhaps forever. "Yes," she finally said. "I think so. I hope so, anyway."

Father Tathin smiled. "When you get to the heart of the matter, that's all the Flame really asks of us," he said. "And I believe that if you go forth with that in mind, that it will go with you, and Bless you." He made a gesture of blessing with one hand. "Good luck, Thyra, with whatever mysterious journey you are undertaking. The Flame shine on you."

"And on you, Father," Thyra said, returning she gesture. The priest nodded and turned back towards the fire, and she too turned to leave the chapel. As she did so, she felt lighter, and

somewhat at peace; the old priest hadn't given her any concrete advice or aid, and yet Thyra couldn't help but feel that he'd taken part of a burden from her shoulders.

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The sound of music echoed through the opera house, leaving the audience enraptured as they listened. The voices of the singers on stage were powerful and expertly pitched, weaving complex webs of song that left listeners spellbound, with equally capable accompaniment from the orchestra. The lyrics were in an archaic form of the Elvish language that few in the audience understood, and the story was equally ancient, dating back to the Age of Giants and the long struggles of the elves in their ancestral homeland of Xen'drik. Rinnean, though an elf himself, wasn't familiar with this story, and in all honesty cared little for it; he was here because of the music and the spectacle – and to watch one of the performers in particular.

Even now, the music died away as she approached the front of the stage for her solo. Vaelynn d'Thuranni was young by the standards of elves but was considered a rising star by a number of *The Sharn Inquisitive's* more prominent music critics. Tonight she was wrapped in a dark gown that accented her pale skin and jet-black hair; from what Rinnean had read in the program, her character was supposed to be some legendary oracle who exhorted her fellow elves to stand against the giants and their tyranny. He had no idea how much of it was true; elves had long memories but not *that* long, and this opera was set in the days long before the birth of the Undying Court. Still, he had to admit as Vaelynn began her song, the part suited her well.

“Enjoying the show?” the man in the seat beside Rinnean's, a portly, well-dressed gnome, whispered; apparently he'd noticed Rinnean leaning forward when Vaelynn's solo was about to begin. “Sure is something, isn't she?”

“Yes,” the elf said quietly. “You don't know the half of it.”

The gnome grinned, excited, as many of his kind were, by the prospect of intrigue. “Do say on, friend,” he said, leaning in close. “They say House Thuranni produces more than just entertainers. You seem like a knowledgeable man. I don't suppose you'd be willing to share if those rumors are true?”

“No,” Rinnean said, eyes still on the stage. He was already wearying of this conversation. Maybe coming here tonight had been a mistake, he thought. Someone here was bound to recognize him sooner or later – someone more knowledgeable than an overly inquisitive gnome – and that could lead to some very awkward conversations. Still, when he'd seen an advertisement in the paper that Vaelynn would be taking a starring role in a new opera, he'd been unable to keep himself away.

On the stage below, Vaelynn's solo finished; she turned to leave the stage as the next scene's cast took their places, but as she did so, her gaze flitted up to the balcony. It was a far distance to pick out details, but elves have keen vision; her eyes and Rinnean's the exact same shade of dark blue-violet, met. She gave a faint acknowledgment, a nod so slight no one would notice it if they weren't looking, and then she was gone.

At Rinnean's side, the gnome had pulled out his program and was staring intently at the cover, a portrait of the singers with Vaelynn prominently displayed near the center. He ran a finger along the ink thoughtfully. "Say, friend," he said, "you look an awful lot like..." The gnome turned towards Rinnean to make his observation, but his voice trailed off. The seat beside him was empty.

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Later that night, Rinnean crouched on the roof of an apartment building overlooking the opera house, watching the crowds streaming out into the night, conversing about the performance in loud voices he could almost make out. Scowling, he stood and began to pace back and forth along the edge, idly tossing a dagger and catching it in one hand. Finally, he heard the sound of soft footsteps behind him.

"I was wondering if you'd find me," he said, turning to face the newcomer. Vaelynn d'Thuranni regarded him with arms crossed; she'd changed out of her costume and into a plain, loose-fitting shirt and pants and wore her black hair pulled back in a simple tail, but still she was unmistakable. Rinnean knew her face better than he knew his own.

"Hello, Rinnean," Vaelynn said, looking him up and down. "It's been a while, hasn't it... brother?"

"It has at that," he replied, shaking his head. It had been more than a year since he'd last spoken with his twin sister, but still neither sibling made a move to embrace the other, or to cry tears of joy at the unexpected reunion. Their last argument before Rinnean had stormed out of House Thuranni and never looked back had been far too heated for that.

And yet, their blood kinship was obvious to even a casual observer – even that fool gnome had picked up on it in the opera house, working from a picture of Vaelynn that wasn't, in Rinnean's opinion, even a particularly good likeness. In person, it was even more striking. The twins had been able to effortlessly pass themselves off as each other during their childhood, much to the consternation of their parents and tutors. As adults, they still could, given the right clothing and time to prepare. But of course, there was one key difference that in the culture of House Thuranni meant all the world.

Vaelynn had a dragonmark, and Rinnean did not. That division between them hadn't been what drove him from the House, but it as sure as Dolurh had been a start.

"I'm surprised you came tonight, brother," Vaelynn said. "Wouldn't think you'd want to risk running into someone from the House who'd be rather less understanding than me. Some of them still think you're a traitor, you know."

"Well, I could hardly miss my baby sister's performance, could I?" Rinnean asked with a grin; Vaelynn rolled her eyes. He was older, but by less than an hour; even to short-lived humans, it was barely a difference. "And besides, I... wasn't sure when I'd get a chance to talk to you again. I'm leaving Sharn before too long, and I've no idea how long it will be before I get back."

“Leaving? What?” Vaelynn asked. “I’d heard you’d taken up work for some scruffy mercenary; by the Traveler, don’t tell me that’s true. Talk about a family embarrassment.”

Rinnean waved her teasing away with one hand. “It’s not so bad, really,” he said. “The job isn’t too hard, the pay is decent enough, and the fact that I’m easily the best looking one on the team is a fact I can always comfort myself with. But... well, we’ve gotten mixed up in something I can’t easily explain, and the captain’s decided to drag us halfway around the world, to Sarlona of all places. And she’s the one who pays me, I can hardly say no.”

“What have you gotten yourself into now, Rinnean?” Vaelynn asked, but her expression softened. “You don’t have to do it, you know. Come home, brother. We can talk to Father, and he can talk to the Baron and smooth things over. Whatever happens, Mark or no, you’re still a Thuranni.”

“No,” Rinnean said firmly, pulling away. “You weren’t there on that last assignment, Vaelynn. It was bad. I may not have many standards, dammit, but I have a few. And I’m not comfortable with being part of a House that thinks murdering its rivals and their families is acceptable business practice.”

Vaelynn sighed. “I had a feeling you’d say that,” she said. Then, unexpectedly, she stepped forward and wrapped her brother in a hug; Rinnean tensed for a moment and then returned it. “But you’re still my brother. Good luck with whatever it is you’ve gotten yourself mixed up in, and come back in one piece, all right? And if you ever find yourself somewhere I’m performing and need help with anything... get in touch, and I’ll be there. I promise.”

A sudden warmth blossomed in Rinnean’s chest; he tried to fight the pleasant feeling down, but wasn’t able to completely. “Thank you, Vaelynn,” he said. “It’s good to have someone you can rely on out there.”

Vaelynn pulled back and grinned. “Why not? *Someone* has to be the responsible one.”

Chapter End Notes

We continue our character focus here, in this case looking at both Thyra and Rinnean. Religious Studies is my area IRL, and it certainly influences my desire to explore the religious lives of my characters; this is particularly true of Thyra, who is both very devout and has a very complicated relationship with her Church. Thus, the chapel makes an ideal venue to explore some of the ways she’s changed after her decision to stop fighting what she is last fic.

We also get some light shed on Rinnean, one of the less-focused-on mercenaries in the previous fic. I’d alluded to someone being tied to a dragonmarked house in one of my previous author notes, and he’s the one, a Thuranni out of favor with his family. Rinnean was a hard character for me to get good insight into earlier, which may sound odd

considering I created him – I knew he was an elf rogue, and the most selfish and morally dubious of the team, but it wasn't until I determined he had a falling out with his family that I realized just who that family was, and the key piece of who Rinnean was as a person fell into place. We'll get more on his backstory later on. For now, I will say that nobody, not even Len, knows he's a Thuranni – but Yhani has her suspicions.

Speaking of the Thuranni, Vaelynn is actually a character I created for another storyline that's yet to get off the ground; she was a Thuranni from my first conception of her, and making her Rinnean's twin sister (and giving her a cameo here) fit neatly into place after his backstory fell together. Like many members of her house, she leads a double-life as an entertainer and something rather shadier – opera singer and spy respectively, in her case. I may tell her story someday, or maybe not. Either way, Rinnean may find an opportunity to make use of that favor before the Game of the Ancients storyline is over...

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 3: A Royal Audience

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

East of Karnath, east of the dwarven homelands in the Mror Holds, clinging to the edge of Khorvaire on the border of the Lhazaar sea, there lay the land that was known as the Lhazaar Principalities. Partially located on the mainland, mostly composed of countless islands scattered about the ocean, it was here that human explorers in another age had made landfall from Sarlona, and begun the expansion that would leave them the dominant race across Khorvaire. Now the Principalities were divided, considered lawless among many of the people of the continent, and home to a variety of competing power groups. Pirates, Riedran spies, and the Dragonmarked houses all kept secret strongholds among the Lhazaar isles, away from the mainland's prying eyes.

So to did the Order of the Emerald Claw, and the followers of the Blood of Vol remained a common sight among the isles. For it was here, the rumor ran, that the Queen of Death herself maintained one of her secret dwellings, on some lonely and desolate island.

Irinali knew that the rumors were true. Even as she pulled the hood of her cloak more tightly about her head and stared out over the unquiet waters of the Lhazaar sea towards the shadowed shape of the island that was their destination, she remembered how it was that she had come to take part on this journey. She and her patron, Lord Kharvin ir'Sarrin of Karnath, had been preparing to set sail for Sarlona in this vessel that his family owned, when the words of a magical sending had echoed through the air. The flat voice had demanded they take a detour here, to speak with the Queen in matters concerning the item which they sought; though the words were not spoken aloud, the silence the spell left hanging gave no room for doubt that refusing to comply would have very unpleasant consequences.

Irinali turned and began to make her way towards the stern, cursing the cold under her breath. Ships she could handle, though she didn't love them; she'd been born and raised on the island continent of Aerenal, and was familiar with sea travel. The cold, though... Aerenal was mostly tropic. Irinali had left her homeland and her heritage behind long ago, but she still hated the cold.

A sudden wave rocked the ship, and Irinali stumbled as she heard the crew cursing and scrambling nearby; leaning on her staff, she just barely managed to right herself before sprawling directly onto ir'Sarrin himself. A tall, powerfully-built human in late middle-age, ir'Sarrin had been a fine patron for the last few years that Irinali had worked for him; as a high-ranking operative of the Order of the Emerald Claw, he was far less squeamish than most about her practice of the necromantic arts. Of course, he was also a true believer in the Blood of Vol and the Order's mission, something that Irinali, who had long since abandoned belief in much of anything but the magic she wielded and the money she could be paid for doing so, sometimes found grating. Nonetheless, the Karrn lord was one of the few people the elf necromancer considered a friend.

“All right, Irinali?” Ir’Sarrin asked, holding out a hand to steady her.

“Yes, my lord,” she replied, breathing somewhat more heavily than was dignified. “Let’s just say I’ll be glad when we get out of this foul sea and into the open ocean where I can only hope the weather will be somewhat calmer.”

“I find it rather invigorating, actually,” Ir’Sarrin said, scanning the horizon with a determined eye. This ship, *Karrn’s Glory*, had been in his family for generations; though not much of a seafarer, he’d made sure to keep it repaired and crewed in case he ever needed it for pressing business; now, with the summons from the Queen and the subsequent journey to Sarlona under way, was such a time. “Based on the charts, the navigator expects we should be arriving soon; I expect we’d already be able to see the island if it weren’t for this blasted weather.”

Irinali smiled. “You forget, my lord, that I’m not blind like you humans are. The island is there.” She pointed towards the dark shape on the horizon. “I wonder what business the Queen has for us? Hopefully our failure at the Mournland didn’t infuriate her so greatly she’s going to have us killed, or imprisoned for the rest of our lives.”

Kharvin’s face tightened; he didn’t like being reminded of their failure to secure the artifact in the Mournland, not least because it involved his own defeat in single combat at the hands of an ancient demon. “I doubt it,” he said. “If the Queen wanted us dead, she’d have sent assassins to dispose of us quietly. I suspect she wants to discuss the... unfortunate incident and our future plans in person.” He paused. “The presence of the rakshasa may have drawn her direct attention.”

“Not unlikely,” Irinali murmured. The two fell to silence as the ship drew ever closer to the island, a remote place that was difficult to find and reach without the proper charts, and was shrouded by illusions that could not be pierced without the proper tokens – both of which Kharvin had, courtesy of his standing in the Order, though he’d never had occasion to use them before. Slowly, the dark patch on the horizon grew, and then finally it resolved itself into a small, rocky piece of land jutting up from the sea; on its highest point was built a slender tower that rose to the heavens, built in a style that Irinali thought resembled some of the older Aereni architecture she’d seen, wedded to elements of Karrn pragmatism. At the base of the tower was what appeared to be a small but elegant manor house, and between two of the island’s rocky outcroppings, Irinali could just make out a protected harbor.

“Ah,” Kharvin said softly, a note of almost religious reverence in his voice. The followers of the Blood of Vol didn’t worship the Queen the way others did the Sovereigns or the Silver Flame, but they did venerate her as their first and greatest teacher. “At last.”

“Now we’ll see,” Irinali whispered.

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Karrn’s Glory pulled into the dock and Kharvin and Irinali descended the gangplank to the pier; there they were met by a pair of servants so heavily swathed in dark robes that the necromancer couldn’t tell what race they were, or even if they were living, undead, or constructs. The two figures bowed once to their guests and then turned and led the way up a

winding path towards the manor's gates; Irinali glanced at Kharvin, shrugged, and then they both turned and followed.

Inside the manor was a long, low hall decorated with tapestries depicting historical scenes so ancient they seemed old even to the long-lived elves; the images were faded, but Irinali could make some of them out, even recognize a few events from Aerenal's long history. The room was lit by magical torches that cast an eerie green light, and they illuminated a long table lined with chairs. Its only occupant was a handsome human man of indeterminate age who sat at the head, clad in rich robes of red and gold. He smiled when he saw the two guests, and gestured for them to take their seats on either side of him.

"Welcome, welcome," he said, smiling and showing a pair of sharply elongated canines. Irinali sucked in her breath at that sight; between the fangs and his pallor, it was obvious that whatever this man had once been, now he was a vampire – and doubtless a powerful one, to stand so high in the Queen's confidences. Irinali had long since become inured to the presence of lesser undead – it was necessary in her line of work – but she still had to suppress an instinctive shudder at the idea of a vampire. In her homeland, such creatures, who fed on the blood of the living, were considered abominations, a twisted perversion of the sacred mysteries of the Undying Court and their symbiotic relationship with their living kin. Irinali had long since left Aereni ways behind, but there was still an instinctive revulsion that she couldn't entirely expel. Shaking her head, reminding herself that it was only ignorant superstition, she took the seat offered to her; across the table, Kharvin did the same.

"Now, then," the vampire said, "in the name of Lady Vol, the Queen of Death, I welcome you to this, one of her lesser retreats. My name is Orrin; I speak for Her Majesty. No doubt you are hungry after your journey; allow us to remedy that." He clapped his hands and more dark robed servants hurried forward, setting plates of elaborately dressed steak and salads in front of Ir'Sarrin and Irinali, and a tall glass filled with a bright red liquid that certainly wasn't wine in front of the vampire. Orrin raised the glass in toast and took a long drink from it.

Ir'Sarrin regarded his plate calmly but didn't eat. "Will the Queen not be joining us, then?" he asked. "I was under the impression she wished to speak with me in person."

"Her Majesty is a very busy lich," Orrin said. "She has many demands on her time; she is currently scrying in her chambers and does not wish to be disturbed. I will relay your words to her precisely when she is available to hear them, which may take some time. Eat, both of you; you make me feel a poor host otherwise. And during our meal, we will discuss certain recent events and what they may portend."

"I submitted my report on the Mournland debacle to the Queen in writing," Ir'Sarrin said, frowning.

"And we would like to hear it in person," Orrin said; Irinali frowned at the use of the word "we", and wondered if the Queen's scrying mirror might be pointed at a site rather closer to home than the vampire had implied.

Ir'Sarrin began with his acquisition of the map to the Mournland vault and related the entire story up through their defeat at the hands of the rakshasa and his barbarians, and Irinali's subsequent discovery of the map leading to the second piece of the artifact in Sarlona. Orrin

listened intently, with his hands folded in front of him and his gaze never wavering; when Ir'Sarrin completed his tale, he stood and began to pace, with his hands clasped behind his back.

"In most situations," he finally said, "Her Majesty would not be pleased by the loss of a company of loyal warriors and the failure to achieve the goals of a mission. To be honest with you, she isn't happy *now*. However," he raised a thin finger, "she does not intend to punish either of you yet. You, Lord Ir'Sarrin, remain well-placed and well-connected, and elsewhere have proven yourself a skilled commander. Irinali, we cannot afford to waste a necromancer of your abilities; such are not common even among the Order. More to the point, you remain the only ranking agents of the Order to have significant experience with these matters. This is more important than you realize."

He turned back to the table and leaned forward, resting his hands in front of his chair. "Ordinarily, Her Majesty wouldn't consider a single artifact worth all of this trouble. The presence of the rakshasa, however, changes things. Such creatures do not make their presence known casually, and they do nothing without purpose. If there is a prize a rakshasa is pursuing, it's something Her Majesty considers worth having, if only to keep it from the hands of potential rivals. Therefore, Lady Vol has authorized me to give you her blessing to continue your pursuit of this device."

Kharvin inclined his head. "Thank you, Master Orrin," he said. "Now that I am aware of what force opposes us, you may assure the Queen that we will not disappoint her again."

Orrin gave him a thin-lipped smile. "You will not." He clapped his hands again, and two more figures entered from a side door. One was a tall, lean human man with a somewhat suspicious look about him; he was clad in leather armor written over with mystical symbols and carried a number of wands in holsters on his hips; Irinali raised an approving eyebrow at the sight of that magical arsenal. Beside him was a half-elf woman with red hair that was disheveled in a manner so artful it must have been done deliberately; she was wearing a plain shirt and pants and a brilliantly green cloak, and had a rapier belted at her hip.

"These are Arlan and Saeria," Orrin said, gesturing to the man and woman respectively; both bowed, though Irinali couldn't help but notice a mischievous glint in her eye as she did so. "Arlan is an expert in magical devices; Saeria specializes in ancient legends; both are also skilled in combat. They will assist you in your mission."

"I do not require 'assistance'," Kharvin said stiffly, with all the wounded dignity that only an aristocrat could muster, but then he nodded. "However, if the Queen sees fit to assign them to me, I will welcome whatever aid they can provide."

"Very good," Orrin said. He gestured for the two newcomers to join them at the table. "Now, then, let us make plans..."

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It was late that evening when the four of them made their way back to the *Karrn's Glory*; the ship was to sail at first light, and nobody, even Irinali, particularly wanted to spend the night in a lich's fortress. Ir'Sarrin took the front, seemingly filled with renewed purpose; Arlan and

Saeria followed, watching everything around them with such intensity that the necromancer was certain they were there as spies and minders as well as assistants. She herself took the rear, her staff tapping lightly on the flagstones with every step.

When they reached the ship, the other three boarded quickly and without complaint. Irinali, however, felt what seemed to be the pricking of eyes watching her back, a feeling she couldn't shake. Slowly she turned and looked up, back towards the manor and its tower, and there, in one of the upper windows, she thought her keen elven eyes could just barely make out the silhouetted figure of a woman regarding them with a keen, piercing gaze. From a distance, it was hard to tell, but her eyes seemed to flicker with a penetrating green light.

Then she was gone, and the window was empty. Irinali shivered, knowing that the memory of that eye contact would never leave her and certain in her bones just who it had been that she had seen. Turning away, she hurried back up the gangplank, her staff tapping on the wood as she tried to put more distance between herself and that penetrating, pitiless gaze.

Chapter End Notes

Irinali and Ir'Sarrin make their reappearance in the fic this chapter. I'd initially intended to kill them off at the end of the previous fic, but they grew on me and I decided to keep them around as a rival faction to our heroes who are after the same goal. To further that end, they're also gathering a bigger party of named characters around themselves. Haund, Ir'Sarrin's Blood of Vol cleric, will be returning in a bigger role (though he's not high enough in the Emerald Claw to get an invite to this little dinner party), and here we add Arlan (an artificer) and Saeria (a bard) to their group as well. In this chapter they don't get much to do other than show up, but they'll be getting fleshed out along the way.

Erandis Vol isn't the biggest Big Bad in the Eberron setting, but with the possible exception of the Lord of Blades she may be the most iconic. I deliberately didn't have her show up here in person, as I like to keep my big bads a bit mysterious, but she's definitely taking a more active hand; Orrin is a character I created here to act as a go between in the vein of Tolkien's Mouth of Sauron or Babylon 5's Mr. Morden, and he's probably not the only one she's got doing that job. This isn't Illmarrow Castle, Erandis's canonical main base, that we see here but as Orrin said, more of a smaller retreat – I'll wager Erandis (being the good supervillain she is) has dozens of hideouts and boltholes all over Khorvaire, and this is one of them. I did want to let Irinali get a quick glimpse of her at the end, though, to remind everyone of who is really pulling the strings in this organization – it's not a piddly little vampire like Orrin, and it certainly isn't Ir'Sarrin. The Wyrmbreaker isn't the only major power taking a hand in events now...

Also, in her portrait in the Eberron Campaign Guide, Erandis has glowing red eyes. I decided to give her green ones instead, which seemed far more appropriate on many

levels. Hey, if you're a millennia-old vengeful lich, you learn how to stick with a theme.

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 4: Meditations on the Future

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Thyra shouldered her pack as she made her way through the docks, apologizing to people as she pushed past them. In the distance, she could make out the shape of the Lyrandar galleon *Stormchaser*, which Len had contracted for their journey; her heart couldn't help but beat faster at the sight. Soon, for the first time in her life, she would be leaving Khorvaire on a mission to thwart the plans of an evil as old as Eberron – and maybe, a part of herself whispered, to prove that she wasn't damned beyond salvation.

Thyra was a follower of the Silver Flame, as were most people in her homeland of Thrane, but she'd always been more devout than many; growing up in Flamekeep with clerics for parents and an inquisitor for an older sister, it was almost unavoidable. But she was also descended, through many generations, from the rakshasa lords of the Age of Demons, and dark magics she had only barely begun to explore lay within her blood, waiting for her to release them. Once she had wanted nothing more than to have those powers gone, believing them a curse; now she'd come to believe that it might be possible to use them for the greater good. Assuming they didn't consume her first.

Shaking her head, she continued to make her way through the crowd. She'd given up the utilitarian blouse and skirt she'd worn on her recent journey to Karnath in favor of an outfit of vaguely military cut; combined with her shorter hair, Thyra fancied it gave her a somewhat martial air, suitable for a servant of the Flame on a great journey. It didn't seem to be having much of a noticeable effect on the people around her, unfortunately, but it helped give a small boost to her confidence, and for now that would have to do.

Finally, approaching *Stormchaser*, she saw her companions gathered and smiled. Len stood with her arms crossed, looking impatient; behind the captain stood Yhani, serene as ever in her white robes, and Rinnean with his usual air of feigned nonchalance. Ghazaan, the hobgoblin warrior, towered over everyone, though Thyra knew that his imposing appearance belied a kind and easygoing personality, at least outside of battle; Harsk the shifter stood beside him, stroking his scruffy beard with one hand and regarding the bustling crowd with an expression of great dislike – he was from the vast forests of the Eldeen reaches and was something of a druid by inclination if not by training, and he'd never been shy about his distaste for cities. Finally, Havaktri was almost bouncing on the balls of her feet and kept glancing over to the ship as if she couldn't wait to board – when she saw Thyra she smiled and waved. Thyra wasn't sure if she was getting more used to the kalashtar girl or if Havaktri had been practicing, but her expressions seemed more natural than they had even a month ago.

“Hey, kid,” Len called as Thyra approached. “Glad to see you found the place. You ready for this?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Thyra said. She nodded to the captain and her second-in-command. “It’s good to see you too, Captain Len, *Soungral* Yhani.”

Len raised an eyebrow at that, but Yhani smiled. “You have been practicing your Elvish, child,” she said. “There are not many of your people who would know the proper way to refer to an Aereni priest. I am impressed.”

Thyra shrugged. “Well, I learned a few words,” she said. “The library at Morgrave has more books on your language, but I haven’t exactly had time to go through all of them. I’ve been... a bit distracted lately.”

“Yeah, about that,” Len said, leaning close, “I don’t suppose you have... you know what... on you?”

Thyra gestured to a long, thin package that hung at the side of her pack. “It’s here,” she said. “Taras said it might help in getting us to the other pieces – Flame knows I’d rather not be leaving my blood all over Sarlona if I can avoid it. And we both figured it would be safer with us than left at the university.”

“So we’re going to be trekking across a hostile continent carrying a magical weapon ancient demons have already shown they’d literally kill for,” Rinnean muttered. “What could possibly go wrong?”

“Many things,” Havaktri said. “But, the Inspired aren’t looking for the Key. I don’t even think they could use it. And if we’re lucky, they’ll keep the Lords of Dust out of our territory. If we’re extremely lucky, they’ll be too busy fighting each other to give us much trouble at all!”

“So you’re suggesting that there’s not one but *two* powerful forces involved, and we’re going to be caught in the middle of them?” Rinnean asked. “I’m not exactly reassured.”

“That’s not really what I meant-“ Havaktri began, but Len raised a hand.

“As fascinating as this all is,” the captain said, “we’re on a bit of a schedule. Let’s continue this on the ship, all right? It’s time we get this journey started.”

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“Captain,” Len said, nodding to Meren as she stepped on board *Stormchaser* with the rest of her team close behind.

“Captain,” the half-elf said, returning the nod with a grin. “And I take it these are your people. Are you ready to set sail?” His gaze slid to Yhani, and he smiled and winked at her; Len fought down a sudden surge of irritation, though ‘Hani herself only regarded him with a flat stare.

“Yes, I’d say we are,” Len said, a bit more crossly than she’d intended. “Where should we put our things?”

“We have some passenger cabins belowdecks,” Meren said. “House Lyrandar always promises a comfortable journey.” He gestured to a crewmember, a younger half-elf, who came hurrying over. “Van here will show you the way. Just as a reminder, I would appreciate it if you stay out of my crew’s way while we’re working, though we would, of course, welcome your assistance should *Stormchaser* fall under attack.”

Len shrugged. “That’s fair,” she said. “None of us are sailors anyway, so we’ll be sure not to be a bother. *Any* of us.” She turned over her shoulder to regard her team, particularly Rinnean, who was doing his best to look perfectly innocent. She snorted quietly, and her gaze fell to Thyra; the girl looked serious and determined, and combined with her newly short hair, it gave her a disconcerting resemblance to her older sister, Valyria. Shaking her head, Len turned back to Meren.

“Well, if that’s settled,” she said, “I suppose we’d better get settled in our cabins.”

Meren nodded to Van, who bowed. “Of course,” he said. “Right this way, sirs and madams.” He turned towards the ship’s castle and began to walk towards it, the mercenaries following close behind. Yhani slipped up beside Len and lightly squeezed her arm.

“Do not be so tense, dear heart,” she whispered. “Everything will be fine.”

Len doubted things would be so easy. Sometimes, she really did wish she had ‘Hani’s faith, but changelings learned at a young age never to trust apparent good fortune. It could be all too easily swept away.

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Taras Zanthan watched the *Stormchaser* leave Sharn’s harbor in the bowl of still water that sat on his desk, and smiled. Thyra and her companions were at last setting out on the next stage of their journey; hiring on the mercenaries long-term for this job had proven a successful investment. They would ensure that the young woman made it where she needed to go, and recovered the next piece of the Key from Sarlona.

The Prophecy had decreed that they would, and so it would be, barring the interference of other powers. Taras’s job was to make sure that didn’t happen.

Dismissing the scrying with a wave of one hand, he rose from his desk and walked over to his window, regarding Morgrave’s campus and the bustling towers of Sharn beyond. To outward appearances, the professor was an avuncular man of late middle age who wore a short, grey beard and a pair of spectacles on his nose, but with largely unremarkable for a human man in his sixties. Appearances could be deceiving, for Taras – Tarazanthan – was an ancient creature who had walked Eberon far longer than sixty years. He was a rakshasa of the ak’chazar caste, tiger-headed and white-furred in his true form, making use of his own natural shapeshifting powers and a number of artifacts to deflect magical inquiry to conceal his true nature. He had been old already when the first humans had crossed the seas from Sarlona millennia ago and made Khorvaire theirs.

Taras thought of that history as he watched the students milling about on the campus grounds below. To most of his kind, humans were vermin, but of little consequence – barely worthy

even of contempt. A rakshasa might slay a human if it suited his needs to do so, or even if the mortal had made themselves a nuisance, but most did not care enough to go out of their way to do so – even as a human might crush an insect that bit them, but would be unlikely to dedicate themselves to exterminating all insects everywhere. No, the Lords of Dust had other foes, far greater, to occupy their attention – a fact that the nations of humanity might have been thankful for, had they stopped to consider it at all.

Taras, however – he had to admit, he had always found humanity intriguing, ever since they came upon the goblins of Dhakaan in the twilight of their empire and waged their wars of conquest against them. That life was struggle and conflict was something the rakshasas and their fallen masters had long known; humans understood that as well, though few would willingly admit it. Their histories were so much more dramatic than the countless rolling years of the elves or the dragons; humans lived short lives, but by Khyber, they *lived*. Taras had spoken with few other rakshasas who truly appreciated that.

And of course, they made ideal tools. That, as much as academic curiosity, was why Taras had chosen to live among them for centuries, in a succession of scholarly guises, to shape their knowledge of the past to better ensure that in the future, they would serve the needs of the Lords of Dust. In particular, at the command of his master Durastoran the Wyrmbreaker, greatest of their kind, he had watched a particular bloodline over the centuries, ensuring that it survived and produced the person their plans required. For this bloodline had been mingled with that of a lesser rakshasa, and the Wyrmbreaker had foretold that from it would descended a sorcerer who would retrieve the Key from where it had lain hidden for millennia, paving the way for the return of their ultimate lord – Bel Shalor, the Shadow in the Flame.

That sorcerer was Thyra Entarro.

Taras liked Thyra, to the extent that he was capable of liking individual humans – eccentric he might be, but even he had his limitations. She didn't know of the role he'd played across her life, his guiding hand shaping her into the person the Wyrmbreaker required – even when he'd shown himself to her in his true form in the Mournland and let her believe he had confessed the truth, there had been much he'd left hidden, including his identity as her favorite professor. In time she would learn the truth, but that time wasn't yet.

Now, of course, she was heading into a place where she would be largely beyond his reach. The Inspired were not rivals of the Lords of Dust, precisely – the rakshasas had never been able to ascertain the upstarts' ultimate goals, but they favored order over open conflict, and their plans displayed little knowledge of the Prophecy. Still, they represented an unknown, troubling factor. A part of Taras wished he could be there in person, to make certain events progressed smoothly – but the Wyrmbreaker had read his future and told him that such action would not be necessary, and that he should maintain his cover a while longer. But the time was coming soon when it would no longer be needed, and the rakshasas would reign once more openly upon Eberron, as they had long desired.

Shaking himself from his reverie, Taras removed his pocket watch from inside his coat and flipped it open, checking the time. As he'd suspected, he had a class to get to. Gathering up his materials, he left his office and carefully shut and locked the door behind him; there were things in his possession it would be unwise to allow a potential student interloper access to.

If some of the students felt that Professor Zanthan seemed particularly pleased with himself that day, none of them recognized the reason.

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As *Stormchaser* made its way through the mouth of the Dagger River and out into the sea, Thyra found Havaktri standing at the ship's rail, staring out over the water towards the east.

"Did you know that some Lyrandar galleons run on power from bound water elementals?" the kalashtar girl said suddenly; she didn't look at Thyra as she approached, but knew she was there nonetheless. "Not this one, though. I asked the captain earlier, and he said that elemental galleons are usually only warships. Trade and passenger ships, like this one, usually don't have elementals." A faint smile crossed her lips as she turned to look at Thyra. "It makes me glad. I always feel sorry for elementals attached to the airships or the lightning rail. I don't think anyone ever asked them if that's what they wanted to do for the rest of eternity."

"Havaktri, I think you're the first person I've ever met who felt sorry for something made of water or lightning," Thyra said, joining the kalashtar by the rail. Havaktri seemed to take it as a compliment, and smiled; she could take some getting used to, but Thyra had found herself liking the kalashtar girl almost in spite of herself. Havaktri had decided to be her friend almost from their first meeting, but now she was coming to realize she could return that feeling.

"I've never been to Adar before," Havaktri finally said. "I was born here in Breland, you know. Most kalashtar live in big cities, like Sharn, but my parents were part of a group who thought it was too wild, too... *loud*. So they built their monastery out in the country, very well hidden, and that's where I was born and raised. I never left until I decided I needed to see the world. Now I've seen Khorvaire, but I've never been to my people's ancestral homeland." She lowered her head and stared down at the water. "I think it's good for me to make that journey."

"But you've heard stories about Adar, right?" Thyra asked. "Len's counting on you to be able to talk the kalashtar there into helping us."

"Oh, of course," Havaktri said, seeming offended that Thyra would think otherwise. "There are kalashtar of the Vaktri line there, and all kalashtar of the same line are beloved family, even if we've never met before! Besides, I do know Adar a little bit." She tapped her forehead. "Kalashtar don't dream, but our minds need to do *something* while we sleep, so we relive the memories of the previous incarnations of our quori spirits. I've never been to Adar, but my ancestors have, and so I remember it, vaguely. Like something from a dream." She seemed to find this inordinately funny, because she gave one of her strange, hissing laughs under her breath.

Thyra shook her head. "I'm a follower of the Flame who's descended from demons, and you're part dream and remember places you've never been. We have to be two of the strangest passengers this ship has ever had."

“Of course,” Havaktri said, grinning. “As your people say, we wouldn’t want our lives to be boring, would we?”

Thyra bust into sudden, raucous laughter, startling a pair of Lyrandar sailors who were working nearby. “Oh, Havaktri,” she said, “I don’t think there’s going to be any danger of *that*.”

Chapter End Notes

So, this chapter is mostly about getting everyone ready to cast off for Sarlona, but we do get some important character beats here. Thyra’s new look reflects her character development and increasing determination, but of course, she’s not yet walking her own path as much as she thinks she is. On that note, we also get to see inside Tarazanthan’s head for the first time since learning about his true nature. To better contrast him with his boss the Wyrmbreaker I deliberately chose to make him a somewhat eccentric rakshasa with a genuine interest in humanity (who, per Keith Baker, are usually beneath the Lords of Dust’s attention as a group). Of course, he is still a rakshasa, and they’re a monumentally arrogant bunch – his interest in humanity is much more that of a researcher with a fascinating specimen than genuine empathy from one person for another. Being a demon doesn’t make Tarazanthan puppy-kicking evil in all aspects of his life – but not being puppy-kicking evil doesn’t make you good either, something to keep in mind.

And of course, Havaktri is always fun, and here we get a bit of insight into kalashtar culture and how they work. I was always disappointed that the only two major kalashtar characters from the novel line, Lakashtai in the Dreaming Dark trilogy and Dandra in the Dragon Below trilogy, turned out to be far from typical representations of their race; Havaktri is closer to the typical kalashtar (if such a thing can be set to exist) and her mix of human and quori tempered by a firm idealism and no small amount of eccentricity is a combination I find fascinating. I intend to do more with her in this fic than the last one – after all, Sarlona is tied to her people’s story more than anyone...

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 5: Legacies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The fort crouched atop a low hill overlooking the Cyran border, a low wall of light-brown stone surrounding a circle of barracks and support buildings, at the center of which rose a tall tower that overlooked the surrounding landscape. From its peak waved a Brelish flag, leaving no doubt to whom the fort belonged; the uniforms of the soldiers stationed within confirmed that association. Breland's army wasn't as disciplined as Karrnath's or as fanatically dedicated as Thrane's, but their country was an economic and intelligence powerhouse, and they took pride in being the best supplied and best informed force in Khorvaire.

Not that the soldiers here were a particularly outstanding example of that military, a young woman thought as she struggled to force her way through the crowd in the fort's courtyard. She was of decent height but spare of frame, athletic but not overly endowed with muscles or curves; her hair was black and pulled back in a braid and her face was marginally attractive but not strikingly so. Her appearance would go unremarked in any city in Breland; that, in fact, was what she'd designed it for. Unfortunately now, in strange territory and separated from her cadre of new recruits, was not a good time to go unnoticed.

Suddenly, she slammed into something solid and stumbled back to find herself face to face with a big, rough-looking human who looked down at her with cruel amusement in his eyes; a smaller man and a hard-looking woman hovered behind him like guards or enforcers. "You lost, newbie?" the big man asked, pausing a moment to spit. The young woman regarded him with distaste, but tried to keep it out of her voice when she replied; now was not a good time to be starting a fight.

"I'm with the recruits from Wroat," she said. "But I got separated from them in the crowd. I'm just trying to find my barracks and I don't want to cause you any trouble."

The big man grinned, and his two minions laughed. "Well, if that's the case," he said, "then here's what I'll do. I'll help you find your barracks, and you'll give me whatever money's on you and do whatever I say for the next three months. How's that sound?"

"Not acceptable," the girl said, a note of anger creeping into her voice. A part of her seethed inside, wanting nothing more than to bury a blade in his throat and be done with it, but she fought it down; she wasn't - couldn't be - that person anymore. And besides, a crowded courtyard in the middle of the day was no place for a killing.

"Too bad," the big man said. "Sounds like you need a lesson in manners around here, newbie. And don't think you can go run to the commander and get things fixed; newbies get roughed up all the time, and no one gives a damn."

“Try me,” the girl hissed; scuffing the ground with one boot, she kicked up a cloud of dust and sent it flying at the big man’s eyes. He stumbled back, cursing and trying to clear them while his two minions charged forward. The girl sidestepped the hard-looking woman and struck her clean in the face with her fist, but as she stumbled back the other man caught her arm. He pulled her close and grinned nastily.

“You just made a big mistake, girlie,” he hissed, but before he could demonstrate what, exactly, that mistake might entail, a large, orange hand descended onto his shoulder.

“Good day!” the owner of that hand called merrily, and then he casually yanked the man off his feet; the girl pulled free in time to see her assailant go flying into his compatriot, sending both of them sprawling. The ringleader paused, regarding his intended victim and her new ally for a long moment, then turned and left, cursing under his breath.

The girl turned to her new friend and found herself staring up at a towering figure whose fangs, wolf-like tufted ears, and yellow eyes, together with his burnt-orange skin, meant that he could only be a hobgoblin. Unlike their cousins, hobgoblins were always big, but this one seemed big even by hobgoblin standards – he had to be at least a head taller than the human who’d been threatening her. But his expression seemed almost jolly.

“Thank you,” the girl said. “I could have handled it, but I appreciate the help.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the hobgoblin replied. “Those idiots seem to forget we’re on the Keeper-damned border and think harassing everyone else is a good use of their time. Commander won’t stop it, of course, but someone has to. Might as well be me – apparently, people think I’m intimidating or something.” He laughed and showed his fangs, and the girl found herself smiling as well.

“Well, it’s good to know not everyone around here is like that,” she said. “And here I was about to have all my illusions about the brave and noble soldiers of Breland crushed. Speaking of that, do you suppose you could help me find my barracks? This whole mess started because I got lost.”

“Not a problem,” the hobgoblin said. He held out his hand. “I’m Ghazaan, by the way.”

The girl took it, and shook. “I’m Len.”

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Rinnean stood at the railing of *Stormchaser*, staring down at the churning waves below, and prayed for death.

The voyage had started out well enough; true, the ship had been rocking somewhat but the waves on the Dagger River were small, intermittent things that didn’t cause much disturbance. It had taken a bit more than a day for the ship to pass out of the river’s mouth and into the open ocean and then... then the real trouble had started. He’d woken up that morning to find his insides churning with an agony beyond anything he’d previously imagined; after he’d vacated what seemed to be the entire contents of his stomach into a pail, both Harsk and Ghazaan, who shared his cabin, had deserted him, the hobgoblin even having

the nerve to wave his hand in front of his nose at the smell. Of course, as luck would have it, none of their other companions were affected, leaving Rinnean to suffer alone. The next morning, noticing no distinct improvement, he had forcibly dragged himself to the deck, determined to confront his enemy – the sea – in person. He'd hoped it would help.

As it turned out, he was wrong.

And so he stood, resting most of his weight on the rail and silently wishing that the Devourer himself would appear and drag *Stormchaser* whole down to the depths, because at least there would be some dignity in dying by a god's hand. So tantalizing was that thought that for a moment he failed to notice the white-clad figure who had come to stand beside him.

"I might be able to help with that, you know," Yhani said; if she was at all amused by his situation, she managed admirably not to show it. "I do not believe I have ever tried to cure seasickness, but I believe the magical principal is the same."

"Spare me your gloating, Yhani," Rinnean muttered, now wishing the railing would oblige him by breaking and dumping him into the water directly, sparing him from this conversation. "Can't a man suffer in peace?"

"I am not here to mock you," Yhani said. "I was attempting to be friendly and offer you help; if you are too proud to accept it, perhaps I should seek elsewhere."

"Pride," Rinnean said with a short laugh. "That's rich, coming from an Aereni. You people sit there on your island, looking down your noses at the rest of us who actually live in the world. Nobody does pride better than you, 'cept maybe the dragons, and when was the last time you saw one of them around?"

"Your characterization of Aerenal is unfair," Yhani said. "Though as you are obviously in distress, I will not press the matter except to say that while there are some of us who think as you describe, many others do not. Whatever you may think, we *are* part of this world, and my family has always taken an active interest in events on Khorvaire."

"Family," Rinnean said. "That's what it always comes down to with you, isn't it? You think it's the most important thing in the world. I get where you're coming from, but my family? They're not exactly a bunch I'm proud to belong to. So if I seem like I don't take proper interest in my elven heritage or whatever you're thinking, that's why – my heritage isn't something I think very well of. Keep that in mind."

Yhani actually looked compassionate at that; somehow, that irritated Rinnean even more. "I will not pretend to imagine what that is like," she said sadly. "But do remember that you are not the only one among us who would rather escape their past. If you ever wish to talk about it, I might not be the right audience, but perhaps someone else would be." She held out her hand. "Now, would you like me to at try to heal your... condition?"

"No," Rinnean said. "I'll manage."

Yhani shrugged. "As you wish. But if you change your mind, I will be there." She turned and glided away, damnably graceful even on the rocking deck of the ship.

Rinnean turned his gaze back to the sea and sighed. What he'd told Yhani was true, for the most part – aside from Vaelynn, he had little love for anyone in House Thuranni. But there was a part of him that missed the excitement and glamor of life in the dragonmarked house, even if he'd promised himself he'd never go back. That part scared him more than anything else.

But maybe Yhani was right about talking with someone helping; as Rinnean stood at the rail, he found to his surprise that he was feeling better, just a little.

But he still hated the six-damned sea,

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Irinali lay on her back in the hammock in her cabin aboard *Karrn's Glory*, gaze scanning the spellbook that she held open before her, when a loud knock sounded on the door. "Whoever is there," she said without looking up, "had better have a damned good reason for disturbing me or I promise you the consequences will be as awful as are in my power to make them."

The door opened and the artificer, Arlan, stepped inside; Irinali sat up and regarded him suspiciously, while he did the same for her. She didn't much care for the fact that the Queen – or at least, her lapdog – had seen fit to impose a pair of "helpers" who were almost certainly spies on her and Kharvin, and more than that, she'd always had a particular distaste for artificers. Though their creations were ubiquitous, she had always seen them as something more like smiths or carpenters than true wizards – useful to have around, to be sure, but to act as if their imbuing of wood or metal with a mockery of life was an art equal to shaping life and death themselves to do one's bidding was absurd. And yet they acted as if they were equal – or superior – to any wizard. Arlan, who was now leaning against the wall with his arms crossed as he regarded her, looked to be a particularly obnoxious example of the breed.

"Well?" Irinali demanded. "I would like to get back to my reading, and if you have anything better to do here than stand and stare, get to it, or else I will evict you – forcibly." She flexed the fingers of her right hand and smiled as necromantic energies played along it.

If Arlan was impressed, he didn't show it. "Listen," he said. "I can tell you don't like me, and I'm not terribly fond of your kind either, *necromancer*, but we're the only two wielders of the arcane arts on this ship who have any power – Saeria's a dabbler at best. I'd like to talk with you a bit about this thing we're after, and I'd rather do it away from interruptions – professional to professional."

Irinali quirked an eyebrow at him. Maybe this could prove interesting after all. "There's not much to tell, unfortunately," she said. "I didn't get a good look at the object in question before the damned rakshasa showed up and everything went to Khyber. It was a sword, though; set with dragonshards. As best I could make out the inscription it's called the Key and is supposed to have the power to bind things, though I don't know how."

"Hmm," Arlan said, stroking his chin. "Khyber dragonshards are useful for making bindings, whether for creatures or energies. Channeled through the sword, maybe? Stab something with it, and that something gets caught in the shards? *Damn*, I wish I could see it."

“Well, it’s probably in a vault in Flamekeep by now, where it’ll be no good to anyone,” Irinali muttered. “Damn Flameites never know when to leave well enough alone, and last I saw that inquisitor and her friends had the rakshasa outnumbered. If the Church doesn’t have it, he does. What a waste.”

“Indeed,” Arlan agreed. “And so you think that another one of these things is buried in Sarlona?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Irinali said. “I didn’t get a very long look at the inscription, and the dialect was so old I could barely read it. But I think either another artifact of the same type, or something that is somehow linked to the sword’s purpose, at least. I’m not even entirely sure if just the sword itself is the Key, or if the whole set is. But we won’t know until we find it.”

“Was there anything else worth noticing in that vault?” Arlan asked. “Speaking from professional curiosity, of course.”

“There were these constructs,” Irinali said, shuddering at the memory. “Big iron monsters that spewed steam, shaped like dragons. Nearly wiped out the lot of us.”

That got Arlan’s attention. “Constructs?” he asked. “Like warforged?”

“More like golems,” Irinali said. “Warforged are supposed to be smart, right? These things seemed to be following set orders; I don’t think they had minds of their own.”

Arlan looked disappointed. “House Cannith based the warforged on ancient magic even they barely understand,” he said. “When you mentioned constructs, I’d hoped it might be something that could give a clue into the origins of that power. Still fascinating, in any case. You’ve given me a lot to think about.” He paused for a moment. “I’m sorry if this is rude, Mistress Irinali, but you’re not much like the other Aereni elves I’ve met.”

Irinali grinned. “That, Master Arlan,” she said, “is because if my people go one way, I try my hardest to go the opposite. Getting off that island was the best thing that ever happened to me. My path lies forward; I have no intention of looking back.”

“Then I think we’re more alike than you think,” Arlan said. “Maybe you don’t approve of my discipline, and I don’t approve of yours, but I hope we’ll be able to work together to figure out the secrets of the Key and the other relics – and cut down anyone who gets in our way.”

Irinali stood and shook his hand. “In that, at least,” she said, “we can consider ourselves agreed.”

This is a chapter that heavily focuses on the past, isn't it? Len's backstory is something I hinted at in the previous fic, and we'll be exploring it in bits and pieces across the next few. This fic will have flashbacks to her time in the army and her meetings with Ghazaan Harsk, and, of course, Yhani. Next fic will deal more with her life before that, for reasons that will become obvious when (or if) we get there.

Rinnean and Yhani, despite being the only two elves in Len's team, didn't really interact that much last time; I wanted to change that here. They are radically different people in a lot of ways, not the least of which is what being elves means to them – to Yhani, that heritage is of incredible importance, while Rinnean might as well consider himself a pointy-eared human who'll live a long time (Irinali reflects a third perspective on Aereni culture – Yhani is Aereni to the bone, Rinnean was never part of that culture to begin with, and Irinali was but actively chose to reject it). As a result, it's not all that surprising that she'd try to reach out, and he'd have no interest in it at all. As for making one of the team severely seasick – well, I know it's cliché, but I couldn't resist, and since poor Rinnean was a character I wanted to develop more, he got stuck with the short straw.

Most of the information Irinali relates to Arlan in their section of the chapter is stuff the audience knows last time, but its primary purpose here is the beginning of an alliance between the necromancer and the artificer. The tension between their disparate magical disciplines isn't going anywhere, but their shared desire for knowledge – and a certain amorality when it comes to getting it – helped bring them together for this purpose. And of course, there's more to Arlan's past than he's let on, and he hasn't always worked for the Order...

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 6: The Void of Taratai

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shaikatari spun in the center of the training field, punching and kicking an opponent only she could see as she ran through the katas that had been drilled into her from early childhood. The Chosen were born to great privilege, but also great responsibility – they were all expected to develop skills that could be used for the benefit of Riedra, and which might someday attract the attention of an *il-atla* and impress the spirit sufficiently that it might choose them as its mortal avatar; there was no higher honor. Some Chosen developed their skills in bureaucracy or diplomacy, others in the psionic arts, or the arts of war. Shaikatari's calling was more specialized.

As she went through her exercises, her right hand shot up, and in it materialized a shaft of violet light that formed itself into an intricately worked katana that gleamed in its wielder's hand. Shaikatari adjusted her form swiftly as she passed from unarmed training to training with her mind blade; the transition was smooth, second nature, for she had been practicing it since she was little more than a child. Some who practiced the psionic arts focused on the power of the mind alone, others on integrating it with the body, but Shaikatari had been trained as what was sometimes called a soulknife, a warrior who wielded a weapon forged from pure thought. A mind blade cut as sharply as any sword of steel, but it had no true substance of its own – when its wielder willed it so, it would vanish back into the ether until it was needed once again. Effortless to conceal, all but impossible to trace – it was an ideal weapon for an assassin.

At last, she brought her practice to its end; planting her blade point-down in the earth, she rested her hands atop it in a gesture of blessing and breathed a soft prayer to the *il-atlas* before letting the katana dissolve back into mist. Raising her eyes, she saw several off-duty soldiers had gathered around the edges of the practice field to watch her, and that one of them was approaching.

“Honored Chosen,” he said, bowing his head, “His Excellency the Lord General requests you to attend him in his tent at your earliest convenience.”

“I shall do so at once,” Shaikatari said, inclining her head in thanks. The general's private tent was not far from the practice field; she made her way there swiftly and ducked her head inside. The furnishings within were plain and spare, though well-made; Inharanath himself was seated in a chair, his eyes closed and his expression blank, seemingly lost in deep meditation. Shaikatari approached him and bowed, and then his eyes snapped open and his postured straightened, the palpable force of the spirit within him animating his features once again.

“Shaikatari; good,” he said. He gestured towards an empty chair across from his own. “Sit. We have matters to discuss.”

The Chosen did so, and she couldn't entirely keep the curiosity from her gaze as she regarded her superior. "What is your will, Excellency?" she asked.

"I have communed with my fellow *il-atlas*," Inharanath said, "and I have learned that the barbarian expedition of which I told you is underway. They have set out from Khorvaire upon a chartered vessel and even now prepare to cross the Lhazaar Sea. Furthermore, our sources have confirmed they intend to make port in Adar before pursuing their objective."

"So it's true," Shaikatari breathed. "They do intend to ally with the kalashtar. But to what purpose?"

"That, I do not yet know," Inharanath said, and the admission galled him. "But I am now even more certain that they seek a weapon to use against us. They must not be allowed to land. I have communicated what I've learned to the ones who command Riedra's navy; the admirals have been instructed to let nothing leave or exit Adar until this ship, this... *Stormchaser*... has been destroyed. If possible, however, the passengers are to be left alive – especially the kalashtar. Her I may wish to question in person about the intended prize, and its potential uses as a weapon for Riedra." The general smiled then, and Shaikatari managed to suppress a shiver. She revered the *il-atlas* and the Inspired who channeled them, as did any Riedran of proper and pious upbringing, but in that instant she understood that there were few places on Eberron one could be that would be worse than being in Inharanath's clutches. She was relieved indeed to not be his enemy.

"I do not mean to question the competence of our honorable naval commanders," Shaikatari said, "but the question must be asked – what if they fail? What if this barbarian ship does make landfall in Sarlona?"

"That, child, is where we will come in," Inharanath said. "You and I are going to take a detachment of elite troops to reinforce the garrisons at the passes of Adar. We will intercept these barbarians when they attempt to leave, and then, they *will* tell us what they know before they die."

Shaikatari saluted. "As you command, Excellency. I shall make ready at once."

That afternoon, a small group on horseback detached itself from the main army and raced towards the south, kicking up a storm of dust behind them. The Lord General and his new personal assassin rode at their head.

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Thyra wasn't sure what to expect when she stepped into the captain's cabin to find Havaktri seated on the floor with her legs crossed. She'd seen the kalashtar speaking quietly with Meren earlier in the day – a week out from Sharn, now – and after that conversation had concluded Havaktri had approached each of the rest of the mercenaries and asked that they join her that evening in the captain's cabin, which he'd graciously given her the use of. She hadn't said what for.

Looking around, Thyra saw that the cabin was dark, its windows shut tight; the only light came from a small, glowing crystal that hovered above Havaktri's lap. When she saw Thyra,

the Kalashtar smiled sadly and gestured for her to sit beside her.

“So,” Thyra said, “would you mind telling me what this is all about now?”

“Soon,” Havaktri said. “Let’s wait for the others to get here. They should hear what I’m going to say as well.”

Slowly, the rest of the team trickled in; Len and Yhani came first, the captain raising an eyebrow at the sight of the crystal, but she took a seat on Havaktri’s other side, with Yhani beside her – the elven priestess seemed genuinely curious, as did Harsk, who arrived a moment later. Ghazaan came next, and finally Rinnean, who still looked somewhat queasy as he shut the door behind him and delicately sat directly across from Havaktri.

The kalashtar closed her eyes and breathed deeply, then raised her gaze to regard her companions. “Thank you all for coming,” she said. “You’re all, except maybe Yhani, probably wondering why I brought you here, and why I convinced Captain Meren to lend out the use of his room for this evening – alas, our cabins aren’t large enough to fit all of us at once, at least not very comfortably. This is an important day in my people’s calendar, and a sad one. Normally, in kalashtar communities we mark it solemnly, all together, but since there aren’t any other kalashtar aboard *Stormchaser*, I would like you, my friends, to share it with me instead.”

“So all this is just some kalashtar ceremony?” Rinnean asked, looking irritated that he’d been roused from his bed just for this. “Sorry, Havaktri, but I’ve never really been one for this sort of thing, and...”

Harsk elbowed him in the side, hard. “Knock it off,” his growled under his breath. “If I’m understanding things right, Havaktri’s just told us we’re the closest thing to family she has outside her own people. Show a little respect, whatever you think inside.”

Rinnean winced, looked around the circle at his companions disapproving glares, and sighed. “Fine,” he said. “Apologies, Havaktri. I seem to have been out of line. You were saying?”

“I was saying,” she continued, “that by the kalashtar calendar today is the first day of the Void of Taratai, one of the most important times in the kalashtar year. You might call it a holiday, but it isn’t a time for celebration. It’s a time for mourning, somber reflection – and for some, vengeance. But it’s always a time of memory, when we recall the history of our people. Some of you have heard parts of this story already; tonight, I will tell it in full. And Rinnean,” she said with a sharp look in the elf’s direction; he had the decency, in Thyra’s opinion, to at least look guilty, “will come to understand that this is not just empty ritual or dead history. It closely concerns the land to which we are traveling, and the conflict we will soon find ourselves in the middle of.

“Some of you have heard me speak of Dal Quor, the Realm of Dreams; Thyra and Yhani will recognize the first part of the history I am about to tell you. The sages teach us that there are thirteen planes of existence beyond our own, each embodying an aspect of reality – they orbit Eberron spiritually, just as the moons orbit our world physically. Dal Quor is one of those planes, a realm of pure thought and feeling. Most mortal scholars know little of it, for Dal

Quor was pushed out of its orbit long ago and though mortal minds touch it in dream, it is not possible to visit this realm directly, or for its inhabitants to come to Eberron.”

The crystal’s light seemed to dim, casting Havaktri’s face into shadow, but her eyes gleamed above it like small stars nonetheless. “My people know better,” she said. “For our lore teaches that Dal Quor itself is a dream of some vast, unfathomable entity – and that dream is a nightmare. The plane itself is a realm of terror, and the quori who inhabit are parasites the feed on the thoughts of mortal dreamers who have touched their world. Ruling over all is a force which in the Quori language is called *il-lashtavar*; in your language, it would be the Great Darkness that Dreams, or just the Dreaming Dark. We’ve faced the Lords of Dust, and we know of their great masters, the Overlords, but in its own domain, *il-lashtavar* is the equal of any of them. It is the dream of a god, and it has all the power that status suggests.”

Thyra found herself shivering at the thought. She still remembered the rakshasa at the Mournland vault, the sheer *presence* of that ancient and powerful creature – and she knew that it was only a servant of far greater masters. To think that there were other dark forces every bit as terrible elsewhere in the cosmos... somehow, it made the holy light of the Silver Flame seem a frail guardian indeed.

“But,” Havaktri said, “all dreams – even god-dreams – eventually end. Long ago, a quori scholar named Taratai came to believe that it was inevitable that *il-lashtavar* was not eternal, that in time it would cease and be replaced by a different dream – one of peace, and light, and beauty. Taratai gathered followers who shared her beliefs, who were not content to serve *il-lashtavar* and who waited for darkness to pass and a new light to be born. But the Dreaming Dark was afraid, for like all living things, it feared to die. Thinking it could stop the inevitable, it sent its minions against Taratai’s followers, destroying many of them and exiling the survivors from Dal Quor. They fled, seeking refuge, but because their plane had been knocked out of its orbit, they couldn’t find their way to sanctuary. So they were condemned to wander the trackless paths between worlds for eternity – or so they thought.

“At last, in her desperation, Taratai reached into the dreams of mortals and made contact with a man, a human. She begged him to help her, though she didn’t expect it, for she knew she must seem a strange and fearsome being to his eyes. But the man was compassionate. He told her he was a monk from the land of Adar, and he thought he knew a way the rebel quori could be saved. The quori couldn’t physically enter Eberron, but they were able to open their minds and mingle their essences with that of the humans, giving birth to something... new. There were sixty-seven quori who fled the Dark, and sixty-seven monks who sheltered them – together, they became the sixty-seven original kalashtar.”

Rinnean whistled. “Well, that’s something you don’t hear every day, I must admit,” he said. “But I’m still not sure what this holiday is supposed to be about, or why it’s relevant to us.”

“If you do not interrupt, you may actually learn,” Yhani said. “I do not believe Havaktri’s story is done.”

Havaktri shook her head. “No,” she said. “Thyra, this is the story of the kalashtar as far as I’ve told it to you. It doesn’t end here. Taratai, now bonded to a human host and freed from Dal Quor, spent many years writing a compendium of her theories about the power that will replace *il-lashtavar*, which she called *il-yannah*, the Great Light, and what actions might be

taken to hasten its arrival. This is the basis of my people's religion, the Path of Light. Centuries passed in peace, and each generation of kalashtar passed on the connection to their quori forebear, from father to son and mother to daughter. The rebel quori no longer exist as singular entities; instead, each of us, their descendants, carries a small fragment of their awareness within us." She gave a faint smile. "If I sometimes seem odd to you, this is why. In spirit, at least, I am quite literally not entirely of this world.

"These peaceful generations were not to last. In Dal Quor, *il-lashtavar* spent centuries studying how to preserve its existence for all time, and at last its followers devised a plan – one that, cruelly, recalled and perverted the very means by which Taratai saved her people. The evil quori learned to walk in the dreams of the rulers of Sarlona, whispering threats and promises of greatness to them, until at last they had cast all the continent into war. At the same time, they arranged for certain people to meet, certain bloodlines to be formed, until they had created a specialized caste of humans who could host the quori spirits – not in equal communion, as in the case of my people, but in direct possession and control. And so these quori went out among the people clad in their new human shells and preached an end to the conflict they themselves had started, using it as a justification to enforce their own will upon the world. They built the empire of Riedra, that now stretches from one end of Sarlona to the other. These quori-in-human-skin are called the Inspired; when they are not hosting a quori, which is often for there are far more potential hosts of the proper bloodlines than there are quori trusted to be agents on Eberron, they call themselves the Chosen. My people call such beings Empty Vessels instead, for that is all we perceive them to be – specially prepared bodies that a quori can inhabit at will."

"Creepy," Ghazaan said. "But one thing I don't get is why they bothered to take over at all. How does building an empire help the quori keep their world from changing?"

"Because the quori came to believe that Dal Quor and Eberron are symbiotic," Havaktri said. "Quori are eternal, and they are creatures of order – with some exceptions, like Taratai and her rebels, most quori of the same breed are more-or-less the same individual repeated over and over again. Mortals are chaotic, always changing. The quori feared that it was the influence of mortal dreams – and human dreams especially – that would destroy *il-lashtavar*. Their solution? To make sure every human on Eberron would be forced to dream the same dream for the rest of time. That is the purpose of their empire, and their state ideology, the Path of Inspiration, which holds that the quori are honored ancestral spirits who are to be obeyed without question – they have everyone in Riedra dreaming one dream, and they intend to keep it that way. And to expand their influence."

Yhani's hand tightened on the skirt of her white robe as Havaktri spoke, and though her face remained serene, there was a look of such outrage in her eyes that Thyra was almost shocked to see it. And yet, it made perfect sense. Yhani revered the Undying Court, the ancestor spirits of her own people – to learn that the quori had usurped that role in another land to exploit its people, to her that must be the greatest blasphemy imaginable. Thyra suddenly found herself thinking that if the elven priestess ever met an Inspired, the quori's fate would not be a pleasant one.

"But that's not the end either, is it kid?" Len asked. "There's more you haven't gotten to yet, I can tell."

“Yes,” Havaktri said, inclining her head. “Not much more, but it is the part that’s hardest to tell. When the Inspired first arose centuries ago, my people recognized them for what they were – and they recognized us for what *we* were. They sent their armies south to the mountains of Adar, to subdue its people and wipe out the last remnants of Taratai’s followers. At that time, Taratai herself had ceased to exist, but there were many of her bloodline who lived, and her spirit moved in them. They gathered at the mountain passes and made a final, terrible stand. Such great psionic power was unleashed that day that kalashtar bards still sing of it. The Riedran armies were thrown back, and to this day they have not succeeded in taking an inch of Adaran ground. But the victory came at a terrible cost. The bloodline of Taratai, the great teacher, the foremother of my race, was destroyed utterly; so in one way, the Dreaming Dark got what it wanted after all. The great rebel spirit was finally silenced. What becomes of a quori rebel when all of the kalashtar who share their spirit perish no one knows. It may be that Taratai lives still, trapped on some far-off plane, or that she was returned to Dal Quor, where *il-lashtavar* must torment her daily for her transgressions. But we know only that she was taken from us.” Havaktri clenched her fists so tightly that Thyra was certain her nails were drawing blood, and what looked like the faint lines of tears were streaking down her face. “This day commemorates her loss. That is why it is a day of sorrow, of reflection... and, for some, vengeance. We kalashtar are not a warlike people. We dream of the day when an age of peace and harmony will dawn. But this, we all know in our blood and spirits. For the loss of Taratai, the Dreaming Dark will *pay*.”

The last word came out as a hiss that was almost alien in tone; for a moment, Thyra was sure, she’d heard the voice of an ancient rebel spirit speaking through her friend’s mouth. Then, suddenly, as she looked at Havaktri, she felt herself rocked back; for a brief moment she stood on the precipices of a cliff looking down at the vast armies gathered below, and of the robed figures who gathered in the pass to face them. There was a blinding light, a terrible roar of sound, and she was back in the cabin again, blinking her eyes in the dim light.

Havaktri looked concerned. “Are you all right?” she asked. Thyra looked around; none of the others seemed to have been affected.

“I’m fine,” she said shakily. “Just got dizzy there for a moment. Thank you for sharing that with us, Havaktri.”

“Huh,” Len said. “So that’s what the Inspired really are. Don’t think they go around announcing that on every street corner when they come as diplomats to Khorvaire. And they’ve got a whole empire between us and this artifact we need to find.” She shook her head. “Traveler, do we know how to pick our enemies.”

“So, why haven’t *your* people been announcing this from every street corner?” Ghazaan asked. “I don’t think people would stand for it if they knew what the Inspired were really up to. Humans have their faults, but most of the ones I’ve known wouldn’t stand for these creatures messing with their heads.”

“Would they believe us?” Havaktri asked sadly. “Or would they dismiss it as a – what would you call it – a ‘conspiracy theory’? The Inspired rule a great empire; my people have only a little land with little voice. Whose word do you think the kings and generals of Khorvaire would trust? Besides, this is a quori matter, between quori. The Inspired brought humans into

it as their pawns and slaves; we won't repeat their sins, or we are no better than they. This is a war of thought and ideal, more than a war of weapons."

"Well, you can do that," Rinnean muttered, "but if they try to kill *us*, you can use your principles while I bloody my daggers and we'll see which works best." Harsk elbowed him again, and Rinnean shot the shifter a glare.

"Now, then," Havaktri said, "if you would all take a moment to share with me in silence, to remember Taratai and all those who have died for this world, and whose loss we still must mourn." She bowed her head, and around the circle everyone did the same. Thyra tried to focus her thoughts on her namesake, Tira Miron, the founder and first martyr of the Church, but her mind kept slipping back to the brief vision – or whatever it had been – she'd seen when Havaktri finished her story.

Thyra was rakshasa-blooded – she might not be a kalashtar, but she was still something not entirely human. She'd fought it for so long, but that had proven futile. Maybe instead she should be trying to figure out what it meant.

Maybe Havaktri, lost child of the realm of dreams, could help her.

Chapter End Notes

So, this ended up being a rather quori-centric chapter, with both Inspired and kalashtar sides getting their time in the spotlight. We've seen Shaikatari for the first time since the prologue and gotten a better sense of her abilities – class-wise, she's obviously a soulknife; I knew I wanted something a bit more distinctive than a vanilla psion, already represented by Havaktri. Of course, Shaikatari is a true believer, and though some Empty Vessels are in on the con (hard to avoid when you spend so much of your time sharing headspace with a quori) she's still too junior to know much.

Inharanath, for his part, is a secondary villain who thinks he's much more important to the story than he actually is. After all, he's automatically assumed that a party that includes a kalashtar trying to enter Riedra and retrieve an artifact must be out to bring down the Inspired, when they're actually doing nothing of the sort, and would probably try to avoid tangling with the Inspired altogether if he wasn't determined to get involved. To borrow a phrase from Sirius Black, he's put his keen and penetrating mind to the task and come to exactly the wrong conclusion. Doesn't mean he won't still be a problem down the line.

Havaktri's section, being mostly exposition, is fairly self-explanatory, but it was information that is pretty obscure in-universe and was important to get into the hands of the non-kalashtar in the party so they know what they're getting into (and of course, I may be biased but I think it's one of the coolest pieces of lore in the setting); the Void of

Taratai holiday was a useful vehicle for that. As for what's going on with Thyra... we'll see.

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 7: Unsettled Thoughts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was late that night – or maybe early in the morning – when the observance of the Void of Taratai ended; Thyra returned to the cabin she and Havaktri shared unaccompanied by the kalashtar herself, who had apparently gone to find Captain d’Lyrandar and let him know he could have his quarters back. She dropped into her hammock and quickly fell asleep, a rest that was, thankfully, undisturbed by dreams.

Thyra awoke slowly the next morning, groggily blinking her eyes as she slowly sat up. Havaktri had returned, and now stood in the center of the cabin with her eyes closed and head bowed, running through what appeared to be an elaborate series of stretches and poses, some of which looked like combat moves, others which appeared to be purely aesthetic. The kalashtar’s grace even on the gently rocking ship was superb, and Thyra found herself watching the exercise in fascination. Finally Havaktri fell still, exhaled deeply, and opened her eyes.

“That was lovely,” Thyra said, miming applause. “What was it?”

Havaktri smiled. “I practice *sheshan talarash dasyannah*,” she said. “In your language, it would be something like “dancing with the shadows on the path to light,” or maybe just “the path of shadows”. It’s something we do for exercise, and discipline, and it can be adapted as a style of martial arts. I’m not as attentive to it as I maybe should be, but after the Void I felt unsettled and thought I needed it.” She regarded Thyra appraisingly. “I might be able to teach some of the forms to you, if you’d like. The elders would probably be very cross with me, but they’re not here and you are.”

Thyra laughed. “Thanks for the offer, Havaktri,” she said, “but I think I’d probably just end up flat on my face. I never was much of a dancer.” She was silent for a long moment, weighing her options carefully, and then finally spoke. “There’s something else I’d like to talk to you about, though.”

“Really?” Havaktri asked, seating herself on the hammock beside Thyra. “Hopefully you’re not going to tell me that you’ve actually been an Inspired assassin sent to kill me all this time. Being rakshasa, human *and* quori wouldn’t leave you much time to be anything else, would it?”

For a moment Thyra simply regarded her in shock, but then she noticed the small smile playing around the edges of Havaktri’s lips. “That was a joke, wasn’t it?” she asked.

“Apparently not much of one,” the kalashtar muttered. “I don’t have much of an ear for human humor. Back in Sharn, I heard someone telling the strangest one about a chicken, and

for il-Yannah's sake I simply don't understand what was so funny..." she shook her head. "Anyway, what were you saying?"

"Last night, when you were telling us about Taratai, for a moment, I thought I... saw something," Thyra began, worrying that she would seem foolish but too committed now to back out. "For a few seconds, I had what felt like a vision of what must have been Adar, and it looked like the last battle of Taratai's line was about to begin. Then I was back in the cabin. Did you do that? I thought so, but nobody else seemed affected."

"Hmmm," Havaktri said quietly, a pensive look crossing her features. "I saw you react, and I felt what I thought was your touch in my mind. No, I wasn't trying to project my thoughts directly into your mind, but I think you may have tapped into them yourself. That was one of my memories you saw."

Thyra quirked an eyebrow. "*Your* memories?" she asked. "And here I thought that you said Taratai's line got wiped out in Adar centuries ago, and that you were seventeen and had never been out of Khorvaire before. Is there something you're not telling us, Havaktri?"

The kalashtar gave another of her quiet, hissing laughs. "No, no," she said. "Your language isn't very good for these things! *I* wasn't there. But a kalashtar of the Vaktri line *was*. One of my ancestors. All kalashtar of the same line are different people, but we all embody the same spirit. Now, we can't dream like you do, because our ancestors were exiled from Dal Quor, but our minds have to do *something* while we sleep, so we relive the memories of our ancestral spirits. So you might say that battle was like something out of a dream." Havaktri seemed to find this statement particularly funny, as she dissolved into an even louder fit of laughter. Thyra watched, nonplussed.

When Havaktri seemed to have regained her composure, Thyra spoke. "Okay, so instead of dreaming you sometimes remember things your ancestors saw. I get that. But why did *I* see it? I'm not a psion, and I'm certainly not a kalashtar."

"No," Havaktri said, "but I think in some ways you're more like one of my people than you are like a normal human. The power of *your* ancestor moves through *you*, even if that ancestor was a rakshasa and not a quori. But I'd thought you might ask me something like this sooner or later. In Sharn, before we left, Professor Zanthan was generous enough to lend me some of his books on rakshasas. Fascinating reading. Often disturbing, but fascinating. Where was I? Yes – rakshasas, it seems, sometimes had the power to read the thoughts of others. I'd wondered if you inherited the ability; it seems you have. I must have been projecting my thoughts very strongly last night; I'll have to be more careful. My mother would say that was very sloppy of me."

"Wait," Thyra said, holding up her hand. "So you're saying I *am* a psion after all?"

Havaktri shook her head. "No. If I'm understanding the books correctly, rakshasas used arcane magic to attain this skill, not psionics. There is often some overlap between the three branches of magic, after all. This is a part of your sorcerer's gifts."

"They don't normally feel like gifts," Thyra muttered, then looked back up at Havaktri. "Whatever this is, I don't want to go around reading people's minds uncontrollably. It's

wrong to intrude like that, and not very fun for me either. I know this may be a lot to ask, and might not even work, but – Havaktri, do you think you might be able to help me get more control over this?”

Havaktri beamed, and managed to make the expression look almost normal. “I don’t know if the kalashtar arts can help a sorcerer,” she said, “but we can find out!” She took Thyra’s hands in hers. “I can try to show you some of the techniques I learned when I was small, and – who knows? Maybe we’ll see just how much overlap between magics there really is.”

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Irinali stepped into the chart room aboard *Karrn’s Glory* to find ir’Sarrin seated at a table with one arm bared to the shoulder; Haund, the warlord’s personal priest, was wrapping a bandage around his forearm. On the table in front of them rested a small bowl filled with water mixed with blood – the warlord’s own, Irinali knew. Ir’Sarrin had come to the Blood of Vol late in life, but as long as Irinali had known him he’d been extremely devout in his practices. He must have been letting Haund bleed him as an invocation to the divine spark that lay hidden in all living things – the equivalent to a god-worshipper’s prayer for blessing or wisdom.

Irinali wrinkled her nose at the sight, and then quickly composed herself. She had no objection to the shedding of blood – no necromancer did – but she preferred to do so in rites that *worked*. So far as she’d been able to determine, for all its pretenses at rebelling against a cruel cosmos, the Blood of Vol’s rituals were no more effective than those of any other religion.

If Kharvin had noticed her distaste, he didn’t show it – he knew her opinion of his chosen religion, and it was an area on which they had agreed to disagree. “Irinali, good,” he said, waving Haund and the bowl away, the priest muttering a blessing as he took it. “Our new compatriots should be joining us shortly.”

“Already here,” a female voice said from behind Irinali as Saeria slipped into the room beside her, looking around with an interested expression. Arlan followed close behind and took up a position leaning against the doorframe. The half-elf woman’s eyes went to the bandages on ir’Sarrin’s arm, and she bowed her head. “Forgive us for interrupting your devotions, but you *did* call for us to attend you at once.”

“You’re not interruption anything; I’m through for now,” ir’Sarrin said, gesturing for the others to sit. A servant who’d been waiting quietly in a corner placed a map at the center of the table and unrolled it; it depicted Sarlona, with a red mark in the north where Irinali had copied the location of the next vault.

“We’re out of Khorvaire’s local waters and will soon be approaching Sarlona, given favorable winds,” the warlord said. “Now is the time to begin seriously discussing our next move.”

“I’m concerned about making landfall in Sarlona in the first place,” Saeria said, tapping the map lightly with one finger. “From what I’ve heard about the Inspired, they put on a pretty face abroad but don’t take kindly to disruptions at home. We’re Khorvaire “barbarians”,

unannounced and uninvited, and I don't think the Inspired know or care that we're connected with the Order. This could turn very nasty very quickly."

"Fortunately, we're not going to be landing in Riedra," Irinali said. She pointed at the red dot. "That's our destination, and it's located in a place called the Tashana Tundra. Information of Sarlona that isn't several thousand years out of date is hard to come by, but from what I've gathered it's not part of the Riedran empire and isn't even really a nation at all. What it is would be cold, desolate, and full of ruthless barbarians." She grinned at ir'Sarrin. "Sounds like home."

"Without the organization, thankfully," Kharvin said, smiling thinly. "Apparently the Inspired do sometimes send patrols into the area, but if we're lucky, we won't run into them. They've certainly never been able to control it effectively. And we have no intention of staying long. We're not here to conquer the Tashana Tundra in the name of the Queen of Death; we're here to find the vault, grab the artifact, and get out, preferably as quickly and efficiently as possible."

"That's the other problem," said Arlan, stroking his chin. "Apparently that last vault you found in the Mournland wouldn't open without that sorcerer girl – what was her name, Thyra? – bleeding all over it. Last I checked, she wasn't in our party. So what exactly are we going to do when we get there? Dig the vault out and drag it whole back to the ship?" He glanced around disapprovingly. "I don't think it would fit."

"For one, we don't know that this vault has the same security measures as the last one," Irinali said. "That one only included information as to this one's location, not what's in it or how it's guarded. But we do have something now that we didn't have the last time – and it would be a shame if we dragged our artificer halfway around the world and he never made himself useful at all."

"Irinali," Kharvin said softly, a tone of danger in his voice; the necromancer merely shrugged. Arlan himself, however, looked intrigued.

"Much as I would rather she hadn't couched it in such a backhanded way," he said, "our death wizard does have a point. I find myself intrigued by the challenge. I can't promise you anything until I see what I'm dealing with, but the chance to undo protections dating to the Age of Demons... well, people would remember me."

"And you also – apologies to Irinali – didn't have a scholar of the legendary past with you in the Mournland," Saeria said. "Now you do. I might be able to find a clue you missed. The Queen sent us along with you; be a shame if we were never useful." She shrugged. "And besides, what are the odds the girl was the only one whose blood opens the vaults anyway? If nothing else, we could just start bleeding people on the door until it finally opened."

"Wasteful," Irinali said, "but not bad as a *last* resort. At the very least, we've got options."

"We do," ir'Sarrin said. "There are those who, in this circumstance, might pray for good fortune; you will never hear that from me. As you can see, I've made my offerings, but now all remains in the hand of fate. I will say this – I failed in the Mournland. I will admit that."

But I do not intend to fail again. No matter what it takes, I will succeed this time; together, we will succeed, and the Queen will be pleased with the prize we bring her.”

Irinali had abandoned the ancestor-worship of her people; she didn’t follow any gods, nor yet the Blood of Vol. She had her magic, and that was enough. But when Kharvin spoke in *that* tone of voice, she believed him – and she pitied anyone foolish enough to stand in his way.

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“What exactly are those two doing?”

Len turned in the direction Meren d’Lyrandar was pointing and saw Havaktri and Thyra seated facing one another in the middle of *Stormchaser’s* deck; both of them had their legs crossed and their hands resting on their knees, with their heads bowed and eyes closed. The captain regarded them for a moment, then shrugged. “Beats me,” she said. “But then, I gave up trying to figure Havaktri out months ago, and Thyra’s not exactly the most normal person around either, so Aureon only knows.”

“How *did* a kalashtar end up working with a mercenary team, anyway?” Meren asked, regarding Havaktri curiously. “I wouldn’t have thought they’d particularly approve of your line of work.”

Len remembered her first meeting with Havaktri, almost a year ago now – she’d been leaving her apartment to pick up her and Yhani’s swords after having them sharpened, only to almost walk into the teenage girl who’d been waiting at the door. The girl had all but begged Len to take her on; when asked why, she’d announced in all seriousness that she wanted to save the world. That had almost been the end of any chance of Havaktri being taken on; it was only after Yhani convinced her of the usefulness of a psion that Len had changed her mind. She hadn’t – for the most part – had reason to regret it.

“She followed us home,” Len finally said aloud. “And ‘Hani decided to keep her.”

“Oh, it was somewhat more complicated than that,” Yhani said lightly, coming up behind Len. “And I do believe that what they are doing is *meditation*. Not exactly the same as how elves rest, but something I do not believe is too dissimilar.”

“Rests and disciplines the mind,” another voice cut in; Len turned to see Harsk leaning against the railing. “It works; I learned some techniques from the druids, who go in for that thing. Kalashtar do too, from what I’ve heard. Guess Thyra thought she needed to settle her thoughts or something; kid’s got enough on her mind I don’t blame her.”

“Well, so long as they move if I need them to move before they get in the way of my crew, they can stay at it,” Meren said. He tipped his hat in a brief salute to Yhani and then went off towards the helm. Len watched him go, then turned back to the two young women who still sat silently. She thought of kalashtar and druid traditions, of settling chaotic thoughts, and frowned, creasing her brow as she regarded them.

“Are you all right, Len?” Yhani asked in a concerned voice.

Len turned back to her. "I'm fine, 'Hani," she said. "Just thinking."

Yhani knew Len too well; the captain could tell from the concerned frown that crossed her features that she didn't believe her.

Chapter End Notes

Thyra always had the power to read minds; it's part of the rakshasa sorcerer bloodline's abilities. Of course, she didn't know she could do it, which is why she never did before; but Havaktri was broadcasting strongly enough last chapter that she picked up on it. Having Havaktri help her with her abilities is always something I'd been planning to do; it's not immediately obvious, but in many ways Havaktri is right about the two of them being kindred spirits, as Thyra is slowly coming to realize.

The Blood of Vol gets something of a bad rap both in and out of universe, but I've been trying to show a bit of a window into its philosophy and practices via ir'Sarrin. He's the bad guy, but he does genuinely believe in what he's doing (though honestly, loyalty to Karrnath, loyalty to Lady Vol, and his own personal ambitions have become so entangled inside him that I don't think he can tell them apart anymore) and he feels he has genuine reason to follow the Blood. One of the things I like about Eberron is that while there are plenty of villains and villainous groups, most of them have genuine reasons for what they do; nobody (except maybe the daelkyr, because who knows why they do anything) is just evil for its own sake. And then on the other end of the spectrum you have Irinali, who is motivated by pure pragmatic self-interest, but still hangs out with all the fanatics because hey, it's a living. But she makes a good team with Kharvin because they balance each other out.

What's eating at Len? A bit too early to say, but it's definitely going to be part of a running subplot central to who she is, where she's going, and how she perceives herself. But more on that later...

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 8: The Dark upon the Sea

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Breathe.

Havaktri's telepathic voice echoed in Thyra's mind as she sat with her legs crossed on *Stormchaser's* deck. Her eyes were closed; though she could see nothing, she could feel the wood of the ship beneath her, the wind blowing through her hair, smell the salty waters of the ocean, hear the voices and footsteps of the crew as they went about their work. Then, slowly, she did as Havaktri had bidden, drawing in a deep, slow breath, holding it, and then gently letting it out.

Breathe, Havaktri said again. *Focus on your breath, in and out. Let it become your whole world, one breath at a time. In... and out. Let it clear your mind, help you find discipline and focus. My people are both human and quori – we each have two natures in one body. If we let it, it can tear us apart. But we train to make sure that doesn't happen. You, also, have two natures. You don't have to let yours tear you apart either. Now breathe. In... and out.*

Thyra did so once again, and then once more. She didn't know how long they'd been sitting there, her breathing, counting her breaths, and attempting to meditate, while Havaktri's soothing mental voice spoke instructions into her head. Maybe it had been hours, maybe only minutes; she seemed to be losing her grip on the world outside. All she was, was breathing, in... and out. Her thoughts were drifting now, she felt like she was sinking. In... and out...

Thyra found herself standing atop a mountain, looking down over a landscape that she recognized at once as Thrane. It was night, the twinkling light of the stars above reflected in the lights of a city below, which she knew was Flamekeep. A sudden homesickness took her as she watched, a yearning so profound that she almost ached from the pain of it.

The wind began, at first a cool breeze that built into a powerful blast of cold air; Thyra wrapped her arms tightly around herself, trying to ward it away. Looking up, she saw a vast shadow growing across the sky, like a cloud but far darker than any cloud she'd ever seen before. On it came, inexorable and irresistible, eating up the stars one by one and casting the land below into darkness. At last it had swallowed all the heavens, leaving the sky empty and blank; below, the lights of Flamekeep flickered and began to go out.

As she stood there, alone in that ultimate darkness, Thyra thought she heard mocking laughter ringing from the air. Dark shapes moved around her, like hole of deeper midnight in the shadows that now shrouded the world; she could make out the feline forms of rakshasas and other, stranger shapes that she knew must be quori. They laughed at her naivete, her foolish arrogance to believe that she could change things, that her paltry skills were any match for the Overlords or *il-Lashtavar*. Did she really think she could stop them from

claiming dominion? That anyone could? They were eternal, and she was frail, and mortal, and alone.

“She is not alone!” a voice called, and suddenly Havaktri was there by Thyra’s side, taking the young woman’s hand in her own. Slowly, shaking, they raised their combined hands against the dark. “It is you who cannot stand.”

Fool, the rakshasas said. We were here before your races were born; we will still be here when your nations have fallen to dust. You think you can defeat us? Fool, the quori said. Our hand is vast and subtle, and both the dream world and the material world bend to our will. You think you can stand against us?

“You are the ones who can’t see your own doom!” called Havaktri. “Darkness must pass, as day follows night. Taratai knew this!”

“And darkness can’t rule when even one person would rather die than submit to it!” shouted Thyra. “Tira Miron knew this!”

The darkness shuddered for a moment, as if in doubt. “Darkness, by itself, is nothing,” Havaktri said. “It has no meaning, without light to define itself against. This is true of *il-Lashtavar* and is true of every other evil power in every plane. *Il-Yannah* stands!”

“And the Silver Flame stands!” said Thyra. “There may be a different darkness in every world, but there is a different manifestation of the light there to oppose it. Don’t you understand? *We’re not alone!*”

The clouds above the two young women parted, and a brilliant ray of light enveloped them. In the darkness, the rakshasas and quori screamed and fled. The light built steadily until it was blinding, and Thyra shielded her eyes... and then she was awake, sitting up on the deck of *Stormchaser* and blinking up at Havaktri’s concerned face.

“I think it fell asleep there,” she said weakly. “Sorry about that. I’ll try not to do it again.”

“I think that would be for the best,” Havaktri said; her tone was serious, but there was amusement in her dark eyes. “Your dreams are not so pleasant that I want to have to go fish you out of them very often, my friend.”

Thyra looked up at Havaktri for a long moment and then slowly, uncontrollably, she began to laugh. A moment later, the kalashtar joined her.

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The voyage progressed largely uneventfully as *Stormchaser* crossed the Lhazaar sea and approached Sarlona. Thyra continued her practice and meditation with Havaktri, and the other mercenaries spent their time training or finding other ways to entertain themselves on the journey. Rinnean was fortunate to find that his seasickness had largely subsided, though he still kept to himself for the most part, prowling along the rail and staring out over the sea, or observing the crew at their work. He didn’t truly suspect any of them of having ulterior motives, but he still preferred to watch the people around him, familiarizing himself with

their routines and personalities. House Thuranni dealt in secrets and hidden agendas, and its training was hard to shake, even now.

Nonetheless, the voyage was a peaceful one. Rinnean knew it couldn't last.

He was standing at the railing late one afternoon when he heard footsteps beside him and turned to see Ghazaan approach. The hobgoblin took up a similar position at his side, and for a long moment the two of them were silent; finally, Ghazaan spoke. "Well," he said, "based on d'Lyrandar's charts and Havaktri's guesses, we should be coming up on Adar before too long."

"Probably," Rinnean agreed. "I can't begin to tell you how glad I'm going to be to finally be through with this accursed boat travel. Then again, neither Adar nor Riedra sound like my sort of place either. A country run by monks sounds dreadfully dull, and from the sound of things the Inspired like to think they've cornered the market on sneaking and deception and don't take kindly to other people butting in on it."

"Hey, if I can get around in a world full of you little stick-people, I think you can manage," Ghazaan said. "But I've got to admit that solid ground beneath my feet is sounding pretty good to me, too, no matter where it is."

"And they say elves and goblins never agree on anything," Rinnean muttered, but he smiled faintly as he did so. It was hard not to like Ghazaan, he'd found – the hobgoblin was a refreshingly direct soul, one who never hid behind lies or deceptions, and that was something that was, in Rinnean's experience, hard to come by.

Ghazaan shaded his eyes and looked out towards the eastern horizon. "You know what," he said, "I think I can see something dark up ahead. We that close to land? My eyes aren't as good as yours in full sunlight – what do you see?"

Rinnean stared intently in the direction the hobgoblin gestured. He could see faint grey shapes on the horizon, shapes that might be distant mountains, and in front of them... he shook his head and swore loudly.

"What?" Ghazaan asked, but before the elf could answer, one of the crew came racing across the deck and up to the helm, where the captain stood next to the steersman; a spyglass was clutched in his hand.

"Captain d'Lyrandar!" he called. "There's a line of ships that just came into view, flying the Riedran flag! It looks like a blockade!"

"Dammit!" Meren swore, grabbing the glass and taking a look himself. After a moment, he swore again. "Well, maybe we should have expected that. I suppose Riedra doesn't want anyone getting into or out of Adar by sea, and that's not something I want to tangle with."

"So what, you're just going to turn around?" Len demanded, walking over to stand by his side, her face creased in anger. "Look, *Captain*, we paid you to get us to Sarlona – are you just going to walk out on that now?"

“Getting captured by the Riedran navy isn’t exactly what I had in mind,” Meren said as the other mercenaries came over to stand by Len’s side. “But I don’t think they’ve seen us; maybe we’ll be able to find a way around them, and to make port further up the coast where it’s less guarded-“

“I don’t think that will work, Captain!” Havaktri called suddenly. “Look!” she pointed a finger at the center of the deck just in front of them.

The air shimmered momentarily, and then the transparent image of a man appeared; several of the sailors swore and jumped backwards, though Meren himself remained unfazed, regarding the newcomer intently. He was a tall man of middle-age in a plain but obviously well-tailored uniform that was mostly black with some dark blue highlights, and he had the air of one who expected to be obeyed. He didn’t particularly resemble Havaktri, Rinnean thought – his skin was too pale, his hair even darker, and his eyes were a pale, metallic blue rather than brown – but there was some ineffable quality about him that gave him the same otherworldly air as the kalashtar.

He has the look of the Riedran ruling class, Havaktri’s telepathic voice whispered into Rinnean’s mind; he started for a moment, then realized she must not want to risk the apparition overhearing her. *Whether Inspired or Empty Vessel I can’t tell, but I think that’s a captain’s uniform, so most likely the latter. I doubt they’d waste a quori on the commander of one ship.*

“I am Captain Tulcharar of the Riedran Imperial Navy,” the apparition suddenly said, confirming Havaktri’s guess as to his rank; his accent was similar to hers but ever so slightly off, like a familiar style of music interspersed with discordant notes. “To the captain of the Khorvaire vessel, you are in violation of the sovereign waters of Riedra; you will approach slowly, and permit us to board you. Attempt to flee, and you will be pursued.”

“Can you hear me?” Meren said warily.

“I can,” Tulcharar replied. “I am using a psionic technique to project my words and images onto your ship, and to receive yours in turn. Speak, and I will be able to hear you and respond.”

“All right,” Meren said. “I just have one question – I’m bound for Adar, not Riedra. Last I looked, Adar was not part of your empire. By what authority do you obstruct our passage?”

“Adar is in a state of revolt against our sublime empire and its rulers, the holy Inspired, and is a haven for criminals and anarchists,” said Tulcharar; Havaktri looked outraged at that description, but managed to keep from saying anything out loud. “We cannot permit you to land there; it would be a hazard to both yourselves and to the security of the surrounding Riedran provinces. By the authority of His Excellency, the Lord General Inharanath, I am authorized to detain and search any vessel bound for Adar. However, the Inspired must protect their people, but they are not without mercy. If we search your vessel and find that you are not attempting to smuggle unlawful goods or persons into Adar, you will be permitted to return to Khorvaire unmolested. You may consult with your crew and passengers if you wish; I will give you one hour to determine if you are willing to surrender to our

inspection. If you attempt to flee, it will go poorly for you.” The apparition flickered and vanished.

“Somehow I have a feeling he won’t be particularly inclined to let us go free, regardless of what he finds,” Meren said after a long silence.

“Sounded to me like a very polite way of seizing the ship,” Rinnean observed, crossing his arms. “I don’t trust government or military officials who keep insisting they mean you no harm. Talk like that, and they’ve probably got something to hide.”

“And you also have something to hide, Captain,” Havaktri said. “Me. Tulchar mentioned unlawful persons as well as goods; I’m a kalashtar, and as far as the Inspired are concerned, that makes me a dangerous heretic by default. If they found you harboring me, it wouldn’t end well for you.”

“I’d say we fight,” said Ghazaan, “but that’s a whole bloody armada out there, and we’re just one ship. What can we do?”

“It’s Meren’s decision,” said Len. “His ship, his crew. That means he’s in charge, regardless of whether or not we like it, but it’d be a real shame if this was all for nothing.” She looked over at the half-elf. “Well? What’ll it be?”

Meren was silent for a long moment, then looked over at Havaktri. “If we can get through, will your people try to help us on the other side?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Most likely, yes. The kalashtar of Adar are insular and have little knowledge of Khorvaire, but they are committed foes of the Inspired. If we can get close enough to the coast, we may find help, or at least a place to hide.”

“Captain?” the sailor who’d first noticed the blockade asked. “What are your orders, sir?”

Meren was silent for a long moment, and then he looked up with a wolflike smile on his face. “Those Riedran tubs are good at transporting troops and taking damage,” he said, “but I think *Stormchaser* can dance circles around them any day. Everyone to your stations; I’ll take the helm. Len, get your people ready to fight if need be. We’re running the blockade.”

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to show part of Thyra’s training with Havaktri here from a more direct perspective; I’d been envisioning this scene as Thyra letting her mind wander/her thoughts drift during the meditation, and slipping into a dream where some of her anxieties manifest in a direct form, then fighting it off with Havaktri’s psychic help. How much I succeeded in conveying that, I’m not sure. But I thought it would be a cool idea, and one that would help build on their friendship and training.

And of course, getting to Adar with no conflict at all would be too easy. Pirates are sort of the standby villain for ocean voyages, but as I'd already used some in one of my Avatar fics, I decided to just use the Riedran navy instead – let the heroes get their first taste of the Inspired before they even make land (not that Tulchar is technically an Inspired, as Havaktri suspects). Buckle up, everyone. Trouble on the high seas is coming up fast...

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 9: Running the Blocakde

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Len gathered her team near the helm as *Stormchaser* raced towards the blockade, resting one hand on the hilt of her sword and flexing the fingers of the other as she called to mind the spell she planned to use if needed, one well-suited for combat against wooden ships. Yhani stood on one side, gaze forward and unblinking as she recited a blessing from the Undying Court under her breath; from the corner of their eyes she and Len shared a wordless moment of connection. Ghazaan stood at her other side, seeming to loom even larger than usual, all trace of his usual affable demeanor gone; he seemed less a friend now and more a vision of some mighty Dhakaani warrior of ages past, but right now, that's what the team needed. Behind them stood Havaktri and Thyra back to back, their faces set in concentration as they prepared their magic, while Rinnean toyed idly with a his knives. Harsk had already climbed atop one of the masts and crouched far above with his bow at the ready, preparing to fire.

The distant Adaran coast was growing larger, grey mountains rising high above the ways, but before it were the ships of the Riedran blockade, visible with the naked eye now and coming into closer view.

Meren's eyes narrowed as he stood at the wheel, and he nodded once as if in decision. "Brace yourselves, everyone," he called. "Things are about to get a little rough."

Len dropped into a crouch, her team doing the same, Thyra a few seconds later than the others. No sooner had they done so than Meren raised his left arm, holding tight to the wheel with his right. Something gleamed on his shoulder with a brightness that shown through the white cloth of his shirt, a complex pattern that resembled a tattoo but that Len knew was no creation of ink. Meren was an heir of House Lyrandar; of course he bore the Mark of Storms, though Len had never bothered to pry about it. Now was the time to see if the fabled magic of the Dragonmarked Houses was all it was made out to be.

"Now!" Meren called, and his mark flashed brightly before going dark again. Len could feel the air shift around them, and then suddenly the sails inflated, stretched to their full capacity by a sudden gust of conjured wind that no other vessel could feel. Now, they were *moving* at such a clip that Len was sure she'd have been knocked over if she'd still been standing; they were coming up rapidly on the blockade now, and the captain clutched the wheel tightly as he prepared to steer between two of the massive dark ships.

He had a gleeful, half-mad look on his face, and here it seemed was the passion for excitement and danger that had led him to take such a risky job in the first place; Len had not misjudged him. "You see why my ship is called *Stormchaser* now?" he shouted to be heard above the wind. "See how she runs with a Lyrandar at the helm!"

“Very impressive, but we’re about to have other problems,” Len shouted back. “Look!” she pointed beside Meren, and the captain turned his head slightly, one eye still on the path ahead, to see a shimmer in the air announce the reappearance of Captain Tulchar’s phantasm.

“Are you mad?” the Riedran officer called, his decorum strained to the breaking point by this unexpected turn of events.

“Quite possibly, yes!” Meren responded, laughing. “You didn’t leave me a lot of options, friend. But I’m a free captain of House Lyrandar, and I have no intention of showing my belly to anyone on the seas, even the Inspired!”

“Fool!” Tulchar snapped, “your House may be a power in your barbarian land, but in Riedra, your connections will not protect you. It would have been so much simpler if you had submitted peacefully, and then you could have left unharmed...” his gaze drifted to the mercenaries, and when he saw Havaktri, his eyes widened. “But of course; the kalashtar has warped your mind. His Excellency warned us one was coming from Khorvaire. No matter, Captain d’Lyrandar; we will take you alive and free you from her – “

As Tulchar was speaking, Meren quickly gestured for one of his crew, who hurried over and seized the wheel tightly. The captain reached down to his thigh and pulled a thin piece of wood and metal from a holster that hung there; raising it carefully, he scanned the approaching blockade until he seemed to find what he was speaking, and spoke a trigger word. A bolt of lightning lanced from the wand and impacted the deck of one of the ships; Tulchar’s exhortations were cut off in a surprised shout; the Riedran raised his hands as if to ward off a blow, and his image wavered and vanished. Len smiled, impressed. “Nice shooting,” she said.

“Glad that’s over with,” Meren muttered as he took back the helm. “That man was getting annoying. Well, if they didn’t know our intentions before, they do know. Steel yourselves, everyone. We’re about to pass between them, and while the wind is on our side I doubt they’ll leave our passage uncontested.”

“Don’t worry,” Len said. “We’re ready.”

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Thyra could see mechanisms shifting on the deck of the nearest Riedran ship, something very large with backwards-bent arms that might have been a ballista taking careful aim. She barely had time to shout a warning before it fired; a massive harpoon linked to a heavy chain shot towards *Stormchaser*. No sooner had it done so, however, than Havaktri stood, an expression of intense concentration on her face as she raised a hand in a gesture of warding; the harpoon seemed to slam into an invisible wall in midair and rebounded a short distance before falling harmlessly into the sea. Havaktri fell to her knees, her expression strained.

“I don’t have very many of those in the me,” she said, with a faint echo of one of her hissing laughs. “That was... rather heavy.”

“Let’s not give them another chance, shall we?” Len asked, standing and gesturing for Thyra. “Come on, kid. Let’s give ‘em something a bit closer to home to worry about – light ‘em up.”

Thyra looked over at the captain and nodded, and then they both began to cast their spells. Len pulled one arm back and then made a throwing motion, launching a tiny sphere of golden light; Thyra levelled two of her fingers and released a thin white bar of blinding energy. Both projectiles struck the ship and burst into flames as they did so, Len’s in the sail and Thyra’s on the deck. Thyra could hear the panicked shouts of the Riedran crew; she couldn’t understand their language, but she was certain they were calling for water.

“That’ll distract them,” Len said, but Ghazaan seized her arm and gestured towards the ship that was now approaching *Stormchaser* from the other side.

“Let’s not celebrate yet, boss,” he said. “We’re about to have company!”

The other ship’s captain, having apparently noticed the fate of Tulchasar and his crew, had decided other methods were in order. This Riedran vessel was coming up quickly, and Thyra could see that its sails too were stretched taut by a wind that blew exactly perpendicular to the one that Meren had summoned; they must have a psion on board who could move their air telekinetically. For a moment, she was afraid the larger ship was going to ram them, but then it turned suddenly to the side and several figures leapt over the side, clinging to ropes as they swung towards *Stormchaser*.

“Prepare to rebel boarders!” Meren called, pulling hard on the wheel. *Stormchaser* swung out and several of the Riedrans missed their target, falling into the sea, but a number of them made it close enough, grabbing hold of the Lyrandar ship’s side and clambering over the rail.

“Come on!” Len called, drawing her sword and setting it ablaze in a single fluid motion. Yhani, Ghazaan, and Rinnean did the same, while Thyra helped Havaktri up, the two of them keeping to the back – their abilities would be more useful if they could stay out of the melee.

The boarders fanned out, facing the crew and the mercenaries with long, slightly curved swords in their hands. It was the first time Thyra had seen Riedran commoners up close, and she thought they were a surprisingly diverse group in appearance; there was a great variation among their skin and eye colors, though most had the same angular features and almond-shaped eyes as Havaktri or Tulchasar. Riedra had conquered almost the entirety of Sarlona, and drew its troops from what must have been a dozen former nationalities, now all united under the banner of the Inspired.

In the back, however, stood one figure who was different from the others; he bore no weapon and wore a small crystal on a chain around his neck, and regarded both sides with a cool, calculating stare. “Their psion,” Havaktri whispered. “Maybe an Empty Vessel, but more likely a regular human, I think – a favored pet of the Inspired they’ve seen fit to reward with initiation into their least mysteries. I think I can defeat him, but I need you to keep me safe.”

“I will,” Thyra said, and no sooner had the words left her mouth than the boarders leapt forward at some unspoken command. The mercenaries met and held them, flanked by *Stormchaser*’s crew; Len and Yhani’s swords flashed as they fought back to back, the changeling’s blade encased in fire, the elf’s gleaming with silver light. Ghazaan laid about

himself with his great blade, holding several of the Riedrans at bay while Rinnean struck them from behind with his knives. From the mast, arrows whistled, one striking a Riedran in the neck and sending him sprawling to the wood as Harsk carefully picked another target.

The psion, too, chose his targets carefully. Safe behind his men, his eyes scanned the ship's defenders until they lighted on Havaktri, and then they narrowed dangerously. He raised a hand and a bolt of lightning lanced from it; Havaktri stepped forward and raised her own hand, catching the bolt and dispersing it into a burst of harmless light. Her eyes narrowed, and suddenly the deck rocked beneath the enemy psion's feet as he collapsed to his knees, clutching his head. Struggling to stand, he stretched out a hand and clenched his eyes tightly shut; Havaktri suddenly gave a pained cry and collapsed to one knee, shaking.

Thyra's eyes went from one psion to the other in confusion and growing fear. Wizards had their spells and clerics had their prayers, but the two psions dueled in near-complete silence, and it was all-but impossible for someone with only a poor grasp of their art to tell what might happen next- or who was winning. But Thyra was not – would never be again – a helpless bystander, and now she knew it was time to act. Levelling her fingers at the Riedran psion, still occupied with whatever pain he was inflicting on Havaktri, she muttered an incantation under her breath and launched a bolt of silver-blue light that struck his torso. The man cried out in pain and stumbled back; the spell had done little lasting damage, but it had broken his concentration.

Havaktri looked up and smiled. "Good-bye," she said, and made a shoving motion with one hand. The Riedra psion was forced back, eyes wide as he slammed into the rail and then toppled over the side. The kalashtar watched him fall with satisfaction. "That hurt," she said.

"Are you all right now?" Thyra asked, looking up warily to see the Riedran ship coming about for another pass – the psion who'd boarded must not have been the one working the winds after all. When Havaktri nodded once, she stood and turned towards the enemy vessel. "Then I think it's time we rid ourselves of them."

Slowly, carefully, she raised her hands and focused her will on the Riedran ship. Under her breath, she spoke the words of an incantation that sounded harsh and strange to her own ears, and then she cast. To her eyes, nothing changed, but she could feel that the spell had worked – and the screams that echoed from the enemy vessel confirmed that knowledge. The ship's movement slowed, and then it began to drift, as if no one aboard was even bothering trying to steer, and *Stormchaser* left it behind.

"What did you do?" Havaktri breathed.

"I cast an illusion on their deck," Thyra replied, "warping it into some nightmare vision. I don't know what they're seeing, but it's nothing good. They'll get better, but it should buy us some time." That they'd recover was a pity, a small part of her whispered. They'd tried to take the ship and kill her friends, and they deserved their fate. Thyra quickly quashed it into her subconscious, but it was there nonetheless.

And there was another, darker part of Thyra that enjoyed the knowledge that she could cause such fear.

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Len swore angrily as the Riedran she was fighting managed to slip his blade through her guard; she leaned back just before his strike hit her face and spared herself from serious damage, though left a long cut along her cheek that hurt like Khyber. The Riedran pressed his advantage, using his greater size and strength to force her back, but there was no gleam of triumph on his face, just cold determination. The Riedrans seemed to be like Karrns in that respect, but if possible even creepier. Damn all stoic, hierarchical nations to Dolurh, and whoever thought up the idea with them.

Bringing up her free hand behind her, Len hissed an incantation and stabbed it forward, striking her opponent's side with two stiffened fingers. There was a burst of lightning, the smell of ozone, and the Riedran was blasted backwards over the side, his clothes still smoking. Len watched him drop out of sight with satisfaction, then reached up and touched her cheek, wincing as her fingers came away bloody.

Looking around, she saw that most of the boarders appeared to be dead, though based on moving shapes in the water it seemed some had chosen to jump overboard rather than risk death or capture. Several of the enemy corpses had Harsk's arrows sticking out of them, and Rinnean was casually pulling his dagger from one who was still twitching slightly. Len frowned at the sight; there was always a part of her that enjoyed the actual fight, the thrill of testing her skill against an opponent, but the aftermath, when it was time to face the bloody consequences of what had happened – that was different. This sight was something she hated, though it was all-too familiar, and in her opinion any soldier who didn't had lost some essential part of herself along the way.

"Let me look at that," a soft voice said at her side, and Len turned to see Yhani. The Aereni priestess raised two fingers and placed them lightly on Len's cheek, and murmured a blessing under her breath; there was a faint tingle in the captain's skin that she was fairly sure wasn't entirely due to the healing magic, and the gash closed.

"Thanks, 'Hani," Len said with a relieved smile. "What would I ever do without you?"

"Die, probably," Yhani said, with a faintly mischievous twinkle in her serene eyes; she leaned forward and gave Len a quick kiss on the cheek where the wound had been. The captain felt herself blush slightly, but willed the color away as Yhani pulled back; being a changeling, after all, had certain advantages. "Is it over, then?"

"Not quite!" Harsk called from his perch in the mast. "Look out!" Len spun to face the direction he was pointing, and saw the first Riedran ship, the fires aboard seemingly put out. Something metal flashed from its deck, and she barely had time to register that it was another harpoon before it slammed into *Stormchaser's* stern and sunk deep, chain trailing behind. There was a great groan of metal, and then it began to slowly pull the Lyrandar vessel back.

"She's reeling us in!" Meren called. "Somebody get that thing off of us, Khyber damn you, or this was all for nothing!"

"I've got it!" Len called, hurrying up the deck past the helm and towards the stern. Taking a quick look at where the harpoon must be embedded, she ran into the captain's cabin and

threw open the back window; sticking her torso out, she saw the harpoon and chain stuck just below. Muttering angrily under her breath, she drew her sword and ignited it again, letting it build to a reasonable heat before slashing down hard. The chain was sheared off, and *Stormchaser's* backwards movement ceased. Len grinned to herself, but then she looked back up and her eyes widened in horror. They hadn't been stuck long, but it had been enough – more Riedran ships were now closing in on their position, far more than they could fight.

Racing back outside, she hurried to Meren. "We're about to have a whole lot of company!" she called.

"Damn," Meren growled. "Well, they're not getting my ship without a fight – I'd never hear the end of it."

"Wait!" another voice called – Havaktri. The kalashtar looked weary, but she was pointing towards the Adaran coast – and what looked like several rapidly-approaching plumes of white water. "What is that?"

Len shielded her gaze, and then her eyes widened. A half-dozen small boats, each carrying a handful of crew, sped up by *Stormchaser's* side; each of them had one person sitting near its stern, apparently in deep meditation – no doubt the psion whose telekinetic power was propelling it at such speed. In the front of each boat, two of its crew stood and raised their hands; no sooner had they done so than the ocean itself seemed to twist at their command, a wall of water rising several hundred feet in the air between the Lyrandar ship and the Reidrans.

"Huh," Ghazaan said, coming up to stand beside Len. "Never seen that before."

"Yes, truly a wonder for the ages," said Rinnean who followed close behind with a profoundly irritated expression on his face. "Now will someone please explain to me exactly what is going on?"

Len looked at the closest of the small boats and regarded its crew; they appeared human and were all dressed in plain brown robes, but there was something about them that couldn't be put down to any one feature that seemed to speak to another, more alien nature. It reminded her of Tulchar – or Havaktri. "I think they're kalashtar," she said.

"Yes," Havaktri said as she too approached. "They are kalashtar; my people have found us. They're speaking into my mind, and wish me to relay their words to you. We are close to Adar, and their clairvoyants saw us doing battle with the Riedran navy; they were dispatched to assist. They are satisfied we are not friends of Riedra, though some still fear an Inspired trick." She looked at Len with her dark eyes wide. "They do wish to know just who we are – and what is our business in their land."

Well, this chapter was mostly action scene, and therefore mostly self-explanatory. We get to see Meren use his dragonmark, our heroes do battle, Havaktri have a psion fight, and the Adaran kalashtar save the day, so all told it worked out fairly well, except for the hole in Stormchaser. Thyra also got to stretch her wings in magical combat a bit, and also come to the unpleasant realization that there's a part of her that likes having her dangerous magical abilities. I'm sure that's not going to be at all troubling...

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 10: Landfall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Len sat at a small table in the fort's (decidedly unsatisfactory, in her opinion) excuse for a bar, staring down at the mug of beer in front of her and wondering if taking another drink was really worth it after all. Finally deciding she'd had quite enough to make subjugating herself to the stuff again worthwhile, she looked up across the table at Ghazaan and his much larger tankard. She and her friend were both off duty at the moment, and both of them had found their way here.

"Hey," she said. "You hear the news out of Cyre lately? Sounds like the Karrns are planning some big offensive, hoping to take north Cyre and march straight into Thrane. Get 'em a lot of land, if they pull that off." She shook her head. "I got no love for the Church of the Silver Flame, but if they can throw the Karrns back and keep 'em from pulling off a win, they've got my backing for now. Anything so we don't have to end up bowing and scraping to Kaius and forced to let blood for that creepy religion of theirs ten years from now."

"You know, there are plenty of people who'd say the same thing about the Thranes," Ghazaan pointed out. "They'd take being ruled by Karrnath, Blood of Vol and all, if it meant not getting stuck in a theocracy under the Church. They say the Thranish Queen does whatever the church cardinals tell her to, you know."

"Yeah, I've heard." Len frowned and decided, perhaps against her better judgment, to take another drink of her beer. "Look at us," she said when she was done. "A hundred years ago, we were all just provinces of Galifar, and now we're talking about the Thranes and the Karrns like they're different species. Damn it to the Six, what's happening to us?"

"Well, in my case, they are different species," Ghazaan said, winking. "Which makes me think – you want to hear a hobgoblin joke?" When Len arched her brow, he continued. "What's the difference between a hobgoblin and a human? They both conquered Khorviare, but the humans' empire lasted for a thousand years. The hobgoblins' lasted for ten thousand!" He threw back his head and guffawed; Len regarded him crossly.

"Very funny," she said flatly. "Something I've been wondering, though. You're so proud of your people, how come you're here? Why not head down to Darguun, fight with that Haruuc fellow for your homeland's independence, maybe a shot at raising another ten-thousand-year empire after we've all pounded ourselves into the dust?"

Ghazaan stopped laughing and regarded her seriously. "Don't think I haven't considered it," he said. "But the thing is, between fighting for coin and fighting for a cause, I'll take coin. Not for the reason you think, either. In my experience, when you fight for a cause, it can go one of two ways. It can end in a glorious victory. Or it can end with everyone turning on each other, determined to root out anyone who isn't loyal enough to the cause, while whatever the

cause was in the first place gets trampled underfoot. Call me a coward, but I'd rather wait and see which is which before I sign up with Lhesh Haruuc and his glorious revolution. 'Sides, my people have lived in Breland for generations. This country suits me well enough, for now.'

Len regarded him carefully. "You," she finally said, "are a complicated man, Ghazaan, and not what most people take you for."

"Well, I hope most people take me for a great and noble warrior with dashing good looks," the hobgoblin said, winking one yellow eye. Then he looked around carefully and leaned in close. "Len, come with me."

"All right," Len said cautiously, getting up and following Ghazaan out of the bar. He led her down one of the fortress's twisting side passages; when they were alone, he turned back to her. She crossed her arms. "Please tell me you're not going to proposition me," she said. "I like you, but not that much."

Ghazaan guffawed again. "No, no," he said. "Trust me – my mate would have a thing or two to say about that!" He leaned in close. "This is something else. Len... I know what you are."

Len suddenly went cold. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she said, trying to sound calm. "I'm human, I'm a woman, and I can swing a sword, but none of those are exactly secrets. What else, exactly, am I supposed to be?"

"A changeling," Ghazaan said, and Len felt the ice reach her gut. "Look, it wasn't exactly hard when I started paying attention. I overheard some of the women who bunk with you talking; they said your hair is always braided, except that you let it down to sleep – but nobody's ever actually seen you braid it or unbraid it. And that your complexion looks exactly the same every day, even though no one's ever seen you use cosmetics. And that got me thinking – 'Len' is an interesting name, isn't it? One syllable, could be a man's name or a woman's – they say changeling names work like that. And the way you won't tell anyone about who you were before you signed up, where you came from, where you learned to fight – it seemed like you had something to hide. I put two and two together."

Len hung her head. "Fine," she said. "You got me. I'm a changeling. Hope you don't mind if I don't show you my real face; I save that for people I really trust and you're not there yet, especially after this." She looked up at him and glared daggers. "So, what now, big man? Going to rat me out, get me thrown out for lying on my enlistment form, maybe make a nice bonus?"

For the third time that afternoon, Ghazaan threw back his head and laughed. "And why in Khyber would I do that?" he asked. "I've watched you drill, and I can tell you're good with that sword – better than you want people to think, I'd guess. And this may be the most boring post in Breland, but we might need someone like that before all is said and done. And besides – look at me. I'm a hobgoblin. Breland's better than a lot of places, but I've still had people treat me like a monster my whole life. You think I'm going to rat someone else out just because they're not human? Not likely." He winked. "And I like you. So there's that."

Len laughed and shook her head. “Well, maybe my luck’s not so bad after all. But why tell me you knew, if you weren’t going to act on it?”

“I wanted you to know I knew, and that I had your back,” Ghazaan said. “And to let you know that if I caught on, other people might too. This your first time living around people who aren’t changelings and don’t know you are? Figured. Learn to do your braid by hand, maybe let your face get scuffed up a bit. That might help.”

“Well, this conversation hasn’t gone anywhere I thought it would,” Len said finally. “But like I said, Ghazaan – you’re a complicated man. And a better one than most.”

“We’ll see about that,” he said, grinning and showing his fangs. He held out a hand. “Still friends?”

Len took it. “Still friends.”

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Karrn’s Glory dropped anchor in a narrow bay along the coast of the Tashana Tundra, and several longboats were lowered into the water and headed towards the shore. Here, in the far north of Sarlona, the sea was cold and grey, and the land was largely white with snow. The plains stretched flatly off into the distance, featureless and cold, and, just on the edge of elven sight, a low ridge of distant mountains could be seen, brooding expectantly.

That was where they would need to go, Irinali thought, assume she had read the map rightly. The necromancer crouched near the stern of one of the longboats while ir’Sarrin’s soldiers worked the oars; she was wrapped tightly in a fur-lined black cloak that kept some of the cold away but still wasn’t enough to keep her from shivering. Damn the ancients, anyway, for building their vaults in such ancestors-forsaken places – first the Mournland, now *this*. They still weren’t sure who had buried the artifacts in the first place – the Mournland vault contained elements pointing to both dragons and rakshasas, but the odds of collaboration between the two mortal enemies seemed almost nonexistent – but whoever they were clearly had a sick sense of humor.

At last the boats put ashore, and Irinali scrambled out, looking around at her surroundings with distaste as she tried to pull her furs even tighter around herself. Kharvin, Haund, Arlan, and Saeria, who were now disembarking from their own boats, were bundled equally tightly, but didn’t seem to be quite as affected by the cold – damn the Karrns, whose northern homeland wasn’t this cold but could come close in the deep winter, and who knew where Arlan and Saeria originally hailed from. If only the vault had been buried somewhere *tropical*...

Ir’Sarrin turned and gestured, and a small group of his household guards disembarked and joined the others on the shore, leaving only a small group of warriors who sat in the back of two of the boats in perfect stillness, speaking to none, acknowledging none – or rather, *one*. Irinali gestured for them and they stood, marching ashore in perfect lockstep and entirely heedless of the cold. As they approached, the hollowness of their cheeks and the empty sockets of their eyes came into stronger focus. Several of ir’Sarrin’s people had died during the Mournland debacle; many of the corpses had been lost, unfortunately, but enough had

been recovered for Irinali to add several more skeleton warriors to her service to replace those who had been lost.

“All here?” Ir’Sarrin asked when skeletons came to stand with the others. “Good. The first stage of our journey is over, ladies, gentlemen, but the next lies before us; an overland march through this frozen place. Irinali, what are your directions?”

The necromancer turned and pointed towards the distant mountains. “Per the map in the previous vault, our destination lies there, to the east, in a cave in one of the lower peaks. Getting there won’t be easy, but I think we’ve all faced worse. What we do when we get there, on the other hand... that’s the question.”

“That, I take it, will be when my skills are required,” Arlan said. “I look forward to it.” He smiled determinedly, his breath fogging the air.

“Are there any people around here at all?” Saeria demanded, wrapping her arms around her torso and looking around with profound distaste. “This place is so... empty. I knew what to expect, but actually seeing it...”

“There are some frontier towns, I believe,” Irinali said, “and a few nomadic tribes and, allegedly, some rather dangerous creatures, but nothing much in the way of civilization. The Inspired claim it as part of their empire, but they’ve never been able to enforce it anywhere but on paper. Too distant, too sparsely populated, too... cold.” Irinali was not certain she had ever spoken with as much disdain as she infused into that last word.

“Life is struggle,” Haund said unexpectedly in his soft voice; the priest was usually so quiet it was hard to remember he was there. “The world is uncaring and filled with death. If the Inspired gave up so easily, then perhaps they aren’t as formidable as they make out. But we are of the Blood of Vol, servants of the Emerald Claw. We will face the tests this Tundra throws against us, and we shall prevail, in the Queen’s name.”

“Well said, Haund,” said Ir’Sarrin. “Now come; let us be off. I’d rather not waste any more time than we have to; the voyage lies behind us, and the true mission ahead.”

He turned and began to walk towards the distant eastern mountains, the others shouldering their packs and doing the same. Irinali motioned for her skeletons – including one that carried her *own* effects – and took up the rear, watching warily for signs of any danger. She saw no one but their party, felt nothing but cold, and heard nothing but the howling of the wind.

This was going to be a long, tedious journey.

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Stormchaser approached the mountains of Adar accompanied by the kalashtar warriors in their small boats. Thyra watched the great peaks rising slowly in her vision and shook her head slowly, unable to fully take in their immensity, their... power. She’d thought the rakshasa in the Mournland represented something timeless and terrible, but here was something beside which even he paled into insignificance – and it wasn’t a god, or a celestial being, or even one of the dread Overlords, but a natural feature of the landscape.

Suddenly, she found herself feeling very small indeed.

“How are we even going to land here,” she finally said, as much to say *something* as because it was what was really on her mind. At her side, Havaktri smiled.

“There is a port,” she said. “Dvarnaava, it is called. It’s well hidden, but I thought I might be able to find it, drawing on my line’s memories.” She glanced over the rail at the kalashtar boats, whose crews were gazing stoically ahead and seemed to be paying little heed to the larger vessels they were escorting. “Luckily, we have a better way now. If Meren follows them carefully, we will be fine.”

“You *thought* you could find this port?” Thyra asked with a raised eyebrow. “That seems like you were risking this whole ship on a hunch.”

Havaktri looked defensive. “I was reasonably certain,” she said. “The memories are there. Putting them together is harder, but...” she let her words trail off. “Besides, we were lucky that the skies were relatively clear. It often storms in this part of the world, I’m told.”

“It’s all right,” Thyra said. “It looks like it worked out anyway.” She turned and began to walk towards the front of the ship, with Havaktri following. Near the bow she stopped, staring, for the bodies of the Riedran boarders. For a moment, she almost pulled back in horror but found herself looking closer instead, fascination winning over revulsion. The nearest body was a young man not much older than herself, a wound still visible in his neck from where one of Harsk’s arrows had taken him. He looked innocent, peaceful, and Thyra found it hard to believe he could have been an evil man. In all probability, none of them had been, she realized – they had merely been following the orders of their gods, as they had been trained to do all their lives. Except that those gods were evil creatures from the Realm of Dreams, and they had lead these people, and so many others, to their deaths across the centuries, fighting for a lie. Her throat constricted, and a sudden surge of empathy for the Riedrans and rage against the Inspired filled her heart.

Havaktri placed a hand on her shoulder. “My people will lay them to rest properly when we reach the shore,” she said. “These were victims, not villains. But we believe that death is not the end, and I believe your people do as well. Maybe they can find peace in another life.”

“Thank you, Havaktri,” Thyra said. Tearing her gaze from the bodies, she looked up – and her eyes widened. “In Tira’s name,” she breathed.

Stormchaser had come to the base of an immense cliff that towered above them, thousands of feet of sheer stone rising to the heavens. Around her she could hear the crew cursing and calling on the Sovereigns, or yelling to Meren that he should turn back; the captain himself remained at the wheel, staring ahead with an unreadable expression. The kalashtar vessels, however, didn’t pause. They approached the cliff without fear... and seemed to vanish beneath it. Thyra’s eyes focused on where they had gone, and she realized that there was indeed a tunnel leading through the rock, and the waters poured through it.

“Never have I seen a place such as this,” a rough voice said beside her, and Thyra turned to see Harsk standing there, staring at the stone. “I’ve traveled across Khorvair and thought I’d

seen all there was to see, but this... it's pleasant to know there are still wonders in the world that can move a weary soul."

"You sounded almost like a priest, there." Thyra observed, surprised. She'd never talked to Harsk much, but then, it seemed he didn't talk to *anyone* much, mostly keeping to himself.

"I almost became a druid, when I was young," he said. "Couldn't bring myself to go through with it, in the end. But some things you can't easily leave behind." He regarded the cliff intently, and spoke no more.

Stormchaser entered the tunnel, and for a moment all was dark, before several of the crew hurried and lit mage-lanterns to help light the way. Thyra didn't know how long they were in that passage, the mage-lanterns the only light, the only sound the rushing of the water along the rocks as the captain carefully worked the helm, keeping the ship's course straight and true. At last, they passed out of the dark and into the last evening sun – they had emerged into a sheltered bay, surrounded on all sides by mountains that rose high to the sky. On the opposite shore, at the base of the cliffs, was a city of worked stone; there was an ascetic quality to the buildings, which were devoid of unnecessary ornamentation, but even Thyra's untrained eyes could tell that it was an example of incredible craftsmanship. The Adarans might not be an ostentatious people, but if this was any indication, they loved their art nonetheless.

"Behold Dvarnaava," Havaktri breathed. "The last free port in Adar, and perhaps all of Sarlona. We've arrived."

Meren brought *Stormchaser* carefully into an open dock and dropped anchor. No sooner had the crew extended the docking ramp than one of the kalashtar from the boats marched aboard, two others close behind her. She was a stern-looking woman in her prime, with a few faint streaks of grey in her hair, and she looked enough like Havaktri that she could have been close kin.

The mercenaries and Meren walked over to meet her; she scanned the group until her gaze found Havaktri, and then she spoke quickly in a sibilant, alien language.

"She says that she is Taivaktri," Havaktri translated. "She and I are of the same lineage, sharing a quori forebear; in your language, you might say she is my cousin. A distant cousin, true, but to us, the connection is there, and we honor it. She says that she was honored to assist any who would stand against the Inspired, but foreigners are rare in Adar, and not always welcome; this is a nation under siege. She has been instructed to bring us before Dvarnaava's council of Elders. There, we will explain why we have come, and they will decide what exactly is to be done with us."

Well, both groups of main characters have arrived at Sarlona- getting there took rather longer than I'd intended! For the most part, this chapter was about getting the characters into position and exploring some of the new surroundings; I also wanted to take the opportunity to let some characters like Harsk and Haund who haven't had much to do to say their piece. The Blood of Vol is a grim religion popular among a grim nation, but Haund is fairly harsh even by its standards – moderates need not sign up for the Order of the Emerald Claw. Harsk gets to talk a bit more about his druidic background, brought on by the sight of a natural wonder, but it's still a while before we'll explore that in any detail (Havaktri is getting the biggest focus of the non-Len mercenaries this time around, as the setting is, after all, her ancestral homeland).

Speaking of Len, we get our second flashback with her, developing her friendship with Ghazaan more and showing how he figured out she was a changeling. A person always appearing well-groomed even when they never seem to groom themselves is a fairly good giveaway; one of the Eberron novels had a bit where a changeling was identified because he was always clean-shaven, but never actually shaved. The present-day Len, of course, is a bit more careful. And I do like having the chance to get into Ghazaan's head a bit, even if he's not a major POV. There's definitely more to him than meets a casual eye, but he's still a good person when the chips are down.

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 11: Elders of the World

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Taivaktri and her company lead the mercenaries and Meren through the streets of Dvarnaava, slowly making their way towards the city center. The buildings, constructed primarily of stone, were sparsely ornamented but superbly crafted, with smooth lines and an elegant air; the streets were straight and well-maintained; the people they passed went about their business in an orderly fashion, speaking little but smiling and nodding politely to all they passed.

Rinnean didn't like it, and the further they progressed into the city the more he could define why. He was used to the bustle and noise of Khorvaire cities, like Sharn or Wroat; they were chaotic, they were messy, but they were *alive*, alive and unpredictable in a way that Dvarnaava, so far as he could tell, was not. The people – some of whom had the unmistakable but indefinable look of kalashtar, others of whom appeared to be ordinary humans – were so perfectly choreographed that it looked like they'd been practicing every day for a year to get it just right. This seemed like a place where very little ever happened that was unplanned or unexpected. Maybe Rinnean had misjudged it; maybe somewhere there were taverns where the normally-reserved Adarans let loose, dancing on tables and getting into brawls and otherwise doing things that were entirely improper, but in such a place existed, it wasn't immediately obvious where it might be found.

He hadn't expected a land halfway around the world from his home, a land that was locked in an eternal stalemate with the most powerful empire in all of Eberron, to be this *boring*.

Finally, with the sun's last rays glimmering gold through the narrow valley where Dvarnaava was located, they arrived at their destination; a long, low building at the center of the city, larger than most of the others but otherwise unremarkable. A pair of kalashtar, a man and a woman, stood by its entrance like a pair of honor guards; Taivaktri approached them and had a quick, whispered conversation in the sibilant Quori language, and then she bowed. The guards returned the gesture and stepped aside; Taivaktri entered, her charges close behind.

Inside, the building was clean and cool, its walls unadorned save for the small crystal lamps that lined both sides. They were in a long, straight hallway with doors on either side; Rinnean watched them with interest as they passed by, hoping one might open and he would get a glimpse of what lay beyond, but none did. At the end of the hall was another, larger door; when Taivaktri reached it she pushed it open and the mercenaries followed her inside.

They found themselves in a larger chamber lined with pillars, lit by the same crystal lamps, though these were hung in a chandelier in the ceiling. Here there was art along the walls, but it was art of a style that Rinnean was unfamiliar with. He'd grown up in a wealthy Dragonmarked House, and as part of his duties for that House he'd spied on and raided the homes of other wealthy people and groups; he fancied himself familiar with the styles used

by the artists of Khorvaire. The Adaran art, however, didn't depict humanoid figures, or even landscapes, but rather complex abstract patterns that suggested scenes and individuals somehow, but never showed them directly. He felt a pull towards one of the nearer pieces, a desire to try and examine it and figure out its secrets, but he shook it away. Rinnean was here because the captain had taken a job that brought them to Adar, not to study – or steal- their host's art collection.

At the far end of the chamber was a raised awning beneath which were a number of low seats. They were empty as the group approached, but a few moments after Taivaktri stopped in front of them several people entered from side doors and took up their places on them. All of them were kalashtar, and they wore the plain brown robes that seemed so inexplicably popular among that people, but none of them looked younger than middle age, and they all had a quiet confident air, as of people who were accustomed to respect and obedience from others.

Taivaktri and her people bowed at the waist, as did Havaktri; after a moment's hesitation, so did Len, and the rest of the mercenaries followed suit. When they raised their heads, they saw their escort was departing, leaving them alone with the seated kalashtar.

The one in the middle – an older man with a shaved head- spoke in the common language of Khorvaire; his accent was more pronounced than Havaktri's, but his words were understandable. "Welcome, travelers, to Dvarnaava," he said. "We are the elders of this city, and we each represent our lineage – our family, you might say. None of us has precedence over the others, but as I am more familiar with your language than my esteemed colleagues, I have been chosen to speak to do. I am Ganharath.

"Yesterday, we saw your coming, and that you would attempt to cross the Riedran blockade, though we did not know the precise time. Adar has been a land of refuge for time immemorial, since long before the coming of the kalashtar, and we could not stand by and allow you to be taken by the servants of the Inspired, our ancient foe. And yet we cannot help but be wary. Seldom do visitors from Khorvaire come to us; the rulers of your land more commonly treat with Riedra, who maintain that we are anarchists and rebels. Their words have poisoned many against Adar, and the kalashtar people. And yet you travel in the company of one of our own," he nodded to Havaktri, "and it is clear you are no friends of the Inspired. So tell me, Captain d'Lyrandar, why you made this perilous voyage, and what, exactly, you seek in Adar."

"Honestly," Meren said, "this really isn't my journey. I confess I took the job because it seemed dangerous and exciting – something I could tell the House when I got back home, add to my reputation a bit – and I brought some goods in *Stormchaser's* hold that I wouldn't mind trading, if possible. And my ship did get damaged, so if your people would be willing to help me fix her, I'd be most grateful to you. But really, it's Captain Len and her people who wanted to get out here; she's the one who hired me. You want to know what this is all about, ask her."

"You may trade, if you wish," Ganharath said, "and we will provide you with materials to repair your vessel." He turned to Len. "And you – what I asked of him, I now put to you as well."

Len shrugged. “Well, it’s something of a long story,” she said. “It all started for us, at least, when Thyra here showed up and wanted us to do a job for her, but if you really want to know why, I think she can explain it better. Thyra?”

The young human woman stepped forward, and Rinnean thought she seemed more confident now than she had when they’d first met in Sharn; it wasn’t just that she’d changed her hair and clothes, he decided, but that her whole bearing was different – harder, more determined. She spoke of the Overlords, the Lords of Dust, and, after a brief pause to collect herself, her own heritage – she spoke of the map to the Mournland and the Key that lay hidden there, of ir’Sarrin and the Emerald Claw, and the battle with the rakshasa. “And so,” she concluded, “we believe that the next piece of this artifact may be found in the far north of Sarlona. I don’t know how the Inspired found out about our journey, or what they think it has to do with them, but our real goal is to claim the Key, and hopefully to figure out how to use it to bind the Lords of Dust – maybe even all of them. We would humbly request your assistance.” Thyra bowed, copying a gesture Havaktri might have used; Rinnean thought it looked all right, though from Havaktri’s pained expression *something* wasn’t being performed to standards.

The elders glanced at each other, and Rinnean fancied he could hear the faint whisper of their thoughts as they spoke mind-to-mind. Finally, Ganharath turned back to the travelers. “My compatriots think that this is a fascinating story,” he said, “and they wish you will on your quest. But they want to know what this has to do with us?”

“What do you mean?” Thyra demanded, looking startled. “You’re Havaktri’s people, and she say that the kalashtar walk the Path of Light, that you oppose evil powers, just like the Silver Flame does. How can you say this doesn’t have anything to do with you?”

“Easy, kid,” Len said, putting a hand on Thyra’s shoulder. “These are our hosts; let’s try not to offend them. But I’ll admit I’m wondering the same things.”

“We walk the Path of Light,” Ganharath said, his tone still calm and even. “We oppose the agents of the Dreaming Dark, be they quori or mortal. But our war is primarily a spiritual war. We seek to perfect ourselves, to do good in the world, so that the wheel of ages will turn and a new age of light will be born, and *il-Lashtavar* die. But we are descended from another world, and though we cannot return there ourselves, it is to Dal Quor that our thoughts and dreams must turn. If the Dreaming Dark perishes and the Great Light is born, we believe all the planes will benefit. But we are not the Church of the Silver Flame; fighting evil in all its guises is not our purpose. So tell me again – why does this concern us?”

“Honored Elder, if I may,” Havaktri said, “I’ve seen the creature that opposes us – it is terrible! And from what I know of the rakshasa, they consider this whole world their birthright, and will not stop with Khorvaire. As one kalashtar to another, I humbly propose that they are the enemy of *il-Yannah*, whether they know it or not, and therefore are our enemies as well.” She bowed – rather more smoothly than Thyra had – and fell silent.

“Everything is connected,” Harsk said unexpectedly. “World’s all one whole, even if we try to chop it up and pretend otherwise – least, that’s what the druids say, and I’ve never seen reason to think they’re wrong. Maybe you think your private war is safe from interference, but I’d wager my bow and a year’s pay it’s not. Riedra and Adar can duke it out for a

thousand years and pretend the rest of the world doesn't exist, but the rest of the world sure as Khyber won't ignore *you*."

"I go where Len goes," Ghazaan said, "and the boss hasn't led me wrong yet. I don't care if you help us or not, but I just want to say that we wouldn't be on a job this crazy at all if she didn't think it was important."

Silence fell across the hall, and it seemed that the elders were once again conversing silently; Rinnean wondered if he was expected to stick up for this mess next, and was quietly hoping no one would try to make him, when Yhani suddenly stepped forward and cast back her white hood, letting the crystal lights play along her silver-blond hair. She faced the elders confidently, her face as serene as theirs.

Ganharath leaned forward, his expression still neutral, but there was something curious in his eyes. "It has been many years since one of your people has set foot on our shores," he said. "But the kalashtar know the Aereni elves, and respect them."

"And we respect you and your people as ones who see far and possess deep knowledge," Yhani said. "But now I say that you should hear my words. Your people are young yet in this world, Elder Ganharath. Mine are old. Not as old as the dragons or the rakshasas, perhaps, but old nonetheless, and there is much that we know that others have lost. I am Yhani of the family Eshenali, a daughter of Aerenal and a *Soungral* of the Undying Court. You ask why the matter of the Lords of Dust concerns you? I will tell you!

"You, whose ancestors fled from Dal Quor, know the power of dreams and of the mind; we know the powers of *this* world. We believe that there is one divine source that underlies all things, but that it is a force too vast, too... transcendent for any mortal to comprehend. Even as you do, we believe in the quest for enlightenment, but we hold that a mortal life – even an elven life – is too short to attain it. Existence is a journey of endless steps, and the mortal life is but one step upon that path. Thus we use great and secret magical arts to permit the souls of our ancestors to remain a part of this world, that they might progress further along this path, and yet still return to guide us with the knowledge of the divine that we could not attain ourselves. We do not seek to defeat death; that is the folly of the Blood of Vol. Death *is*. Rather, we embrace it, and through embracing it, we believe our ancestors transcend it.

"The Deathless teach us that in the beginning of time, the divine force – which we do not name, for we do not seek to cage or control the infinite – split itself into three. These are the three elders of the world, and their names are known to us still – Siberys, the Dragon Above, Eberron, the Dragon Between, and Khyber, the Dragon Below. From Siberys comes the gifts of magic and wisdom; Eberron is the mother of life, and all who live are her children; Khyber is bound far beneath the earth, and from her proceed all the fearsome things that dwell in darkness.

"Greatest among Khyber's children are the Overlords, beings of extraordinary strength and infinite malice. They ruled this world when it was young, and were barely defeated. I see you nodding; you know this lore. Then you may also know that what Thyra has told you is true; the Overlords still have servants in this world, and the Lords of Dust ever seek to release their masters to reign once again with blood and fire.

“But what you may not know – the knowledge that we of Aerenal remember – is that the Overlords are not mere beings of flesh and blood. They are the embodiments of ideas – each a different form of evil or destruction. Their influence is not restricted to their bodies – if they were freed, the Deathless say, they could remake the world simply by *being*. Do you comprehend this? The Overlords and rakshasas are *this world’s demons* – they are to Eberron what the Dreaming Dark and its quori are to Dal Quor. The strength of the Undying could protect Aerenal from their power, for a time; I believe that the remnants of the sacrifice of Taratai would protect Adar as well. But at what cost? I do not know what Overlord our enemy serves, but imagine – if Bel Shalor, the Shadow in the Flame, is freed, shadows will deepen, words of treachery and paranoia whispered on the wind. If Rak Tulkesh, the Rage of War, walks again, the people of the world will become mad reavers who will bathe the earth in blood. If Dral Khatuur, the Heart of Winter, works her will, the world will be cast into a new ice age beneath which life as we know it will perish.” Yhani’s eyes glinted in the dim light. “Indeed, I have found texts that indicate that such a being – Ran Lishiv, the Unmaker – is bound somewhere beneath these very lands. Imagine if even one of them were loose! If Dal Quor reflects Eberron, you believe, and you seek to bring about a new light there by creating new light here, then think. If the Overlords rise again and remake Eberron according to their designs, the Realm of Dreams will not be spared, and I fear that the Dreaming Dark will perish only to be replaced by a deeper nightmare, one from which there will be no awakening. Your war *is* our war.”

Yhani bowed and withdrew; Rinnean resisted the urge to whistle appreciatively. He’d be damned if he believed half of what she said, but Sovereigns, she knew how to say it. Looking around and his companions, he saw Ghazaan, Harsk, and Havaktri watching with approval; Thyra seemed weary but determined, and Meren completely and utterly lost. Len, however, seemed pleased, but Rinnean thought there was a deeper wariness there at well, as of something buried deep that didn’t sit right with her. Odd; the Captain usually supported whatever Yhani said or did wholeheartedly; he wondered what had got into her today.

Finally, Ganharath spoke. “Your words have merit, *Soungral* Yhani,” the Elder said. “But I am curious as to what your fellow elf thinks of this. He has not spoken yet.” All eyes suddenly turned towards Rinnean, and he felt horribly visible and pinned down, desperate for a shadow – any shadow- to escape to. Finally, steeling himself, he looked up and spoke.

“I’m not Aereni,” he said. “My... family... left the island a long time ago. I never did believe much in any of what Yhani has to say; always seemed a bunch of traditionalist, superstitious bunk to me. But whatever our differences are, Yhani’s not a liar, and she doesn’t usually speak up unless she thinks she’s got something worth saying. So I guess what I’m saying is, you should listen to her.”

Yhani looked at Rinnean and arched an eyebrow; he merely shrugged in response. Traveler, what was he *supposed* to have said after that speech of hers? Still, the kalashtar elders seemed to approve; they appeared to be consulting with one another again, and then Ganharath spoke.

“We are pleased with your words,” he said, and Rinnean let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “We have been reading your thoughts as you have spoken, and we believe you are all sincere – and we also believe that *Soungral* Yhani is correct. The Overlords threaten

us all – human, elven, and kalashtar alike. Therefore, we will provide you what aid we can in your quest to reach this northern vault – “

His words were cut off by a sudden, faint sound of applause. Ganharath raised his head, and his expression tightened almost imperceptibly – but Rinnean had a feeling that it was a dramatic reaction from the reserved elder. The other elders seemed to have much the same expressions. Slowly, Rinnean turned in the direction they were staring, and saw that they were no longer alone.

A phantasm similar to the one Captain Tulchasar had used stood in the center of the hall, but Rinnean knew in his gut, somehow, that the man whose image it depicted was no mere Empty Vessel. He was tall and well-built, somewhat paler than most of the kalashtar but sharing similar Sarlonan features, and he wore rich dark robes over what looked like a well-wrought suit of armor plates. He was miming applause, and a faint smile played across his features. But his eyes – there was a power to them, a *depthlessness*, that no mortal being could match.

This, then, must be an Inspired – a human vessel with a quori spirit inside.

“Greetings, elders,” the phantasm said, speaking the common tongue of Khorvaire to Rinnean’s surprise. He must be able to see his audience, and he wanted them to understand him. “I see you’ve been speaking with some fugitives who fought their way past my servants earlier today. In the interest of fairness, I think it time I say *my* piece.”

Chapter End Notes

This is a talky chapter, but one I felt was fairly necessary. I wanted to get a bit of a look into kalashtar culture beyond just Havaktri (not that Rinnean is the sort to fully appreciate it) and also needed to get the elders willing to help our heroes – the kalashtar are generally an altruistic people, but the Adaran kalashtar do tend to be more insular and traditional, and less proactive, than their Khorvaire cousins. Lucky Yhani was there; her little speech was something I’d envisioned for a long time, and the kalashtar and Aereni tend to see each other as having solid common ground, both being tight-knit cultures with strong spiritual traditions and a long view of history. Of course, there’s more going on here that we’ll see in later chapters.

And then Inharanath showed up. Projecting his image this far into hostile territory must be hard, but then, he’s quite powerful. I wonder what he wants, but I don’t think anyone imagines this is a social call...

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 12: Phantasms and Deceptions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Len hissed and drew her sword partway from its sheath, though she wasn't sure how effective a weapon it would be against this strange apparition. At her side she could see her fellow mercenaries also tensing for a fight, save for Yhani, who continued to regard the newcomer with a calm, even expression. The kalashtar elders, also did not seem to be alarmed; Ganharath merely rose from his seat and walked forward, the others trailing behind.

"Inharanath," he said mildly as he came face to face with the apparition. "I see you have a new Vessel, but I know you nonetheless."

The Inspired – Inharanath – merely shrugged. "Human flesh quickly grows weary," he said, "as you no doubt are aware, child of Harath. But such is the devotion of our subjects that there are always more, willing to stand forth and serve."

If Ganharath was at all offended by his words, he didn't let it show. "You must have expended a great deal of effort to manifest yourself here," he said. "I'm curious what message the Inspired thought was of such urgency that you were willing to go to such lengths to deliver it. You know we shall never cease to oppose you until the Age turns and the Dark is no more."

"Maybe he's not here just to talk," Len muttered. "I don't know a whole lot about psions; how much power can he wield in this form, anyway?"

"Thankfully, very little," Ganharath said, a faint smile tugging his lips at the obvious displeasure on Inharanath's face. "This technique is primarily a tool of communication, or for espionage. But we have little to worry about when it comes to that here; Adar is defended by the Shroud that Taratai our teacher raised before she was lost to us, and it blocks most intrusions; he can see the people to whom he is speaking, but I doubt much else. And though manifesting psionic abilities through this projection is possible, with the Shroud's interference I think that Inharanath would not be able to manage it, and would simply lose the connection instead. No, I think we are safe from direct attack from him now."

"Well, that's a relief," Len said, and let out a breath she'd been barely aware she was holding. Carefully, she slipped her sword back into its sheath and looked to Ganharath. "That still leaves the question – who is he and why is he here?"

"My name is Inharanath, Lord General of the Tenth Legion," he said, bowing at the waist. "The naval forces you evaded earlier today had been placed under my command as well, and I applaud your skill at escaping them – though of course I regret the loss of life and the damage to the vessels. No doubt the kalashtar have filled your heads with horror stories concerning my kind, but I assure you that we desire only to rule our glorious empire in peace."

I did not wish to use force on you, but you refused to cooperate peacefully and Captain Tulcharar panicked. I assure he has been... chastised for his error.”

“You have nice manners for body-stealing tyrant,” Rinnean said, crossing his arms casually. “Personally, I can’t say I disapprove of your manners or your methods – Sovereigns know, I’ve done things I’m not proud of – but I do have to take exception at your men shooting at us earlier. So why don’t you just get to the point and stop trying to butter us up?”

Inharanath pursed his lips. “Very well,” he said. “We received intelligence that you seek a relic buried somewhere in or near our domain. My brother and sister Inspired do not consider this matter to be of significant interest; I do. I believe such a weapon could greatly benefit the stability of Riedra – or threaten it, in the wrong hands. For obvious reasons, I would prefer this not happen. Therefore, I propose an arrangement. Come to Riedra; meet me on the border of Adar, near Kasshta Keep. I will provide an escort to the location of this relic, and my soldiers will help you retrieve it. In return, I request that the relic be turned over to the Inspired for study. You will be well-compensated for the device itself, and permitted to return to your homeland in peace.”

“How did he know?” Thyra hissed suddenly when Inharanath stopped speaking; her eyes were wide with fear. Not wise, in Len’s opinion, but the girl’s words were already out and there was no taking them back. The Inspired merely looked superior, but Ganharath answered.

“Information has always been the Inspired’s greatest weapon,” he said warily. “They walk in dreams, inhabit bodies other than their own, bend the wills of others to serve them – and their own counsels are conducted in Dal Quor, where they cannot be observed or overheard. They rely on knowing everything about their enemies, while they themselves remain ever hidden.” He turned back to Inharanath’s image. “Which is why I have to wonder why you have miscalculated so strongly here, Lord General? I promise you that the kalashtar have not forgotten you, and we know better than any what your kind are capable of. We will not harm our guests, but neither will we permit them to leave Adar if they agree to your bargain.”

Ghazaan, Thyra, and Rinnean looked shocked, and Havaktri looked dismayed; Len waved them off with one hand. She thought she knew what Ganharath was going, and didn’t want any of them to make a scene. But the Inspired only smiled.

“As a show of good faith,” he said, “several kalashtar prisoners of war we hold will be returned to you if you permit them safe passage; this I swear by the heart of Dal Quor and the Dream of the Age.”

The elders glanced at one another from the corners of their eyes, and Len thought she could feel the faint rustle of telepathic communication; finally Ganharath nodded and met Inharanath’s gaze. “You will permit us to discuss the matter,” he said.

“I will,” was the reply. “I will return here tomorrow in this form to hear your response. Choose wisely.” Then he was gone.

“I fear he will not keep his word,” Yhani said finally, after a long silence. “I know little of the Inspired compared to some here, but what I do does not fill me with confidence that this...

creature... will honor his promise. I suspect betrayal.”

“As do we,” said Ganharath. “Inharanath’s name is very old, and very hated. He is ruthless even by the standards of the quori, though more impetuous than most.” He regarded each of the travelers in turn. “If you wish to continue your mission, we must make plans to evade him.”

“All right,” Len said. “My people are tired; we’ve had a long day and need to get some rest. After that, let’s get started.”

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Inharanath released the shoulder of the younger man at his side, a Chosen officer whose name Shaikatari hadn’t caught; the man groaned and pitched forward and two of the common soldiers who stood guard caught him and led him gently from the tent. Inharanath himself did not appear winded at all; he merely strolled over to the map of Sarlona and regarded it intently.

Finally, Shaikatari spoke. “That technique you used, Excellency,” she began, “I didn’t recognize it. I’m not technically a psion, but my education covered the fine points of that art, and I had never heard of an ability like that. The power to manifest an image in Adar was *his*, but somehow *you* manifested it! Forgive my inquisitiveness, but I don’t understand.”

“There are many paths to psionic power,” Inharanath said, but Shaikatari was relieved that he sounded pleased. “The path of the psion is one; the path of the soulknife that you walk yourself is another. My path is different still; someday, I will tell you more of it.” He paused. “You have further questions, Chosen. You doubt the wisdom of my course of action today.”

Shaikatari saluted. “Forgive my doubting, Excellency,” she said. “I merely wonder why you chose to appear to the kalashtar. You must know that wouldn’t hand the barbarians over to us; they’ve been our enemies for as long as Riedra has stood. Why waste your energy when you must have known the attempt would fail?”

“You think it failed?” Inharanath asked, and Shaikatari could hear the amusement in his voice. “No. I want to find whatever it is the barbarians seek. I could have left my hand hidden, waited until they left Adar of their own accord, but that might have taken some time, and with careful planning to evade our attentions. Now, I have revealed myself, and the threat will spur them into action at once, with less caution and planning than they might have used. Riedra is ours, Chosen, from every fortress-city to the smallest hamlet; tonight, I will commune with my fellow generals and order them to keep watch. I do not know by what way the barbarians will leave Adar, but it will be soon. And when they resurface, they shall be ours.”

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Len threw herself down on the simple bed in the plain guest quarters Ganharath had escorted them to and stared up at the ceiling. On the other bed, Yhani had seated herself and begun to brush out her long hair; Len watched for a moment from the corner of her eye and wondered, not for the first time, why she bothered. ‘Hani’s hair always looked perfect, regardless of

what she did with it. ‘*Hani* was always perfect. Len normally admired that in her; sometimes, it could be extremely frustrating.

Finally, the sound of Yhani’s brushing stopped and Len could hear the rustle of cloth as she turned towards her. “Len,” she said, “You are very good at keeping your feelings buried, but I know you too well for it to work on me. Something is bothering you; what is wrong?”

“It’s just this whole situation, ‘Hani,” the captain said, still staring up at the ceiling. “We know what’s going on now, or we think we do, so that’s better than that trip to Karnath, but still. We’re on another continent, in a country most people in Khorvaire have barely heard of, getting ready to make a trip after another artifact that damn rakshasa probably wants. Oh, and it looks like we’ve just made another enemy, one who’s *also* immortal and happens to be one of the rulers of the most powerful empire in Sarlona, if not the whole world. You could say I’m feeling a bit on edge.”

Yhani was silent for a long moment, and Len could almost feel her disapproval. “Please, dear heart, do not lie to me,” she said. “All of that may be bothering you, but it is not really what is weighing on your heart. If you do not want to talk about it, I understand, but please do not insult me with an explanation that you know is not true.”

Len sighed and sat up; as she did so, she relaxed some indefinable muscle in her face and let her whole body change. She could feel, though not see, the color drain from her skin, leaving it ashen grey; her hair came loose from its braid and hung lank and white down her back, while the features of her face lost their distinction and both pupil and iris faded from her eyes. When she looked back up at Yhani, it wasn’t as the human she so often pretended to be, but as what she truly was – a changeling.

Yhani’s eyes widened slightly – it wasn’t often that Len chose to show her true face, even to those who knew her best – but then she merely nodded, as if waiting for her to continue. Len drew a deep breath, and then she began. “There’s something about this place, ‘Hani,” she said. “This whole trip really. The kalashtar may not be a very old race, but Sarlona *is* old, full of memory and heritage. This is the place humans came from, you know, crossing the sea from Sarlona to Khorvaire thousands of years ago and conquering it. Galifar, the Five Nations, the Dragonmarked Houses – it all has its roots *here*. And the kalashtar *do* have history, stretching back to the Realm of Dreams, like Havaktri told us about. And you have history that’s even older – that’s what your little speech was all about, wasn’t it? History and heritage and knowledge. And Ghazaan’s got the Dhakaani Empire in his heritage, and Harsk has the druids, and Thyra has her church.

“Changelings have no culture, ‘Hani. I don’t *have* history or heritage. My kind, we’re like those crabs that live in other creatures’ cast-off shells. I barely even remember my birth parents, so I don’t even have that much to ground myself on. We flit into the cracks in civilization, change ourselves to fit in, live our whole lives in disguise. We reinvent ourselves to become whatever we need to be to survive, and then we do it again and again, but who are *we*, anyway, when we’re alone and shapeless? You know I tell people that I prefer to take human shape to escape how changelings are persecuted, but that’s not it at all. I do it because I’m afraid that if I ever stop playing a part and just let myself be *me*, I’ll realize that there isn’t really anything under the mask, that there *isn’t* really a ‘Len’.” She hung her head.

“You’re a rock, ‘Hani. You know who you are, where you come from, where you’re going. You’re unshakable. And I don’t even know what I am.”

Yhani stood and quietly crossed the room; seating herself beside Len, she put an arm around her shoulders. “Do not talk like this,” she said, and there was force in the quiet words.

“Maybe you do not know who you are, but I do. I know you stood against the Karrn forces when all of the officers were dead, and thanks to your leadership we held the border fort. I know you showed me all the wonders of Sharn, and I saw you laugh at the street performers’ show, that you were outraged at the watchmen who used their authority to bully the common people, that you wept when we took the skycoach tour and you saw all the city’s lights spread out beneath us, though you tried to hide it. I know you kept us together after the War ended and you made sure we would all still be able to earn our living, that you wanted to help Thyra even after she lied to us because you saw that she was frightened and alone.

“You are a great many things, Len, and that is why I love you. You say I am solid, like a rock? You are something different, dynamic and adaptable, but always at your core I see the determined, courageous person I have come to love. Perhaps you do not feel you have the histories some do, but I say, you are Len. And perhaps that is enough.”

Len looked up at her and smiled, barely trying to hide the tears that trickled from the edges of her eyes. “Do you really mean that or are you just trying to make me feel better?” she asked. “It all sounds good, but I’m not sure I actually live up to it.”

Yhani took Len’s face in her hands and pressed their foreheads together. “I am a priestess, dear heart,” she said. “I know things. And I will have faith for both of us, if I must. Now, as patient and understanding as I may be, if you say such foolish things about yourself again, I shall have to slap you.” Len managed a smile through her tears, and Yhani smiled back.

“Now be still,” the priestess said. “We must rest, for we have much to do tomorrow, and I fear little time to do it. But know this – whatever you may think of yourself, you are neither lost nor alone.”

Chapter End Notes

Inharanath is an Inspired, and they never play direct or obvious games. In this case, he deliberately showed his own hand to force our heroes’, and he considers himself fully prepared for any attempt to evade his attentions. Of course, the kalashtar have some tricks up their sleeves too, and are used to Inspired ploys, but we’ll have to wait until next time to see what Ganharath has in mind.

In game terms, Inharanath isn’t a psion; he’s something a bit more specialized. His abilities are based off of a Pathfinder psionic class, but I’ll see if anyone can guess which one. We’ll see more of what he can do before the story is over.

Len's identity crisis is something I've been planting the seeds for across several chapters (and has been in the back of my mind for the character since before I started work on the first fic), and this isn't the end of that subplot, despite Yhani's encouraging words. As a changeling, she has a somewhat different understanding of what identity means than most other people would (or how we would typically use the term in modern discourse) and we'll be getting more into that later, but it definitely influences her fears that she's just an empty shell playing a part. Also note the reference to Len's parents as a further reason why she doesn't feel connected to any sort of meaningful heritage – we'll get more into them as we dig deeper into Len's backstory down the line.

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 13: Looking Forward, Looking Back

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Len stood in the courtyard with her cloak wrapped around her, the rest of the garrison standing around her in even ranks. A faint drizzle of cool rain fell from an overcast sky, and she could hear the muttering of the other soldiers as they wondered what this was all about and when they could get back inside. Ghazaan was standing a few rows down; he'd looked over his shoulder and winked at her when they'd first gathered, and now he was waiting quietly with everyone else.

The murmur of voices died down and everyone stood straighter as Commander ir 'Ashryn, a graying, middle-aged human with a thick mustache, came to stand before them, his officers arrayed behind. Among them was a figure Len hadn't seen before, tall and slender and completely shrouded in white; Len's gaze fall on it and lingered, an uneasy feeling growing in her chest. Then the commander cleared his throat and began to speak. "Attention, everyone," he said. "You may have been hearing rumors lately that Karrn forces have been sighted in southern Cyre and seem to be heading this way. On account of the Karrn push to the north, many of you may have discounted these rumors. I must now inform you that they are, in fact, true. Karrn scouts have indeed been sighted not far from here. High command fears they may be preparing for a major push in this direction while the rest of the Five are distracted by the fighting in the north. Therefore, I have decided to expand scouting patrols of our own to ensure that if such a push comes, we will have ample warning. All of you have been sorted into patrol squads based on the recommendations of your superior officers; you will receive your assignments shortly. Though we have not faced a serious threat in some time, I expect that you will all perform this duty to the fullness of your capabilities."

It was all Len could do to keep from rolling her eyes, and she had a feeling she wasn't the only one. But that was the commander for you; dull as dishwater, marginally competent at best, and entirely oblivious to both of those facts. But he wasn't done quite yet; he gestured behind him and the white-shrouded figure approached, gliding silently through the mist like a ghost. Now that they were closer, Len could make out a delicate, pale chin and strands of silvery hair poking from beneath the figure's hood – a woman, Len thought, though she wasn't entirely sure. "This is Yhani," the commander said. "She's a priestess from Aerenal, and offered her services to the Brelish military as a healer and spellcaster. Apparently, her credentials checked out, because she was assigned to us, and she is to accompany the patrols. There are unconfirmed reports that the Karrns may be using their undead; Yhani has ways of dealing with such creatures. I expect her to be treated with the highest respect. That is all; you will report to your immediate superiors to receive your assignments. For King and country!"

The commander saluted and the garrison returned it; he then turned and departed. As the officers stepped forward and the soldiers began to gather around their own superiors, Len

couldn't keep her eyes off of the shrouded elf-woman who was following a step behind ir'Sarrin. Since when did the Aereni elves give a damn about what happened in Khorvair, anyway? And why would a priestess with sufficient magical power to best the Karrnathi undead sign up with Breland, and get assigned to a backwater here? Something didn't add up, and all of Len's instincts told her that this was a setup, though for what, she couldn't say.

In any case, Yhani – or whatever her real name was – bore watching.

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The wind howled across the Tashana Tundra under a black night sky, scattering snow and chilling to the bone anyone unfortunate enough to be caught out in it. Ir'Sarrin's company had taken shelter earlier that evening in a small cave under a rocky overhang and most of them now lay asleep around a flickering fire, the skeleton warriors standing watch along the cavern walls like macabre, unyielding sentinels.

Irinali sat by the cave entrance with her furs wrapped around her, staring out into the darkness with elven eyes that saw far even with limited light. The empty, frozen desolation repelled her, and yet at the same time it fascinated her; try as she might, she found she couldn't tear her gaze away. The cold wind seemed to shear away all edges, all imperfections, leaving behind something at once fascinating and horrible – like the Mourndland, in some ways, save that the Mourndland had been the product of magic gone mad, while the Tashana Tundra had been shaped by no hand but nature's. And yet, in the distant north Irinali could just make out flickering lights in many colors that added to the otherworldly air.

She hated, of course; hated it in her bones. But it was fascinating nonetheless.

"It makes me wonder," a soft voice said, and Irinali turned to see ir'Sarrin seat himself beside her. "Is this what Dolurrh is like? A cold emptiness that wearies the souls of the dead until nothing remains of them to tie them to their living selves? Is this what Alayria faced, in the end? Is this what our children faced? Nothing but darkness and cold and wind that slowly ate them away into nothing?"

Irinali started; it had been a long time since she'd heard Kharvin speak the name of his dead wife aloud. To her surprise, she found herself resting a hand on his shoulder. "I don't know what awaits in the Realm of the Dead," she said. "My business is mostly with bodies, not souls. But I've never read any study of Dolurrh suggesting it was this cold or windy."

Ir'Sarrin snorted. "Some comfort, at least," he muttered. For a long time the two of them sat silently, staring out over the tundra, before the warlord finally spoke again. "I know you're not very religious, Irinali," he said. "I wasn't either when I was a young man. I followed the Sovereigns – Aureon, Dol Dorn, Onatar – but mostly out of habit. I never really believed. It was Alayria who introduced me to the Blood of Vol, you know. I didn't much credit it at the time – it seemed like a bunch of superstitious nonsense. But then, as the war dragged on and my family started dying, it started to make more sense. Maybe Dolurrh isn't like this tundra, but *this* life is. We are at the mercy of forces beyond our control, beaten down and used up until nothing remains." He clenched his fist, and there was a fervent light in his eyes. "But we can *change* it, Irinali! That's the great gift of the teachings of Vol – they take the power out of the hands of cruel gods and put it back in the hands of mortals, where it belongs. People say

that the Blood of Vol offers no hope, but I say it is the only religion in this world that truly does. I believe that death, the scourge of existence, can be *vanquished* – maybe not in this generation or the next, but someday.” His voice broke. “Can you think of it, Irinali? A world free of death, of pain, where no one will have to experience losing the ones they love again? That’s the world I would build. In the Queen’s service, we can bring a new age to Karnath, and then to Eberron itself!”

He’d said all this before, of course; Irinali was familiar with her patron’s dark moods. But something in the night’s darkness seemed to pull it all out of him at once, and she’d rarely seen him so – raw. She didn’t share his faith – though there were many ways by which a skilled necromancer could live on past mortal life, and she fully intended to make use of them when her time came, she didn’t believe it was possible to eradicate death entirely. And the Karrns were just another nation, not some chosen people. Still, she rested one of her hands gently on his. “It’s a glorious vision, Kharvin,” she said. “I hope I could be there to see it.”

Irinali realized that she did. She didn’t think it would ever come to pass, but a part of her almost wished it could.

“I don’t know if this thing we’re seeking can help in that cause,” ir’Sarrin said quietly, nodding at her. “But if the Queen desires it, I believe it must be valuable. This time, we’ll succeed – I know it. And in the end, it will all be worth it.”

By ‘all’, Irinali knew, he didn’t mean just this quest – he meant all the trials and losses the family ir’Sarrin, and indeed all of Karnath, had ever gone through. She didn’t think there was any prize worth that much, but she didn’t have the heart to say it out loud.

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Thyra stepped into the Elders’ audience hall the next morning with Havaktri following close behind. The kalashtar seemed to almost be radiating an air of mixed wonder and familiarity at finally seeing places that had been in her mind all her life; Thyra wasn’t sure if she could feel it because of her own developing thought-reading abilities, or just because Havaktri was simply projecting that strongly. Either way, her pleasure was difficult to miss, and the sorceress found herself feeling a strong sense of happiness for her friend.

The others were already gathered in the center of the hall; the two young women took up their position near Len and Yhani. Looking around the circle, Thyra saw that Rinnean looked dubious, Harsk curious, and Ghazaan nonchalant. Yhani was as serene as ever, but the sorceress couldn’t shake the feeling that Len was hiding something buried so deep that no one else could see.

“Where’s Captain d’Lyrandar?” she finally did ask, noticing who was missing.

“Apparently, he went back to his ship,” said Ghazaan. “This is our job, not his, remember. Think he’s seeing about getting *Stormchaser* fixed up and then trying to see whether anyone here might be interested in trading with him.”

“I suspect he will be successful at that,” Ganharath said; the kalashtar elder strode into the hall with one of the other elders, a woman who carried several long scrolls, at his side. “We get so few visitors from Khorvaire here that I expect many of our people will be interested in buying anything he has to sell, merely for the novelty. You, meanwhile, have plans to make. Jinkashtai has brought maps to help us.”

The woman elder – Jinakashtai – nodded and spread out one of the scrolls on the floor, revealing an intricately-detailed map of the continent. The mercenaries crouched around it, and then Yhani pointed to a spot in the far northern edge.

“That is where we need to go,” she said. “According to the map we found in the previous vault, this is the location of the second one. Havaktri told us that it is called the Tashana Tundra.”

“Yes,” said Ganharath, stroking his chin. “That land is little known to us, as all of Riedra stands between. I know only that it is cold, largely empty, and very dangerous.”

“Lovely,” said Rinnean. “And, as you so graciously pointed out, it’s on the other side of the damn continent, with an empire ruled by evil spirits in the way. Are we really expected to walk across the entirety of Riedra to find this vault? I think that Inharanath fellow would object to that, and it sounds like he has the resources to do something about it.”

“We could take the ship,” Harsk grunted. “Of course, then we’d have to worry about that blockade again. We got lucky once; maybe not so much next time.”

“There is a way,” Ganharath said slowly. “There are different disciplines among the psionic arts, just as, I believe, there are different schools among your wizardry.”

“Yes, this is true,” Havaktri put in. “My abilities are in the areas of telepathy and psychokinesis, but there are others.” Suddenly looking mortified, she bowed. “Forgive my interruption, Honored Elder.”

“Forgiven, child,” Ganharath said with a faint smile. “Havaktri is right. My abilities lie in the area we would call in your language *psychoportation* – the use of the psionic arts to transport objects across distances. If I joined my will with the other elders and drew upon their power, I believe I could send you most of the way along your journey?”

Len arched an eyebrow. “So you could just teleport us instantly to the Tashana Tundra? Sounds convenient.”

“No,” Ganharath said. “I can only send you to a place that is familiar to me; I have never been to the tundra, and if any of my line have, these memories have never come clearly to me. I could send you here,” he pointed to an area in the north of Riedra. “This is as far as my direct knowledge extends. You would have to make the rest of the way yourself.”

“Sounds like we’d still have to cross part of Riedra, then,” Harsk said. “Better than walking the whole way, but it still could be tricky.”

“It sounds like we’ll need disguises,” said Len; she glanced at Rinnean, and he nodded in understanding. “I don’t think those Inspired would be easy to fool, but if we could get past some of the regular people, that would help.”

“Indeed,” said Ganharath. “Thyra should have no difficulty – Riedra is a vast land of many former nationalities, most of them human. Her hair and eyes are unusual for this land, but not unheard of. Rinnean and Yhani should be able to pass as human, so long as they keep their hoods up and ears covered.” He looked to Harsk. “There are shifters in Riedra; they are not common, but the Inspired often use them as trackers and scouts. One of your group, however, is not what she appears.”

For a terrible moment Thyra thought he meant her, and that somehow her rakshasa heritage would be a danger to the mission. A moment later, however, and she realized that he didn’t mean her at all – Ganharath was staring directly across the circle, at Len. She regarded him evenly for a long moment, then lowered her gaze.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m a changeling. Is that going to be a problem?” She looked back up, and her eyes were hard.

Ganharath raised an eyebrow. “Not at all,” he said. “Changelings are honored in Riedra; the Inspired hold that your race’s mutable forms are a sign of great spiritual advancement, and in their empire changelings typically hold positions above those of ordinary humans, though of course below the Inspired and their Empty Vessels. Your presence could be a great aid to your friends.”

Len sat back on her heels, a stunned look on her face. “I know some people back home who’d laugh their asses off to hear that,” she finally said. “Let’s just say that changelings aren’t so well-off in Khorvaire and leave it at that.” She shook her head. “By the Traveler, you hear something new every day. So, what about Havaktri and Ghazaan?”

“There are none like him in Sarlona,” Jinkashtai said, speaking the common language of Khorvaire in a somewhat halting voice. “Could be a problem.”

“Maybe not,” Thyra said thoughtfully. “I’m an illusionist – among other things. Maybe I could make Ghazaan appear human, at least long enough to fool anyone who got too close.”

“Well, that’s embarrassing,” Ghazaan said. “Imagine if you couldn’t take it off and I got stuck looking like a scrawny twig-man with no teeth? I’d never be able to show my face in public again!” Nonetheless, he was smiling. “But I’ve done worse things for a job than that. If Thyra thinks she can pull it off, I’m willing to let her try.”

“And what about me?” Havaktri asked. “I know that I’m new to this continent, but I’m kalashtar and I know my history. If the Inspired find me and realize what I am, they’ll kill me. I know that for sure.”

“There is a way,” said Ganharath. “It is very dangerous, but one of our people have used successfully before. Riedra is a strictly hierarchical society; the people are taught from an early age to obey those above them without question. It makes them formidable, disciplined foes – but it is also a weakness we can exploit. The quori have bred their Empty Vessels to be

in tune with Dal Quor, making them idea for possession – you have noticed, no doubt, that this connection also gives them a striking appearance. As it does we kalashtar, who are bound from birth to rebel quori. A kalashtar or an Empty Vessel will always stand out in a crowd of ordinary humans – but, by a twist of fate or our connection to the Realm of Dreams, we resemble each other remarkably. Enough for impersonation to be a viable tactic.”

“Are you suggesting what I think you are?” Len asked. “Cause if you’re saying Havaktri should pretend to be an Empty Vessel – or even an Inspired – that sounds *damned* dangerous, and I’m not going to force her to do it if she doesn’t want to.”

“An Empty Vessel would be easier,” said Ganharath. “Travelling as an Inspired would put you above questioning, but even in Riedra Inspired are not so common as to pass without comment, and when the real Inspired heard of it, they would know Havaktri was not one of their brethren. Empty Vessels are more common. But possession leaves no sign, so it would be possible to change the story to suit the circumstances. Either would grant you authority to pass through Riedra unchallenged, unless your deception was discovered.”

“You don’t have to do this, Havaktri,” Len said. “We can find another way if you want.” Thyra reached out and put a hand on the kalashtar’s shoulder, trying to direct her thoughts toward her friend and let her know that whatever she chose, she supported.

Havaktri looked down at her hands for a long, silent moment, then back up first at Len, then at Ganharath. “I’ve heard that impersonating an Inspired carries a death sentence,” she said. “But then, so does being a kalashtar in Riedra. I don’t think this puts me in any worse position than I would already be in.” She sat up straighter and squared her shoulders. “What must we do?”

Chapter End Notes

We get a bit more Len backstory today, including her first glimpse of Yhani. We’re starting to come up on events Ghazaan mentioned when talking about how they met, so we’ll see how that plays out before long.

Irinali and ir’Sarrin have an interesting dynamic; two very different people bound together by common cause and mutual respect, it’s not the sort of thing you see that often among villains. Irinali wouldn’t risk her life for ir’Sarrin or his cause – I think the end of the last fic showed that -but she’s loyal otherwise, and he’s probably the closest thing she has to a friend. Here we also see a bit behind the mask of ir’Sarrin himself; beneath the fanatical and driven warlord is really a weary old man who’s lost everyone he loved, desperately clinging to the cause he thinks will give some meaning to his loss.

And of course, our heroes get ready to put their plans in order, and will soon be joining the hunt for the vault. Havaktri’s deception has been in the works for a while – we’ll

have to wait and see if she can pull it off (the same goes for Len's discovery of the role of changelings in Riedra). And of course, we'll also have to wait and see if this will actually blindside Inharanath at all, and what he intends to do about it...

-MasterGhandalf

Chapter 14: Towards the North

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“So,” Havaktri said, turning in a circle to show off her disguise, “what do you think?”

The Dvarnaava elders, as it turned out, had a rather impressive collection of clothing in the styles that were popular among the ruling classes of Riedra, whether captured or replicas, and so she had been given a fair variety to choose from. The result was something far fancier than anything Thyra had seen any of the kalashtar wear, though perhaps it appeared more opulent to her than it actually was because the unfamiliar Riedran designs still seemed exotic. Her top and pants were both loose and made of what looked like indigo silks, and gold jewelry glinted on her wrists and at her throat; the most striking accessory was the strange, spiky headdress Ganharath had indicated was a popular ornament for Inspired or Empty Vessel psions. Completing the ensemble was a plain wooden quarterstaff set with metal heels on either end; Havaktri had swung it through a few passes and seemed pleased with the weapon.

“Very nice,” Thyra said, smiling. “Just be careful when you go through low doors with that thing on your head, and you should be good.”

“Maybe try for a look that’s a bit more imperious while you’re at it,” Rinnean observed idly. “Based on what I’ve seen so far, I don’t think ‘nervous girl at a costume party’ is quite a look the Inspired go for. That Inharanath struck me as the arrogant sort, and believe me when I say I know the type.”

“I feel ridiculous,” Havaktri admitted, looking down at her silk sleeves. “How anyone would think this was better than a plain robe escapes me.”

“That’s not how you need to be thinking,” Len said, stepping forward. Walking behind Havaktri, she put her hands on the kalashtar’s shoulders and leaned close to her ear. “Take it from a professional, kid. You look like an Inspired, but you’re not *thinking* like one. You’ve got to believe in the con at least a little, or people will notice and it’ll start to fall apart. When you get in character, you’re not Havaktri the wide-eyed girl from the monastery anymore, kiddo. You’re one of the rulers of this continent, and you know in your soul that you expect, and deserve, to be obeyed. That you’re better than everyone else not because of anything you did, but just by virtue of being. Try it.”

Havaktri breathed deeply and raised her head, and there was a sudden coldness in her gaze and expression that Thyra had never seen before. “I know my place, mercenary,” she said in a soft, deadly voice. “Remember yours. Now unhand me at once!”

Len did so at once and stepped back, but Thyra saw the pleased look in her eyes. A moment later, Havaktri’s imperious façade broke and she looked expectantly to Len. “How did that sound?” she asked, and the illusion was broken, but for a moment, it had been successful.

Len mimed applause. “Very good,” she said. “Now, if you can just keep that up any time we meet someone on the road, then we’ll be on to something.”

“Yes,” Ganharath said as he stepped into the small side chamber, a small crystal sphere carried lightly in his hand. “Fortunately, those trained in the psionic arts tend to be skilled at keeping their composure under pressure. Now, a few words before we prepare to send you on your way. Havaktri, am I correct in assuming that you are the only one among your friends who can speak Riedran? My understanding is that it isn’t a commonly taught language in Khorvaire.”

“Yes, Elder,” Havaktri said. “I learned it in the monastery. I can try to teach some useful vocabulary and phrases as we travel, and if I use a mindlink the process should be a quick one.” She glanced over at Len. “It might still be best if you let me do the talking; if someone speaks to you, I’ll send you the proper response. And hope that the Riedran I learned at home remains up-to-date,” she added under her breath.

Ganharath gave a small smile. “Luckily, Riedra is a society that is slow to change,” he said. He turned to Len. “Captain, it might also behoove you to resume your true appearance for this journey. Havaktri will be taking the role of an Empty Vessel, which will give her a rank you might call noble in your lands, but changelings often serve the Inspired and their Chosen in important roles and therefore your presence would reinforce the idea that your group are important and not to be interfered with.”

“No,” Len said flatly, crossing her arms. She shot Ganharath a cool look as if daring him to question her further; had she been looking at Thyra like that, the sorceress would have known to stay quiet. Ganharath, apparently, did not.

“Why not?” he asked. “I assure you, any prejudice you might have encountered in Khorvaire you will not find here. Most Riedran changelings have high standing. You could walk about freely.”

“No,” Len repeated, and her tone was ice; at her side, Yhani winced at the elder’s questions. “Maybe I could walk around here in my real face and non one would care – I could walk around naked, too, and I’m not doing that either. I don’t expect you to understand, but I’d hope you could take a hint. I’ll transform if I have to, but until then, I’m wearing this appearance. Ask me again and I’ll be tempted to do something to you that a guest shouldn’t do to her host.”

Havaktri’s hands flew to her mouth in horror, while Rinnean looked amused, but Ganharath merely appeared understanding. “My apologies, Captain,” he said, bowing. “I’ve known few of your people and was unaware I had caused offense. It wasn’t my intention.”

Yhani put a comforting hand on Len’s shoulder, but the captain thought it over for a moment and then shrugged. “Fair enough,” she said. “Anything else we need to know before we set out?”

Ganharath nodded, and held up the crystal he’d been holding. “This is a power stone,” he said. “I have impressed within it the essence of the power we will be using to send you across Riedra. Once your task is complete, Havaktri will be able to use it to return you here to Adar.

However, I must warn you that it can only be used once before exhausting the power within it, and if you return without your artifact, we may not be able to send you out again.”

“Thank you, elder,” Havaktri said, taking it from him. “We appreciate your generosity.”

“We do, honestly,” Len said. “For the stone, and for all the help you’ve given us. We know most of us aren’t your people and this isn’t your cause, and we appreciate everything.”

“There is no need to thank us,” said Ganharath. “As the *soungral* reminded us, you prepare to face a great and ancient evil that could threaten us all, no matter our race or nation. Our war may be with the Dreaming Dark, but we know enough of the Lords of Dust to have no wish for their rule to return. We can only wish you success in your mission, and help you as we can.”

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Later that afternoon, the travelers gathered in the main hall once again, now dressed themselves in the plain clothing that Ganharath had told them most Riedran commoners wore. He and the other elders stood in a circle near their seats, heads bowed and eyes closed; Thyra could only assume they were meditating to gather their strength. A strange circle had been drawn in chalk in the middle of the floor, but the sorceress didn’t know its purpose.

She idly shifted the heavy pack full of supplies and cold-weather clothes on her shoulders; all of the companions carried similar ones, though Ghazaan’s looked at least twice as heavy as anyone else’s. With one hand, she idly brushed the sword she wore at her hip, which, despite its nondescript scabbard, was the very artifact they’d found in the Mournland vault. Thyra didn’t know much about wielding a sword, and its weight felt awkward at her side, but when her hand brushed the hilt, she felt a faint tingle of energy race along her fingers. Whatever uses this strange device might hold, she doubted its blade was the most significant of them.

Meren stood by the door, speaking quietly to Len. “I can’t stay here forever,” he said. “My House would string me up if I vanished off the face of Eberron and never came back with anything to show for it. I don’t know how long your business is going to take, but I promise you, I’ll wait as long as I can.” He flashed a grin. “You’ve paid me well enough for that, at least.”

“Fair enough,” Len said. “I don’t intend for this to take forever, anyway. Sovereigns keep you, Captain.”

“And you, Captain,” Meren replied. Len nodded in return, and then she walked back over to the others.

“Are we all ready for this, people?” she asked.

“Of course,” Yhani said with one of her faint smiles. “We have not come so far to turn back now.”

Ghazaan grinned and Harsk grunted; Rinnean was affecting a bored look, though he couldn’t entirely keep the interest from his face. Havaktri – the only one who didn’t carry a pack;

apparently it was beneath one of her supposed status – squared her shoulders and nodded once, trying to project an air of confidence. Len’s gaze slid past each of them in turn and finally fell on Thyra, one eyebrow raised in question; the sorceress took a deep breath and nodded once. It was time to go.

“You are prepared; good,” Ganharath said as he strode forward, the other elders following close behind. “Now, take your place in the circle; we will stand around the outer edge.” The mercenaries did as he said, packing themselves tightly to make sure they all fit; Thyra found herself squeezed between Havaktri and Ghazaan.

“Any last words of advice before we’re off?” Len asked.

“We plan to send you to a road in the north of Riedra, in the province of Dor Maleer. It is sparsely populated, and the Riedran people seldom travel far from their homes, so you should be alone on arrival. If our maps are correct, you will be placed a few days south of the fortress city of Kintam Malin, which guards the pass that leads to the Tashana Tundra; if you are fortunate, your disguises may allow you to pass safely; there are few in the empire who would interfere with the business of an Inspired or one of their Vessels. A meeting with an actual Inspired is something to avoid at all costs.

“The Tundra itself is little known to us, though legends speak of barbarian tribes and worse things in the ice. Based on the information you provided, your destination appears to lie in one of the lower peaks of the Eska Mountains. Accomplish what you intend to do, and then Havaktri can use the power stone I gave her to return you here to your ship. Beyond this, we can offer you little help, save to pray that il-Yannah’s light illumine you and speed you on your way.”

“I know you said there’s no need to thank you,” Len said, “but honestly, this is more than we could have expected. Hopefully, we’ll be worth it.”

“Do not thank us yet,” Ganharath said. “We cannot say what lies ahead of you. Now, prepare yourselves. We’re ready to proceed.”

“All right,” Len said. “Brace yourselves, everyone.”

Ganharath closed his eyes and raised his hands; at his side, the other elders did the same. The chalk circle began to glow with a faint blue light, and then suddenly it flared, brilliantly bright. Thyra flung up her hands to shield her eyes and stumbled back into Ghazaan. There was a wrenching sensation as though she was falling, and at the same time her body was being twisted and bent and stretched, and then...

She stood on a well-crafted stone road in the midst of a broad plain sparsely dotted with evergreen trees; a cool wind was blowing and Thyra wrapped her arms around herself, glad she had heavier clothes in her pack. Looking to the north, she could see the shape of low grey mountains; from the map in Dvarnaava, she knew that the Tashana Tundra, and their ultimate destination, must lie beyond.

Around her she could see her companions, some groaning and rubbing their heads but otherwise looking none the worse for the wear. Thyra raised an eyebrow at Havaktri in her

thin silk clothes, but if the kalashtar felt the chill, she didn't show it; she merely looked around herself with interest.

"Is everyone all right?" Len asked, hands on her hips.

"I'm cold, nauseous, and in the middle of a hostile nation, but otherwise, yes- just wonderful," Rinnean said, pulling his cloak tighter around himself.

"It's not cold," Harsk said. "It's bracing. Besides, if the kalashtar were right, we haven't felt anything like the cold we'll run into further north." Rinnean merely scowled at him.

"The elders were correct that no one else is here," Yhani said, "But perhaps Thyra should go ahead and cast her disguise on Ghazaan. He does rather stand out here."

"Fine, fine," said Ghazaan, waving a hand. "I know you're all just jealous of my good looks, anyway."

Thyra smiled at the hobgoblin, though she rolled her eyes as well, and raised her hands. She spoke a quick incantation under her breath, and the air around Ghazaan shimmered; when it cleared, he now appeared as a tall, burly human who resembled the hobgoblin strongly, save for his noticeable lack of fangs or tufted ears, and his skin was brown instead of orange.

Ghazaan felt his face and grinned. "Well, I still feel like me," he said. "How do I look?"

"Well, you're not my type, but you'll do," Len said. "Good work, Thyra. Now let's get moving. I'd like to cover some ground before we sleep tonight; let's not spend any more time in Riedra than we have to. Something about this place gives me the creeps."

They all nodded as one. Thyra shouldered her pack and then they started off to the north, Havaktri walking in the middle as if she truly was the honored personage she pretended to be, with the others positioning themselves as guards at her side. The cool breeze rustled past them as they made their way north, towards the place where, Thyra hoped, the next piece of the Key might indeed be found.

They hoped only that their presence in Riedra might go unnoticed until they were free of its domains, but Thyra had a feeling it wouldn't be that easy.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is mostly transitional, and I don't have a whole lot to say about it, other than that our heroes' plan is coming together and has so far gone off without much fuss – not that that will likely continue, as Inharanath has plans of his own, and nobody knows that ir'Sarrin and company have beat everyone else to the Tundra. We also get to see some small but significant character moments from several of our characters,

including Len, Thyra, and Havaktri. But the important development here is that everything is now in motion, and moving towards the ultimate prize.

-MasterGhandalf

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