

# Keal

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A cloaked figure walked slowly through the mist just outside the large gate. It gave off an eerie glow that lit up the mist before the figure itself became visible. The area in front of the gates was barren and littered with dark rocks on either side of the hard packed dirt road leading up to the gate.

As the figure came closer the guards on either side of the gate stood to attention. But rather than staring straight ahead, their wary eyes followed the figure's every movement. A few feet from the gate the figure stopped and glanced sideways up at one of the guards for a while before letting the hood of the cloak fall back. A young man's face was revealed, his expression one of utmost serenity. The eerie glow radiating from the man could now be seen to come from the very fabric of the cloak, though as he emerged from the mist the glow became dimmer until it disappeared completely when he reached the gates.

One of the guards started to move in front of the man, but a hiss and stern look from the other halted the movement. The first guard straightened again and spoke in a deep voice.

"Who approaches the Gates? Let your name be known that you may be introduced on the other side in a manner befitting your achievements and honour!"

The young man let out a sigh and lost all traces of serenity as his shoulders drooped forward a bit. He slowly and deliberately gave the guard an annoyed look that lasted long enough to actually make the guard a little uncomfortable.

"Nice to see the new recruits are still given the finest education in all the worlds," he said, the sarcasm so strong it nearly formed a mist of its own around the man. He looked up at the other guard who towered over him. This guard was both larger and older than the first and seemed to recognise the man.

"Well?" the man asked.

"Ehm... hullo Keal. Ah, you know, it really isn't a good time. You see, erm, ah, oh! It's after bed time. They're all asleep."

"Sir!" the other guard sounded distressed, "that is not correct procedure. I must protest!"

"Procedure? Oh, erm, ah... there's, ah..."

The young man, Keal, shook his head and let himself slump down to sit on the ground. He let out another sigh and put a hand to his forehead. This was not the first time he had had problems with the guards at the gate and while he did not know the younger of the two he knew that the older was likely to give him quite a headache before he got anywhere. He shut both guards an annoyed glance and mumbled an indistinct curse at them.

"Sir, this is most disrespectful to our positions and to the Gates themselves! I really must insist that..."

The tirade of complaints was interrupted by a well-thrown rock that struck right between the guard's eyes, bounced off and fell clattering to the ground. Keal snorted and picked up another rock, this one slightly bigger than the one he had just thrown at the guard.

"SIR!"

"Now, now, Keal," the older guard said, "that was just, ah, impolite. There really isn't any need for... Ah! Right. Hang on, I'll check immediately."

The older guard's eyes widened as Keal put down his rock in favour of a larger, more pointed one. Keal sneered at the world in general.

“Can I come in or not, Tosco?” Keal asked, throwing the rock from one hand to the other. For a moment it looked like the younger guard was about to explode.

“Come in? Come in?! Sir! What is the meaning of this? How dare this... this... well, look at him! How dare he even ask? His even being here in the first place should provide all the answer he could ever possibly need!”

The older guard ignored this and with a great deal of feet shuffling answered Keal.

“Sorry Keal. Ahm, you’re still not really, ah, welcome. Oh, I mean, we’re glad to see you, of course, ah, it’s just that, you see, we can’t really, uhm, actually let you through the gates, you know?”

“So they’re still mad at me?” Keal asked, a small smile almost finding its way to the corner of his mouth.

“Not so much mad as blindingly furious. I still don’t know precisely what you did, but it must have been truly horrific. Ah, could you please put that rock down?”

Keal shrugged and let the rock fall to the ground as gently as he could via a spot between Tosco’s neck and shoulder that he knew was sore from an old injury.

“Ouch! Now you’re just being mean and, ah, petty!”

By now the younger guard seemed to have lost the ability to speak and, with an air of resignation, dropped forwards onto its front legs. The young dragon, for the guards were indeed dragons, levelled its head with Keal’s and looked more closely at him. Distractedly Keal waved his hand at its jaw, not unlike the way he would wave off flies. The dragon snorted at this and offended withdrew its head outside Keal’s reach and settled down to scratch its forehead where the rock had hit it. Keal noticed this and mumbled an apology.

“Sorry about that. It’s just that I’m a bit tired from the walk across the plain, the crossing of the river, the climbing of the tree and so on and so on.” His voice took on the strained sound of someone who had gone through too many troubles too many times.

“And for what?” he continued sarcastically, “just to be turned back for the hundredth time!”

Tosco, the older of the dragons, consulted a ledger it had dug out from somewhere behind it while Keal talked.

“Actually, it’s, ah, only your ninety seventh time... unless you count the time where you tried to get by hiding in Rayd’s baggage...”

“That was so close,” groaned Keal, “but naturally she just had to stop and check her makeup again right before going through the gates. Say, who’s the new guy?”

Tosco let out a yelp and fumbled the ledger so it fell to the ground. He looked around nervously and hissed at Keal. Lowering both his head and voice he spoke to Keal in serious tones.

“Don’t use that expression! You know they don’t like that term!”

“What term? Oh... ‘The New Guy’?”

Keal smirked.

“Don’t say it!” Tosco said sounding almost panicking.

“Fair enough. Okay, then, who’s the new recruit?”

“Ligridan-ad-Tor-ad-Draconium, third rank of the most noble Guards of the Gate, twice awarded with...”

“We just call it Dragling,” Tosco said, its interruption earning it a disapproving glance. “It’s one of the hatchlings from the new breeding grounds.”

Keal and Tosco both ignored Dragling’s protests at being cut off.

“Its first day on the job?”

“More or less, ah, but you do realise, this, erm, time you humans are so hung up on doesn’t really mean all that much to us.”

“Yeah, I know. Goot thing, too, as I imagine a few centuries in this place would be hell.”

“No, no,” Dragling added in an attempt to recapture the conversation by being helpful, “you get to hell by swimming down the river not crossing it. And then...”

“Oh, shut up!” Keal and Tosco said as one.

Keal stood up and brushed his clothes. He picked up the ledger Tosco had dropped and thrust it at the dragon.

“You done with the formalities?”

“Oh yes, your ninety seventh request...”

Keal looked down at a particularly pointed and wicked looking rock.

“Ah, I mean, your ninety eight request to come through the gates have been duly noted,” Tosco shot Dragling a warning glance, “and all formal customs have been properly observed.”

“And?”

“Oh, ah, and ‘Request Denied’”

“Thanks. I guess.”

Keal sighed again and looked up at the gates with longing in his eyes.

“One day...” he said quietly.

“But not today,” Tosco said. “Shall we get on with, ah, this?”

“We better.”

Tosco stretched out a taloned forearm and let the tip of a claw rest gently at the base of Keal’s neck.

“You know I really don’t like, ah, doing this to you?”

“I really don’t like you doing to to me either,” Keal said, “but it beats walking all the way back.”

Reaching forward Keal touched a ring on Tosco’s talon. As he did so the ring started glowing and rays of energy and light leapt from the ring to Keal’s body. With a sickening twisting of reality itself Keal’s body split into molecules that scattered invisibly in the air. The only thing left were faint echoes of an agonised scream Keal had let out as the ring’s powers touched him.

As the echoes died away Dragling returned to its more formal, military nature.

“Sir? Requesting an explanation for what just happened,” it said.

Tosco looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“Ah, erm, no one told you about Keal?”

“No, sir!”

“And you’ve never heard the rumours?”

“No, sir!”

“Surely your comrades from the grounds must have told some stories?”

“I’m sure they did, sir, those malingerers. Most of them spent more time chatting and carousing than training!”

“But, ah, chatting and carousing. That, ahm, is training?”

Tosco’s expression went from puzzled to pure incomprehension.

“Sir! The fine military traditions of the most noble regiment in all the armies of all the worlds do not sit idle but strive to become the fiercest, most loyal and noble!”

“Ah, right, so when the others had fun and learned important things like, ah, drinking songs and, uhm, stories of heroes past and present you were... ah...”

“Polishing my scales before the next days parades,” Dragling finished the sentence, pride gleaming in his eyes.

“Yes, I was afraid you’d say something like that. Ah, well, at least you weren’t busy stroking your tail.”

“But I was, sir! Tail stroking is...”

“I don’t want to know!” Tosco shouted, “back to Keal.”

“Right, sir. Sorry, sir.”

Tosco sighed and thought back to the first time Keal had been turned back at the gates. That was a long time ago, even by dragon standards, and Keal had definitely grown bitter since then. He could hardly be blamed.

“Let’s just say that, ah, Keal managed to really upset everyone who is anything on the other side. As the only one in, ah, the entire universe of time and space he’s been forbidden entry for all eternity.”

“Sir, they can’t do that, surely?” Dragling sounded genuinely concerned.

“Ah, well, no. Not completely. There is a small loophole that, ah, might let him enter eventually. You see, ehm, someone once pointed out that if he were to, ah, destroy time, erm, eh, he would effectively have made it through all eternity and thus, ah, be able to pass through.”

“Can’t he get a pardon, sir?”

“From them?” Tosco tilted his head and looked meaningfully at Dragling.

“Beg pardon, sir, of course he could not. But why does he come back, sir?”

Tosco shook its great head sadly and became unusually sombre.

“He doesn’t always have much choice in these matters.”

For a while the two dragons sat in silence contemplating the difficulties of Keal’s situation until Dragling lifted his body up and stood to attention on his hind legs. He nodded towards the mist where another dim light had appeared.

Tosco blinked a few times and consulted his ledger. He shook it a few times and turned it upside-down.

“No one else is supposed to come through now,” he said in a surprised voice.

Slowly a figure became more visible through the mist and soon became recognisable as an old man. Unlike Keal his walk was a lot more uncertain and the hood of the cloak did not cover his head revealing grey hair and a wrinkled face. It did, however, keep the old man’s from noticing the large shapes of the dragons until he was very close to them. When he came close enough to see their clawed feet he gave a small shriek and looked up. Seeing the two large forms looming over him he scrambled back a few paces covering his face with his arms.

“Help,” he screamed, “get away from me, you beasts!”

Both Tosco and Dragling stood still at attention, their only movement to exchange a tired glance. Humans never could get it into their heads that just because dragons are big it does not mean they will eat them. After a few moments the man quieted down and seemed to figure out that perhaps he was not about to get eaten after all.

Dragling’s voice boomed through the mist.

“Who approaches the Gates? Let your name be known that you may be introduced on the other side in a manner befitting your achievements and honour!”

“Where.. where am I? What is this place?”

“You stand before nothing less,” Dragling continued, “then the Gates to the Afterlife, the Land of the Dead, the Netherworld, the Other Side, the...”

“Ah, look,” interrupted Tosco, “just tell us your name and we’ll make sure you’ll be received by the, ah, proper people once you pass through.”

The old man looked from one dragon to the other something clearly not making sense to him. Tosco put on what he believed was his most benign and patient expression, a wide smile that very clearly showed every single tooth in his gaping maw, and calmly explained.

“Please, my good man, ah, it would seem that your physical body has given up on, ah, its normal functions such as breathing, moving and generally just being alive. This has allowed the real you, or your soul or spirit if you prefer, to pass on to, ah, whatever you’ll find beyond the gates.”

“You mean that I’m...” the man gulped, “that I’m dead?”

“That would be, ah, correct, yes.”

“But no. It can’t be right. One minute I was right there on the road and now I’m here. There must be some mistake.”

“You were just on the road?” Dragling asked. “No accidents happening, no wild animals nearby or any other similar dangerous elements as covered by the regulations’ articles on life threatening situations?”

“No, well, there was this man, but he was just lying dead at the side of the road. Surely that doesn’t count. And I did check that there were no poisonous insects in his boots before I put them on. I mean, yes, ‘you must not steal’ and all that, but he was dead and had passed on to a better place. He was beyond owning his boots, wasn’t he?”

“Ah, erm, boots you say?” Tosco said, “they wouldn’t by any chance be green leather boots with a star pattern on the heel?”

“Now that you mention it...”

The conversation was interrupted by a loud metallic groan from the gates. Slowly they opened and bright light spilled out from the other side. The two dragons urgently waved the man on so he would get through before the gates closed again.

“Sir, with your permission, what was that about the boots?”

“Boots? Oh, ah, the boots? Well, suffice it to say that Keal gets, ahm, annoyed when people try and steal his things while he’s, ah, dead.”

“Oh,” Dragling said and thought about it a bit.

“Guess I would be too, sir,” it said with a firm nod, “but what about the other things he said? The ‘don’t steal’ bit? That sounded odd.”

Tosco shrugged, but did not reply. He was not himself sure what it was all about, but an increasing number of people had started saying things like that and other nonsense. He had even once overheard his superiors mention this line of thinking briefly. Apparently there was some concern over this new way of thinking that was being spread across the lands. At first it had started out small, but for some obscure reason people seemed to find the thought of simply being nice to each other comforting. Tosco shared his superiors’ concerns. A world where people were being nice to each other would be boring indeed.

“Sir?”

“Huh? Oh, ah, let it go,” Tosco sighed as he settled down for a nap, “that part is not our headache. We just have to get their names and get them through the gate. Or, in Keal’s case, not get him through the gate.”

“But sir,” Dragling said nervously, “we never did get that last man’s name. What will happen to him then?”

“Hmmm... never thought about it. He’ll probably just, ah, cease to exist or, ah, something. Hardly matters, does it?”

Before Dragling had a chance to answer a new light could be seen in the mist. Groaning Tosco also stood at attention and the dragons waited patiently for the next confused person who would make the final journey.

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Keal put on his boots and shook his head. It was the same everytime he died. He still had not reached an age where he died of natural causes so his deaths usually involved other people. This had been no exception. For a while he had been travelling with a tribe of nomads trying to survive by scavenging whatever they could. Keal looked over at the corpse of the old man a few meters from him on the other side of the road. His name had been Messo. If it was his real name or just short for something else Keal did not know. They had talked a few times over the past couple of weeks and Keal knew him to be a greedy, old bastard. The kind that would not think twice about stealing a dead man’s boots. Or think twice about being the cause of said dead man’s death.

The worst shock of returning to his body had left him and he began to think clearly again. He got up and retrieved the slim stiletto from Messo's chest. When Keal had woken up Messo had been searching his breast pockets and had held one of Keal's guns in his hands. Not feeling ready to die again just yet Keal had deftly let the stiletto slide out from its hiding place in his sleeve and had rammed it into the old man's side pushing it up toward the heart. Messo had not even had time to look surprised before he died.

Keal had been retrieving his other items from the corpse when he had seen his boots on Messo's feet. If it had been his shirt or pants or even his warm jacket he might just have shrugged it off. But the boots were special to him. A gift from someone important in his life and he had always been very protective of them. Caught between the queasiness of his resurrection and his anger at having his boots stolen he had lost his temper and wasted precious ammunition by emptying one of his revolvers into the corpse's chest. The force of the bullets had caused the corpse's eyes to blink a few times in a highly disturbing way and Keal had, shivering slightly, withdrawn to the other side of the road to put on his boots.

Staying clear of the corpse he gathered both his own possessions and Messo's and got ready to leave. He would have given anything for a small cart to ride in, but no such luck. He seemed to remember Messo riding in one, but if he had had it with him the mule must have been scared off at some point.

"The shooting probably spooked it, you dumb oaf," he muttered to himself.

He glanced up the road in the direction the tribe had been headed. Nothing to be seen or heard in response to his shots. Hardly surprising since, judging by the sun's position, several hours had passed since his death. If it was even the same day. He never really knew since time flowed quite differently, sometimes even a bit sideways, in the place between this world and the next.

Thinking back he tried to piece together what had happened, but could remember nearly nothing. He had been waling at the rear of the tribe's column and at some point he had fallen a bit behind feeling dizzy. Since he was a stranger to the tribe the others had just passed him by, only taking care of their own. After he had lost sight of the last of them there was only blurred memories of absolutely nothing. Nothing until he had woken up in the by now far too familiar meadow at the edge of the plains where his long walk to the gate always started.

Briefly the dizziness returned followed by a round of nausea that made him empty his stomach in the middle of the road. His vomit smelled far more sour than it ought to.

"Poison, then," he spat at the corpse, "you old fart."

He threw up again once or twice before heading back in the direction from which he had come, away from where the tribe was going. He had no real desire to try and explain to the tribe why he was alive and one of them was not. They had passed a river a day or so earlier and Keal figured there might be a good chance of finding a settlement somewhere along it, maybe he could even find a boat going downriver, perhaps it would even lead to the coast. He started walking at a slow pace not yet trusting his feet on the weathered road.

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A long time ago, before Keal was born, the road would have been in a far better shape than it was now. The stones would not be cracked or missing entirely and the branches falling off the trees would have been removed. Everything would have been in a better shape. Everything

would still have existed. But then the war came and things changed. For many years the war had raged on and on without anyone winning and without any of the nations wanting to make peace. Eventually the entire world had been at war in one way or another and huge steam driven ships had battled for control of the oceans while on the ground armies moved against each other.

Finally, after too many years, a group of scientists had declared that they had found the ultimate way to end all wars: a monstrous and powerful super weapon that was so devastating that it could lay waste to entire continents. They believed, and managed to convince the governments, that if only everyone had one of these weapons no one would dare harm each other for fear of unleashing the horrible power of the weapons and thus destroying the entire world.

While the government rejoiced at having found a way to end the wars a small detail was, sadly, forgotten in all the rush to complete a weapon for each nation. The scientists had designed the weapons to be linked to each other to make sure they would all go off if one was used. When the weapons were all in place and fired up this became all too clear and as people realised this all hell broke loose. Everyone blamed everyone else for the situation, but at least the scientists had been right. No one dared do more than shout at each other and thus the world actually managed to settle down and get on without wars for a while.

The nations started prospering again and trade began to replace the wars. People lived well and over the years the weapons came to be seen more as symbols than actual weapons. That is, until the day one of the weapons went off and that in turn made every other weapon in the world go off as well. The details of what caused this were lost in the destruction and following chaos. For the scientists had been right about something else: the weapons effectively destroyed almost the entire world.

For many years after, the human race struggled for survival in hard competition with every other living being that had survived. The plants were the best survivors and they soon started overgrowing the ruins of human civilisation. Only in a few places, mainly underground sites, had people managed to stay together and create new communities. But they were few and far between and most of the survivors had to survive in the wilderness reverting to hunting, fishing and gathering edible plants and fruits.

Eventually the human race got the upper hand and gradually managed to tame nature again. A large part in this was the rediscovery of how the ancient steam engines worked. Immediately after the apocalypse there had still been engineers enough to keep the steam engines running, but as no real educational system had been left intact fewer and fewer engines could be kept operational due to lack of qualified operators. The break-through had come in one of the larger settlements, Probuyat, where the conditions had become good enough for the people there to start thinking further out in the future than the next winter.

Once more the great wheels were turning and the people of Probuyat took pride in the dark columns of smoke rising majestically towards the skies. The smoke was a sign of progress and a prospering city as well as a guide to people still travelling through the lands. Within a decade the city had grown to several thousand inhabitants and, generally speaking, functioned as a good community. There was not a complete sharing of everything, but by and large people had understood that to survive they had to work together towards common goals rather than going off in their own separate directions. This had led to a form of government where people

were well cared for, but with harsh punishments for anyone not acting for the good of the community.

Across the world others had made similar developments and where these cities were close together they tried to keep in regular contact with each other. This was a difficult task for a number of reasons. Whatever roads were left from before were in bad shape and only few of them still had enough cobbles left to raise them above the status of dirt tracks. Combined with the great distance between the cities it took a long time and cost a lot of effort to send any kind of letter. But it could still be done. As long as the couriers got lucky and were not ambushed by any of the large number of lawless people who lived in the forests and plains between the cities. These tribes found it easier to hunt, scavenge and rob than to do the hard work required to build and maintain a settlement. A lot of them were also people who had had trouble with the authorities of the cities or who just plainly chose to live in the wild as opposed to the noisy and quite dirty cities.

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As Keal walked towards the river he thought back to when he had been a boy of ten. His guardians, from Probuyat, had been selected as part of an expedition trying to find some new settlements that had been reported by travelers. Before they had found anything their caravan had been ambushed by a tribe of nomads. Those who had not been killed in the ambush had been adopted by the tribe, the adults as slaves, the children hardly better off, though they were given proper food and care. Most of the tribes in the wild knew the value children represented either as future workers or slaves or as full members of the tribe, capable of increasing the tribe's size and adding fresh blood lines to it.

The tribe Keal had been in had been large enough to be fairly organised and they held annual contests for the older children to judge their skills and whether they were worthy to become full members or not. In addition to this the contests also served as entertainment for the tribe's adults who could make bets on the different children or even put markers towards adopting a specific child if they found it to their liking. Some took on strong or smart children hoping to have him or her carry on their family, others simply adopted them to get a personal helper. An adopted child was officially not a slave and could therefore not be treated as such, but in the wild such lines were easy to cross and as long as the child in question was not overly abused or mistreated most members of the tribe would look the other way.

The first time Keal had been in the contest he had not done well for himself. It had been a cold month shortly after his capture and he had suffered from fevers as well as general misery at his new situation. One of his guardians had been killed in the ambush, the other left for dead after a vicious flocking that had stripped the flesh from her back.

The next year he had not done much better: underweight and scared from a long year of being bullied by the other children he more or less failed at everything he tried to do. At the end people would turn away if he looked directly at them, afraid his bad luck would rub off on them. However, one of the older men in the tribe had recently suffered a leg injury and needed a helper. Since the better faring children up for adoption had all been chosen by members with more power and influence than him the old man had grudgingly accepted Keal.

At first Keal had been glad to be out of the children's tent, but he soon came to dislike the old man, Fredíc, more and more until at last he outright hated him. Daily beatings, mouldy bread and hard work from before sunup to after sundown was all Keal knew for the next couple of

years. By the time he turned fifteen Fredíc's mistreatment was rooted so deep in Keal that he had alienated himself from everyone in the tribe suffering, through Fredíc's comments and cursing, from the feeling that he was hopeless and that no one liked him. He became reclusive and lonely.

It was during these years Keal first began to truly speak to the gods. Not being a part of the tribe's social community he did not join the common prayers or hear the priests speak. But his guardians had taught him enough that he at least knew the gods' names and domains, even if neither he nor his guardians had ever actually believed in them. The gods of the lands were many, from the small Dila, God of Taking A Walk, to the fierce Rayd, Goddess of War. Keal spoke to them all, often long into the night. The young boy found a small measure of peace in the belief that somewhere the gods actually listened. Even if they ignored him the thought that someone was simply listening gave him some much needed comfort.

Having been brought up without beliefs he had never expected the gods to answer, and indeed they never did. Not for a long time, at least. But one day they did and Keal's life was irreversibly changed. It is one thing to believe in gods, maybe even praying to them. It is an entirely different matter to have one of them standing right in front of you.

One evening, after receiving a particularly harsh beating from Fredíc Keal had run off to the small tent he had outside Fredíc's wagon. To his great surprise the tent had not been empty when he got there. Nor had it been his own tent he entered. From the outside it had been its own shaggy self, as he entered through the flap he felt a rush inside him and when he looked around it felt as if he was in a large pavillon. To add to his surprise the tent had not been empty. Sitting cross legged on a pillow in the middle of the pavillon was a sad looking person of indeterminable age. Keal stopped midstride and slowly put down his foot as he gazed at the person more closely. Hard as he tried it was impossible for Keal to see if it was a woman or a man so plain was the person's face.

Having had almost no contact with anyone but Fredíc Keal was struck dumb by being in the presence of someone else. He could literally feel the silence creeping around him and his instincts screamed at him to get back outside. Just as he had found the courage to start turning around the person spoke, the voice distant and hollow.

"I'm sorry, I could not stay away any longer."

A sad smile spread on what Keal decided must be a woman's face. She looked at Keal with obvious longing and desire on her face and Keal began to feel nervous.

"I have followed you for some time now. At a distance, but still close enough to notice you," she continued, her voice still sad despite the desire showing on her face.

Keal felt himself tense. Fredíc had from time to time threatened to sell him off to some ugly, old person as a pleasure toy. Keal had not completely understood the meaning of that though Fredíc's sneers and hoarse laughter had left him certain that the pleasure would most definitely not be his.

The woman stood up and Keal's breath caught in his throat when he saw that her torso was only covered by a small, loose hanging vest. As she moved the vest moved aside and Keal got a good look at a chest that was most definitely not a woman's but a man's. His gaze wandered up to the woman's face again only to find it had changed, most notably to grow a short, trimmed beard.

Keal's mouth dropped open as his mind recalled the stories of one of the more unpopular, yet highly feared, gods. The god whose very name could curse you forever. A god so erratic that nothing about it was ever constant, so unpredictable not even the other gods knew precisely where it was half the time or what it was up to.

Jinx, the God of Bad Luck, tilted its head and looked at the boy. Legends frequently told of how anyone who caught Jinx's attention would forever be cursed with horrible bad luck, constant changes and all manner of ill fortune. Keal's nervousness was plainly visible on his face and Jinx shook its head with a small sigh. It reached into the air and pulled a small coin on a string out from nowhere. Both sides of the coin had a simple outline of an open hand on it.

"Come closer," Jinx said, "this is yours."

Keal did as asked. How could he not. When he came close the god reached out and grabbed Keal's left wrist and twisted his arm so his palm faced up. Jinx pressed the coin against the veins of Keal's wrist and Keal gasped in pain as the coin slowly seeped in through the skin. Being held in the god's grasp Keal could not pull away and his eyes were oddly drawn to the sickening sight of the coin being absorbed by his arm. Keal fell to his knees, his arm still being held up by Jinx's firm hand.

"You're mine, Keal," Jinx whispered and let go, "I'm so very sorry for you."

The words kept ringing over and over in Keal's head and he doubled over feeling sick to the core of his being. He did not notice how Jinx suddenly disappeared along with the large pavillon, leaving Keal on the dirt floor of his small tent. He started sobbing and felt his wrist. There were no visible signs of the coin, but when he pressed his fingers against his wrist he could feel the coin moving slightly, deep inside his arm.

He fell over on his side and lost all sense of time and place.

When next he woke up he was being shaken by Fredíc who had hopped down from his wagon in search of the boy. Fredíc shouted something Keal could not make out. He pressed his hands to his ears and screamed, loud and without words, at Fredíc. Being disoriented and not presently remembering the coin in his arm he could only think of one thing in that moment: how much he hated the old man. Fredíc slapped Keal's face hard and Keal slumped down on the ground, too heavy for the old man to keep shaking him.

"You little bastard," Fredíc sneered, "get up and make sure my dinner is ready by sundown."

He stalked out of the tent leaving Keal dazed and nauseous on the ground. The boy emptied what little he had in his stomach onto the floor and struggled outside to find some water from one of the barrels tied to Fredíc's wagon. The water cleared his head a bit and like a searing flash of white going through his head he remembered the meeting with Jinx. The god's face, or rather one of them, the bearded man, invaded his vision and the coin in his left wrist started getting warmer. Breathless he held his wrist hoping to stop the coin going warmer. He poured water over it as the coin became unbearably hot and finally emerged his forearm in the barrel when it felt like the heat was going to consume him. Nothing helped, the pain just got worse and worse. Gradually it went from searing heat to a crushing pain as if something, or someone, was crushing his bones.

Suddenly and for no obvious reason the pain went away. Keal nearly staggered as the tension was released from his body. His arm and hand still felt numb, but he could now feel more than

just the blinding pain.

Somewhere inside the wagon Fredíc started coughing violently, but Keal did not notice it. He slowly opened and closed his hand a few times, convincing himself that it was still there and working. As he did so he felt a strange presence spreading through his body starting where the coin was.

Something fell to the floor with a loud noise inside the wagon.

When the presence filled his entire body it shifted somehow and seemed to also enter his mind, his being.

Fredíc let out a startled cry.

Keal gasped as the presence leave his body. In his mind he could still feel it. Though he could not physically see it he could sense the presence moving through the air toward the wagon.

More clattering noises could be heard from inside followed by a couple of loud thumps and then there was silence.

Keal felt the presence disappear completely and he just stood there, shaking. His body jerked once as the coin moved slightly, seemingly settling inside his wrist.

Later some of the others from the tribe had found him there, still standing next to the water barrel. From his incoherent mumblings and the mess inside the wagon they guessed that Fredíc had simply stumbled and hit his head on the edge of the table. The blow had been more than the old man could withstand and he had died almost instantly.

“Cursed bad luck,” they said and made a warding sign.

Fredíc had not been popular in the tribe and the others still viewed Keal with suspicion. So when the tribe found that Fredíc had had nothing valuable in his possessions Keal had simply been given all of it and asked to leave the tribe. Not feeling any kind of attachments to the tribe he chose to simply pack a bag with the most necessary thing and a little food. The same evening he left the clearing the tribe was camped in without even bothering to do anything about the wagon.

He set off with less than an hour’s light left in the direction he had seen a plume of black smoke earlier that day hoping to start over and find a better life in one of the settlements.

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An old leatherbound tome flew through the room and Literfe nimbly dodged out of its way.

“Such affection, my love,” he sighed, “your smallest look, every single word from your lips, every heavy object you try to kill me with...”

Rayd shot him a dangerous look making Literfe sigh even deeper.

“All of that makes me quiver, filled with the purest love for you. Many a night I can only think of holding you in my arms and spiriting you away with quiet words of love whispered in your ear.”

Literfe’s romantic tirade was interrupted by two armoured dragons entering the room. They snapped to attention, standing some ten feet tall when sitting back on their hind legs.

“News from the front, sir” one of them said.

Putting down another heavy book Rayd shifted her gaze from Literfe to the dragons. She took off her mail gloves and threw them on the heavy oak table in the centre of her war room. Though the dragons were nearly twice her height her presence was far stronger than theirs. Dressed in her ancient black and red armour she was an impressive sight. A flowing red cloak spilled from the wide shoulder guards offsetting her jetblack hair. She was not a small woman, but her body was that of a hard working person, efficient and full of purpose, rather than Literfe's artistic muscles. Where the former's body was made for use the latter's was made for show. That Literfe was prone to wearing flowing and quite impractical clothes also emphasised the difference between the two of them. The same was also true for their faces. Literfe's was as beautiful as anything the best painters and sculptors could have come up with, almost porcelain like with soft curves everywhere. Rayd's was more square and had lines from millenia of thinking, planning and an endless number of battles. A thin scar ran down one side of her forehead, a memory from one of her first battles as Goddess of War. Back in the beginning she had always seen it as her responsibility to be in the front line, making sure the war was as bloody as possible. As time passed she changed and began to see how she could create even bigger, bloodier and longer wars if she kept back and used her knowledge and skills to direct the troops on both sides.

In particularly fierce battles she might still take out her axe and loose herself in the rapture of fighting. She had never lost the passion for killing, spraying blood and the screams of the dying. This was why she could not stand Literfe. In every single aspect they were different. Where he stood for love, prosperity and peace she stood for hate, destruction and war. Some might argue that opposites attract and perhaps this was why Literfe had been in love with Rayd ever since he first met her. He did not long for her body or feel drawn to her strength and intellect. No, it was pure love. Plain and simple. Or maybe not so simple.

Literfe sighed and left the room. He knew that whenever Rayd got news from the wars of the mortal lands she would be absorbed in them for a very long time. With a stabbing pain in his chest he took one last look at her before quietly closing the door. If only she would give up the blood shed and settle down. Then they could let go completely and be washed away on waves of love and compassion.

Rayd did not even notice Literfe leaving the room.

"What news?" she snapped at the dragons.

Tosco shuffled its clawed feet a bit and looked nervous.

"Ahm, yes, the news. You see, it's rather funny, really. We have just received the casualty lists from the mortal lands and I think you might, ah, find them, erm... interesting," it said.

Tosco really wished it was somewhere else. Preferably back at the Gates where it at least would be far away from the volcanic anger it knew was about to erupt from Rayd.

"Give them here," Rayd said.

Tosco did and closed his eyes. After a few minutes, when the shock of still being alive had gone, it cautiously opened one eye and looked down at Rayd. It had expected Rayd to tear its head off or throw something heavy through the room. Or at least scream and shout. Instead she just stood there with a completely blank look on her face.

When still nothing happened Tosco dared speak again.

"Ah, sorry, sir," it said, "but, ah, I'm sort of needed back at the Gates so if that is all?"

Rayd looked up at the dragon her eyes not focusing on anything. Her mouth started working and after a few attempts she managed to find her voice.

“One casualty?”

Tosco closed its eyes and nodded.

“One casualty?!” Rays screamed.

Tosco felt oddly relieved that Rayd’s temper had returned. She started pacing the room waving the report in her hand curses escaping her lips.

“No news for a week and then this? One bloody casualty? And from the looks of this report it wasn’t even bloody!”

“Well, ah, actually, there was two casualties,” Tosco said hoping this would cheer Rayd up.

Rayd stopped dead in her tracks, her back turned on the dragons. She looked more closely at the report and found some very small letters written in very thin ink down at the bottom. She went back and reread the rest of the report more closely.

“Interesting,” she said, “very interesting.”

She walked over to a book shelf and searched for a particular book. When she could not find it she looked across the room to where Literfe had been standing. The book she was looking for had been the one she threw at him before. With a snap of her fingers the book returned to her hands and she put it down on the table and flipped through its pages.

“Very interesting.”

Tosco looked slightly nervous.

“What is, sir?” it said.

“It seems like one of the casualties was one of The New Guy’s prophets. Directly killed by an agent of one of us, even.”

“Ehm, who?” Tosco asked.

“Someone named Keal, apparently he’s one of Jinx’s. Good riddance. The fewer of his agents around the better.”

“Oh, ah, Keal, you say? Well, erm, you should know he’s not really not around anymore.”

“What?”

“Yes, remember, ah, back when Tep got all furious and loud because, ah, some mortal had tricked him?”

“Get to the point?” Rayd yelled.

Tosco jerked.

“Keal staged The Great Escape.”

“Yes, I know that. Last I heard old Tep got so mad at him that he forbid him to ever pass on to the other... Ooohhh... Interesting. Very interesting indeed. This just might work out well after all.”

Tosco thought about Keal and deep in its mind it knew that if might not be too long before he would see Keal at the gates again.

“Dismissed,” Rayd said, “Go! Out of here! Get back to your beloved Gates.”

As the dragons left Rayd got a very calculating look in her eyes. Pulling down a couple of other books she put them on the table next to the one she had thrown at Literfe and started jotting down bits from each of them. After a while she walked over to a large map hanging on the wall and nodded slowly to herself. She took out a small pin and placed it at a small river delta where the word “Pinchtown” was written.

“Yes,” she said to herself, “you will suit me just right, Keal...”

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Around noon the day after he had been killed by Messo Keal found the river and headed downstream. The river crossed the road in the middle of an open plain so Keal had no problems leaving the road and walking along the river bank. While he was walking he considered his options. He could either find the settlements whose dark smoke could be seen rising in the horizon and go for a simple job for a time or he could try to move on in case the settlement was small.

After being on the road for several months now he could do with a place to lay low without having to worry too much about where he was going and where his next meal would come from. He never should have taken that job back in Porbuyat. Or, at least, he should have done his legwork better before getting in the thick of it. He sighed at the memory of his nightly break-in at the library. An old man had approached him discreetly asking for his help in securing a certain item for him. This was hardly surprising as stealing things was what Keal did for a living. And the old man had contacted him through someone Keal had worked with before so the deal had indeed sounded solid. For all he knew it had been solid. At first everything had gone well, but then he had come across a young librarian working late. While Keal preferred to remain undiscovered he had enough experience that one skinny book worm should pose no problems. As long as they did not turn out to be lightning fast fighting machines.

Keal pushed the memory from his thoughts and took solace in the fact that he at least had gotten half his pay up front. The money was almost all spent now making it necessary for him to return to the real world. Or as real as it could get. He did not look forward to entering any settlement or city, though. His life was bad enough as it was without having other people interfering in his plans. It seemed that no matter what he did these days someone would get in the way causing no end of problems for him.

He shifted his bag on his shoulders and walked on looking for a place to take a break from the midday sun. He could see a cluster of trees a short distance from the river and headed inland toward it. Judging by the distance to the dark columns of smoke he would not be able to reach the settlement before the next day so he might as well enjoy a little shade until the sweltering heat had passed.

As he approached the trees he instinctly walked slower and crouched down to take advantage of what little cover the long grass could give him. To his surprise he was rewarded for this by not being seen by a small group of people who were camped among the trees. He slowly crept up on them to get a better look and see if he should avoid them. Hiding behind a tree he listened to them talking for a while. There were three of them, two women and one man.

“Why the fuck am I still listening to you?” the man said.

“Because you’re a stinking loser who’d never get anything done on your own,” a deep female voice answered.

“Now get the stinking map out and find our new bearings,” she continued, “you got us lost in the first place, now get your stinking head out of your stinking ass and get it straight this time.”

“Fuck you too,” the man replied.

He shuffled around in his bags for a while searching for the map. Frequently Keal could hear him mumble curses to no one in particular. In the meantime the two women had a different conversation.

“Jeen, get over here,” the deep voiced woman said.

Jeen kept quiet, but walked over to the other woman and squatted down.

“Do you remember what we talked about?”

“Yes,” Jeen said, her thin voice sounding frail compared to the other woman’s.

“Good. We’ll be in the stinking town sometime tomorrow so keep your mouth shut from now on or people won’t believe you’re a stinking mute.”

Keal smiled to himself. Con artists. He silently loosened the string holding his guns in place at his side and rose to his feet. Stepping into plain view he folded his hands across his chest and arrogantly leaned against the tree and took in the scene.

The deep voiced woman was in her mid thirties and had the intent look of someone bordering between extreme intelligence and raging paranoia. She was wearing worn clothes that might have been good quality once. The man was dressed similarly, but was carrying a large knife in his belt next to a short rifle of some sort. A scatter gun, Keal guessed. The two of them could have been siblings or married for all Keal knew, same age, similar appearance but not too similar faces. Jeen, however, was an entirely different manner. She was very thin, probably in her late teens and had an air of quiet nobility about her that nearly made Keal drop his guard and wait for whatever she asked him to do. Her clothes were a bit dirty from traveling, but otherwise they were in very good shape, making them a sharp contrast to the worn clothes the others were wearing.

When they saw Keal the man and woman immediately went for their weapons, crouching instantly in a way that made it clear that they were used to taking care of themselves. Keal was just starting to draw for his gun and drop back behind the tree when Jeen’s voice could be heard. Not thin this time but commanding.

“Stop it!” she said, “all of you.”

She stood up and took a single step toward Keal while looking him directly in the eye.

“Yes,” she said, “you will suit me just right.”

Keal tried to keep one eye on her while still watching the others. His left hand still moved slowly down to his gun, hidden by the trunk of the tree he was leaning against. But when Jeen kept her eyes on him he found he could not focus on anything but her, so mesmerising was her gaze.

Behind Jeen the man and woman slowly got up again and the woman moved around the tree to pull Keal’s guns from their holsters. When she had done so she motioned for Keal to step clear of the tree.

“Turn around and let me have a good look at you,” Jeen said.

Not seeing much of an alternative Keal did as she said. He was very conscious of the armed man and woman, but still kept his eye open in case he could get a chance to get to one of them.

“Yesss,” Jeen continued, her voice taking on a purring tone.

Seeing that the others posed no immediate threat to him Keal shifted his gaze to Jeen. His eyes widened a bit when he looked directly into her eyes. He had seen those eyes before. Somewhere.

“Who are you?” he said.

“Keep your stinking mouth shut,” snapped the woman, “Jeen, what the stinking stink are you doing?”

“Just getting reacquainted with my old friend Keal”

Again Keal felt himself unable to pull his eyes from Jeen's. She somehow held on to him. Though she still looked like a young woman there was no doubt that that was precisely what she was not. She finally let go of Keal and turned to look at the others.

“You will not be going to the town,” she said.

Tilting her head she seemed to contemplate them for a while before continuing.

“In fact, you will not be going anywhere.”

The man shifted nervously and starting moving back from Jeen.

“Kay?” he asked.

“Stay there,” Kay, the older woman, said, “but keep sharp and don't take your eyes off any of these stinkers.”

Jeen turned to face Kay and the man completely. She stepped up to the woman and very calmly reached out and took the revolver the woman was holding in her hand. Keal half expected the woman to just shoot, but it seemed he was not the only one Jeen could bind with her eyes.

Jeen and the now unarmed woman were blocking the way between Keal and the man with the scatter gun. This gave Keal the perfect opportunity to shoot Jeen in the back and still be able to dodge behind a tree before the man could get a clear shot at him.

In one fluid movement Keal pulled out a spare gun hidden under his coat and fired it at Jeen's back before dropping down on one knee to roll back behind the tree. His sudden movement caused the man to discharge the rifle. The woman screamed and fell clutching her side. In the middle of it all Jeen just started laughing gently. She thrust the gun back in the woman's hand. When she spoke again her voice was no longer calm and youthful, but had turned hard as steel turning her laughter into the ringing sound of blade hitting blade.

“Here,” Jeen laughed, “you would not want to be unarmed in the middle of a war.”

Hidden behind the tree Keal could not see the scene clearly. He could hear it, though, and as Jeen pronounced that last word, war, slowly and passionately he froze. A shiver went down his back as something inside his mind resurfaced and reminded him where he had heard that voice before.

The man fired the gun again and splinters flew from the tree Keal was hiding behind.

“Shit,” he muttered.

He shifted to the side to counteract the man’s movement’s around the tree. This gave him a view of Jeen and Kay who were now both standing and faced each other. Kay had lifted the gun and pointed it straight at Jeen’s face. Both women were bleeding from their wounds, Kay pressing her hand against a large, red smear on her left side. Jeen seemed not to notice the blood trickling down on both her front and back where Keal’s shot had passed through her chest.

The man screamed something incomprehensible and after another roar of the gun more splinters flew from Keal’s tree.

For a while Keal just looked at the scene unable to decide what to do. A part of him wanted to kill Jeen and just hope he could get away from the others. He did not know who they were and did not as such feel any desire to go through the trouble of killing them as well. On the other hand Jeen might be able to help him, as she indeed had a long time ago. Unfortunately, she had not known she was helping him and had not exactly been magnanimous when she found out.

The largest part of him just wanted to be somewhere far, far away from all three of them.

“Shit, shit, shit.”

Without blinking he shifted his aim from Jeen to the woman and pulled the trigger. The force of the bullet turned her head to the side and she collapsed in a heap, her gun going off as the hand that held it hit the ground.

“Kay!” the man screamed and rushed forward dropping the gun.

With a blank face Keal let his gun follow air slightly ahead of the man and let off another shot just before the man reached Kay’s body.

Jeen looked down at the two bodies sprawled on the ground next to each other. She crouched down, completely ignoring the gun Keal was still pointing at her, and brushed the hair out of the woman’s face. Then she let a finger caress the hole in her chest.

“Your aim is getting better,” she said.

Keal slowly got back up on his feet.

“Rayd?”

Jeen laughed and walked casually toward Keal. Her wound faded away before Keal’s eyes and as she came closer her figure and clothes shifted and became something more befitting a Goddess of War.

“Of course it is me. You didn’t think I had forgotten you, did you?”

Keal gave a resigned sigh and reloaded his gun before sliding it back in its concealed holster. Without answering Rayd he went over to the woman to retrieve both his own guns and the one she had been carrying. After that he took a look at the scatter gun and found it too worn to be of any use to him.

As he walked around doing his best to not look at Rayd she was just standing there with an amused smile on her face, one hand holding her chin. She had always found it amusing that people who did not know she existed did their best to talk to her, see her, ask for her help

whereas the few mortals who actually knew she was real did their best to avoid her and pretend she was just a figment of their imagination.

Eventually Keal stopped looking through the others' belongings and looked at Rayd.

"Why the hell are you here?" he asked.

"Oh, just out for a walk," she said.

Keal glared at her.

"So much for trusting the word of a god," Keal said, "I'll believe you going for a walk the day Jinx wins the lottery."

Rayd shrugged, still smiling. She walked over to the scatter gun and looked down on it. She frowned and picked the gun up in two fingers by its barrel.

"Modern technology," she sighed, "I never did understand this. What's the point of guns?"

Keal's mouth opened in a very unaweinspiring way. He quickly caught himself and was just about to say something when Rayd spoke again.

"They take all the fun out of wars."

"What? By being efficient and keeping you, hopefully, safe and far away from the enemy?"

"Efficient? Pah! There's nothing efficient about gun."

This time it was Keal's eyebrow that took on a life of its own. It crawled far up into his forehead. He stammered as he replied.

"But guns are better. They make it far easier to kill people."

"Yes, yes. I know that. And that's precisely the problem. They take all the fun out of wars. In the old days wars would rage on and on slowly peeling away at the troops on either side in huge battles. These days all that's left are a few small skirmishes here and there."

Keal said nothing. He could not have said anything even if he had tried.

"It all went downhill after the whole Ultimate Weapon thing. Especially when it actually went off and effectively made it impossible to get enough people together to anything resembling a proper slaughter started."

Keal still said nothing. The part that wanted to be somewhere far, far away returned and started tugging, mentally, at his sleeve.

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Jayton Fax closed the door to Nin's room. It had been a long day and the young girl was very tired. Most of the past week had been spent packing their belongings and the merchandise Jayton had stored in the warehouse down by the docks. He had been working from sunup to sundown with almost no breaks and Nin had done her best to help her father but she was still too weak to give more than moral support.

The two of them had been staying in a small house in Probuyat for almost six months while Nin recovered. Jayton had hoped they could stay longer since his business was just beginning to go really well. But two weeks ago he had found out that some suspicious people had started asking questions about him around town. No one had approached him directly and his enquiries showed that the suspicious people had just asked around for information about him

for a few days and then, just as suddenly as they had appeared, they had gone. None of those who had talked to them seemed to be able to give a good description of how they looked or even how they talked.

That was why Jayton had decided that they needed to move on and they needed to move quietly leaving behind as few trails as possible. So he had started packing his wares and sending them to himself to make it appear he was still taking home new stock and increasing his business here in Probuyat while in fact he had slowly been emptying the warehouse. The last couple of crates he had sent to himself had been filled with other crates. Enough of his stock was gone that he had enough cash to find reasonably discreet travel arrangements to another town.

He had done a lot of thinking on where to move next. It should be somewhere large enough to hide, but not so large that it would be too easy for anyone following him to arrive unnoticed. A tricky situation, but he believed he had found a good place. He had lived in Pinchtown some years earlier and remembered it as a place with a very strong sense of community. Someone might still remember him and he did not think they would have any cause to think badly of him. A few disgruntled customers, perhaps, but nothing more serious than that.

Crossing the hall he went into his own room and sat down at his desk. He went over the inventory books and accounts once more to make sure there were no more valuable items left and then, with a sigh, he started collecting all his paperwork. He took all of it down to the kitchen and meticulously burned every piece of paper one at a time in the large stove. He had always been a firm believer of keeping his books in order and documenting everything so he hated having to do this. But he could not leave any traces behind and he felt that burning his accounts was, all things considered, a small price to pay to keep his daughter safe. She had been through too many hard times in her six years already.

When he was finished in the kitchen he walked back upstairs and picked up the two bags he had packed. A large for himself and a small for Nin. He would have preferred it if she did not have to carry anything and if he had believed she would accept him carrying everything he would have done so. A small smile spread on his face as he imagined how the head strong young girl would have given him a hard time if she could not at least carry a little to help her father. Placing the two packs next to his bed he went to sleep himself hoping that there would be no problems tomorrow.

Jayton woke by the feeling of someone standing next to him. With a jerk he sat up in bed and looked around as he heard a thin shriek of surprise next to him.

“Oh, Nin,” he said, “you surprised me.”

Nin had jumped back in surprise but now came closer and crawled up in bed to wrap her arms around Jayton’s neck.

“Dad,” she said, “I heard someone at the door.”

Ice crept down Jayton’s back.

“It’s okay, pumpkin. I’m sure it was nothing. Why don’t you stay here and I’ll go look.”

Nin crawled down under the covers and looked at Jayton with large, round eyes.

“Was it the bad people?”

Jayton padded her head.

“No, no. The bad people can’t find you. I’ll never let them find you again.”

He was not sure how much Nin could remember from her time away last year. Hopefully not a lot, though the references to the bad people made him nervous she could remember more than he knew. They had talked a little about it and Nin had said she could not remember much, that it had seemed like a dream.

He tucked the blanket around Nin and went out of the room to see check that the doors and windows downstairs were properly locked. Even though he found them to be locked he took an extra round through the house walking as quietly as he could and listened for noises from outside. There was nothing so he went back upstairs to get a few more hours of sleep before dawn.

Nin was still awake when he came back.

“Can I sleep here, daddy?”

“Of course you can.”

He smiled as she moved over and curled up against the wall.

“Now go to sleep and I’ll wake you up when it’s time to go.”

Nin nodded and was soon sound asleep. Jayton lay awake for a short while going through the plans for the next day, but his thoughts soon drifted to other things and soon he too was asleep.

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Over the tops of the trees Keal could still barely make out the plumes rising from the town ahead. He turned to look at the Goddess walking beside him. At first he had spent a lot of time in silence contemplating all sorts of nastiness to inflict on her. Or at least try to inflict on her. It was not easy getting the better of a god or goddess. Rayd had set off at a brisk pace and did not seem inclined to wait for Keal so he decided he might as well try and keep up with her and maybe see if he could get a little bit of information out of her. He was beginning to feel that too many things were happening that were almost, but not quite, coincidental.

“So who were those two?” he asked.

“Who? Oh, them? They were no one.”

“Must have been someone to catch the attention of a divine being such as yourself, O Glorious Leader.”

The bitter tone in Keal’s voice left no doubt that he did not think Rayd neither glorious nor his leader. She laughed in response.

“True, they were someone. Notice the past tense. They were someone who were there to see if you were still as good as you used to be.”

Keal scowled at her.

“Now be a good boy, little Keal, and hold these. Consider them a return of an old loan.”

She slapped a small leather bundle into Keal’s arms. He started to unwrap it but she stopped him by placing her hand on his shoulder and shake her head ever so slightly.

“Not yet. It’s a surprise.”

“Gods!”

Keal spat on the ground and walked on in furious silence wishing Rayd, Jinx and all the other gods and goddesses into whatever hell lies beyond both this world, the next world and any other world that comes after.

Darkness was beginning to set in when Rayd finally stopped and looked around. She sat down casually on a fallen tree letting her cloak spill out over the trunk and grass. Keal could not shake the feeling of how regal she looked. The set of her face and the look in her eyes just commanded him to follow her. At some time in the past Keal might have, and indeed did, followed her without question. But now he had seen enough to not be so easily seduced by the presence of an immortal.

“Keal, sit.”

“I’ll stand, thanks.”

Rayd seemed vaguely amused by this display of rebellion.

“Suit yourself, it’s your legs.”

Keal harumphed.

“Well, Keal. Here’s the deal. There’s someone in the town I want you to meet. A special person that I’d like you to keep an eye on for a while.”

“And does this loverboy of yours have a name? Literfe, perhaps?”

Keal got a small amount of satisfaction from the fact that for a split second Rayd really did look furious. She soon mastered her feelings and put her face in neutral folds again. Her voice still had a taint of anger when she spoke again.

“No, leave that grass eating pixie out of this.”

Keal smiled a thin, grim smile to let her know that he was not going to take any of this in good stride but intended to continue the verbal fencing as long as possible.

“Someone will arrive in the town tomorrow morning. Your task is quite simply to make sure nothing happens to her.”

Rayd nearly spat out that last word to prove her point that it was not Literfe. Thinking about him always brought up mental images of suffering in her mind.

“Right, so some girl shows up in some town. Sure, shouldn’t be a big problem. I’ll just find the first girl I see and make sure nothing happens to her. Or do I get to choose one who’s actually as good looking as you, O Joy of My Sight?”

This time Rayd lost her temper and Keal rubbed his jaw as he tried to remember why he was sitting on the ground and Rayd was standing. He had not seen her move, so fast had her blow been, but he had definitely felt it.

Rayd sat down again and kicked the leather wrapped bundle over to Keal. He had dropped it when she had knocked him down.

“Open it.”

Keal shut his eyes hard and opened them again and blinked a couple of times before reaching out for the bundle. Inside he found something that made him gasp. Two finely made short blades with blackened handles. The slim steel glinted in the last light of the day as Keal turned

first one blade over and then the other. For a while he sat there speechless while the corner of Rayd's mouth turned up in a satisfied grin.

"Well," she said, "no smart comebacks now, eh?"

Keal just looked up at her with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Where'd you find these?"

He finally managed to speak again.

"Oh, it was easy. Just had to sneak into old Teppy's house undetected. You are, I'm sure, well aware of how easy that is."

The sarcasm was lost in Keal who had started looking at his long lost blades again. He had had them made more than a decade ago in Probuyat after a very well paying job stealing some blueprints from a factory owner. After that job he had earned enough to take a very long break, but had chosen to up the stakes a bit and try for some more demanding work: assassinations.

(Edit later: this is wrong since Keal must have had a chance to use the knives for a long time or they would not mean so much to him, also: Tep was in possession of the knives so that means Keal lost them during the Great Escape)

It had not worked out that well. On his first assignment he had found out that there is a big difference between slitting someone's throat while they are sleeping and taking down an armed guard to avoid getting caught. His hesitation had caused him to not only lose the chance at his mark, but also got him caught. There had hardly been a trial before he had been thrown in a very deep hole in the ground to rot. Fortunately he had managed to escape and decided to leave the large town behind for a long time.

And now he was sitting here with his blades in his hands. His blades. Not just some random knives. These had been specially forged to suit his hands and strength.

"You bastard," Keal said, "you know what these means to me."

"And I know that to do what I have in mind for you you'll need them."

Keal's face grew sober again and he looked up at Rayd with a hard look in his eyes.

He stood up and with practiced ease attached the blades' sheaths to his forearms and slide them in place. Flexing his arms a few times he tested the springs in the sheaths and when he was content they would let the blades spring straight into his hands he addressed Rayd again.

"Let's hear it."

"Ah," Rayd said, "the old Keal is back. Straight to the point, then."

She sat down again.

"As I said there's a girl coming to Pinchtown that I need you to look after for a while. Plain and simple."

"It's never simple. Who's after her?"

"You'll find out soon enough. But suffice it to say that they will not merely be satisfied with killing her they want to make sure there's no chance she comes back. Ever again."

Something cold went down Keal's back. He knew from firsthand experience that death was not always permanent. But if someone really wanted to it was possible to obliterate a person

so completely that whatever passed through to the other side was not even a shadow of that person. Somewhere a few remnants would be left, enough to be in eternal torment, but not enough to retain any control of what would happen.

“I’ve seen that happen,” he said very quietly, “and I wouldn’t want that fate for anyone. Present company excluded.”

He marked that last word very clearly and Rayd did not miss it.

“Try me,” she whispered.

For a while Keal stood watching nothing in particular while the last light disappeared.

“If my charge arrives in Pinchtown tomorrow I guess we’d better get moving.”

With a pleased smile like a predator who had just cornered her prey Rayd got up and put out his arm for Keal to take. He ignored it and walked off down the road.

Rayd stood there watching him disappear into the forest until he turned a bend in the road. Then she sat back down on the tree trunk again and gave a surprised yelp when she fell backwards and landed on her back on the ground.

“I’m sorry, sister,” Jinx said, “I really didn’t mean to.”

Rayd looked up in Jinx’s pained face. Jinx was sitting on the tree trunk next to where Rayd had sat down. By sheer strength of will Rayd lifted herself back in a sitting position in the exact opposite way she had tumbled backwards and put her hand around Jinx’s shoulders.

“Don’t you worry about it, little Jinx,” she said quietly, “I’ll just tie you to the underside of the next pig I come across. While it’s roasting very, very slowly over a low fire.”

Jinx squirmed away from Rayd, but the Goddess held her in place. Eventually Jinx’s struggles stopped and it sagged forward, a lonely tear making its way down Jinx’s cheek.

“I’m sorry,” Jinx whispered again.

“Why are you here? Why now?”

Rayd’s steel grip tightened.

“I had no choice. For so, so long I have left Keal alone. Shut him out of my thoughts. But I can’t anymore. His presence keeps pressing against my skull until it hurts.”

Jinx was outright crying now.

“And I don’t want to see him hurt. He’s had so many troubles because of me. So many. For so long.”

The tears did not touch Rayd whose harsh reply made Jinx flinch.

“You will not go near him now. You will not!”

“But what can I do? He draws me to him. I draw him to me.”

Jinx appearance shifted from that of a young man to that of an old woman.

“I feel so old and tired. Worn down. Nothing in me.”

“Good,” said Rayd, “if there’s nothing in you then there’s nothing that can follow Keal.”

“But... how?”

“Let my worry about that.”

Standing Rayd pulled the other God up and kept a strong grip on it as they walked into thin air together and disappeared from the mortal realms.

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The boat moved slowly across the quiet sea. From the massive chimney in its center black smoke billowed toward the sky as the boilers down below worked hard to push steam through the large pipes in the boat's belly. A steady thumping sound could be heard from the pistons hammering back and forth, keeping the boats large wheel spinning.

When Jayton had taken Nin down to the harbour two days earlier the young girl had been too tired to notice much more than the noise of the docks and the smell of coal and the sea. She soon woke up, though, and when she found out they were aboard one of the large ocean steam boats her eyes grew wide with excitement. It was all Jayton could do to avoid her running off to explore every inch of the boat. After the first day she had settled down a bit but would still from time to time point at something and delight in the wonders of all the different parts of the boat's machinery.

The two of them were sleeping in their own cabin down below. It had been expensive and throwing that kind of money might draw some attention to them, but Jayton had decided that he would not mind that if it meant they could get their own place to sleep. He was not sure he liked the idea of sleeping in one of the dormitories where anyone could potentially get to them.

Sleeping on their own also meant that they both actually managed to sleep so when the boat came close to Pinchtown early in the morning they both got up, packed their things and went up to the deck to prepare to get off. Nin stood with her chin leaned on the railing and looked as the town came closer and closer. They could soon begin to make out details such as the piers going out in the water supported by heavy, rusted iron beams. On the piers people were running back and forth between the ships moored there and the warehouses.

Pinchtown was far smaller than Probuyat but the last couple of years had seen a fast increase in its size, mainly due to the increased shipping along the coast. The large steam boats could not handle the open sea but were perfect for the calm waters along the coast.

When the boat came up to the pier several strong men helped secure it and the dock workers began unloading the crates and bags from the cargo hold.

Jayton held on tight to Nin and walked up the pier toward the town itself. His destination was a house on the forest side of the town where he hoped he could still find Peet, a friend he had made when he lived here a few years ago, before he had gotten Nin. They had done a little business together with Jayton selling Peet's hand crafted furniture to some of his other business associates. Peet was a nice old man who Jayton felt sure could be trusted to set them up somewhere quiet until they could find their own place.

As they walked through the town Jayton had the feeling that someone was following them, watching them. He tried to keep an eye out for anyone following them but could not see anyone. When they were some distance from the docks the streets became less crowded until, when they were close to the edge of the town, they were nearly empty. Before turning down the street to Peet's house Jayton took a small detour and in an almost deserted street he waited by a doorway to make extra sure no one was following. No one turned down the street after them.

Jayton sighed and looked down at Nin who did not seem to notice anything wrong. Her eyes darted all over the place, a small smile played on her lips.

“Let’s go see if Peet is home, pumpkin, do you remember me telling you about him?”

Nin nodded and squeezed his hand.

“He made the rocking chair you had,” she said.

“That’s right. It was a shame we couldn’t bring it but maybe he has another one we can have here.”

“I’d like that.”

Nin smiled at him and together they walked the last distance to Peet’s house. Jayton knocked a few times on the door automatically finding the same rhythm he had always used back then to signal Peet who it was. It was a kind of game they had played back then. Both had invented a simple set of knocking tunes that indicated if they were hungry, tired, ready for a night out or just in the mood for a quiet evening in front of the fireplace. It had been many years previous and Jayton was not entirely sure he remembered his own tunes correctly.

Inside the house Jayton could hear someone rumaging around. A chair was dragged across the floor for a while and footsteps came closer to the door. An old man opened the top half of the door and stuck his bearded head out.

“You’ve been working all day and are ready for a chair of fire next to the tea?” Peet asked with a bemused smile.

Jayton laughed.

“Not quite, old friend,” he said, “guess I’ve gotten a bit rusty.”

“Looks like it’s not the only thing you’ve gotten,” Peet said and looked down at Nin, “and who might you be, my good lady?”

Nin smiled and giggled, but did not answer. Her face turned red and she hid a little behind Jayton’s legs.

“Don’t be shy, Nin. This is our good friend Peet.”

“Hello, Nin. Welcome to Pinchtown.”

“M’llo,” Nin said.

“Can we come in, Peet? We just got off the boat.”

“Of course, of course, there’s food ready in a few minutes. Just drop your bags anywhere and sit down. I’m guessing there’s a bit of catching up to do.”

“You can say that again,” Jayton said.

He ushered Nin inside and smiled as he remembered how many nights he had spent in Peet’s room talking until late in the night about anything from politics to business to which drink was most effective when it came to causing hangovers. It felt good to be back.

---

The large steam boat came closer to the pier and Keal got up from the bench in front of one of the warehouses. His walk the final way to the town had been pleasantly free of gods and goddesses and had arrived at the town in the middle of the night. Fortunately there was always

at least one open place since boats arrived at all hours so he had had no problems finding a place to get a few hours sleep.

He walked down to the end of the pier and pretended to be very interested in some merchandise that had been unloaded some time very early that morning. In his worn out clothes he looked like any of the other dock workers so no one paid him much attention.

Slowly the steam boat came closer and closer until it finally docked and started unloading. Keal sat down on one of the crates and pretended to be half asleep, dodging work or just resting after a long night's work. Through his half closed eyes he could see a man and a child walk up the pier a bit ahead of the other passengers disembarking.

The two people were not clearly visible to Keal because of all the dock workers running up and down the pier so he did not get a clear look at them until they were almost right next to him. When he saw them he nearly fell off the crate with surprise and quickly turned his head and pretended to have just wokened. The man and the child passed him by, but with his back turned Keal was not sure if they had recognised him or not.

"Curse you, Rayd," he muttered under his breath.

He slid off the crate and moved around it so he could get another look at them. They were walking up toward the town itself. Keal moved sideways to another street running parallel to the one the man was walking toward. As he walked through the town he frequently slipped over to the other street to check that the man was still there. It was not an easy thing to do, following someone by being ahead of them all the time. But Keal had a fairly good idea where the man was headed so he took the chance.

Keal watched as he saw the man turn down a side passage. For a second Keal thought he might have made a mistake and almost started to follow the man. Then he decided to give it a few minutes and his patience was rewarded by the sight of the man coming down from another street. The man headed toward the street opposite from where Keal was hiding behind a rain barrel and walked up to the house Keal had expected.

"Thought so," he said.

He watched how the man knocked on the door and was let in by the old man.

Keal kept hidden for a while before getting out on the street again. The town was slowly waking up and he could move around without anyone noticing him.

Seeing who it was Rayd had wanted him to look after had turned his entire life upside down. He thought he would never see Jayton and Nin again. Ever. This was one old can of worms he did not want to reopen. And he definitely did not want to have anything to do with old Peet again. Keal did not know why, but there was always something about Peet that had seemed out of place.

"Curse you, Rayd," he said, "you fucked up psycho bitch."

Keal walked back to the room he had at a boarding house to think things over. As much as he did not want to get involved in this again he did not feel like he had much choice. Rayd might be playing with him but that did not mean that someone was not hunting down Nin to make sure she got her destined fate.

Fate.

Fate was not one of Keal's favourite things as he believed that anyone could change her own fate by making choices and deciding what to do in any given situation. And yet here he was, sitting in a small room feeling like he did not have any choices anymore.

Restlessly he got up again and headed back down to the docks to see if there had been anymore boats from Probuyat this morning.

The day was fine and only a few clouds could be seen on the sky over the ocean. The docks were busy with dock workers trying to get a couple of boats loaded while some merchants shouted instructions to them to be careful and not drop the precious cargo they were carrying.

Keal sat down on one of the benches that lined the harbour to think things through once more. He ended up sitting there for more than an hour.

"I'm sorry," someone asked, "is this seat taken?"

Keal made a wordless reply and the stranger sat down. His thoughts elsewhere Keal only registered that the man next to him was wearing a dark coloured dress.

Then it struck him.

"Oh, not you, too."

Jinx put a hand on Keal's shoulder and slowly shook its head.

"Oh, Keal, I tried to stay away. Rayd tried to keep me away."

"Remember to send both of you a thank you note sometime."

"But there is nothing you can do, Keal. Nothing we can do. It cannot be avoided."

Now Jinx voice had taken a twist and sounded absolutely despairing. This caused Keal to sit up straight and look straight at Jinx.

"What. Are. You. Talking. About?" he asked slowly. "Enough of these half mumbblings, apologies. Spit it out."

Jinx lifted one arm, now dressed in a beggar's torn robes, and pointed to the only pier in the harbour without any workers on it.

"That."

Keal followed the finger and saw nothing. His head snapped back toward Jinx and he leaned all the way up into the god's face.

"I am not in the mood for your foolishness, Jinx," he sneered.

"No, look."

Once more Keal looked at the pier and then he noticed. There were no workers on the pier, no people in fact. But there was something else. He could not see it when he looked straight at the pier, but whenever his sight drifted somewhere else he could see movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh, no," he whispered.

By reflex he let one of the blades slide out in his hand where he kept it hidden, but ready, in a fold in his cloak. Now that he knew what to look for he could see the shadows slowly creeping from a black boat in the water and up the pier.

One, two, three, four, five he counted. They moved very slowly so as not to draw attention to themselves. But they came forward towards the city with a steady pace. Straight toward Keal.

Once more Keal was sitting alone on the bench. Jinx had left while he was distracted by the shadows. He quickly got up and slid around the corner while watching the shadows closely. They changed neither their direction nor speed but kept coming toward him. Then he noticed that the street he was standing in was the same one Jayton and Nin had taken earlier that day. There was still some time before the shadows would reach the place Keal was standing and he tried a small experiment.

As quickly as he could without attracting too much attention he went around the warehouse he had been sitting in front. That put him out at the side of the shadows. They still kept going for the street.

“At least that’s something,” he said to himself.

He waited a few more seconds until he was sure the shadows would not change direction and then he forgot all about being inconspicuous and started running through the town. People yelled at him as he hurtled by but he did not stop. He was not sure where the shadows came from but he had a fairly good guess that it was Tep who was behind them somehow. But how he had found him, or Nin, Keal had no idea. He just knew that he did not like it. Not one bit.

It felt like time stretched out as he made his way through first one street, then the next. Faster and faster he ran, but he did not seem to get anywhere. The streets became longer, his movements slowed and yet he felt as if he was running as fast as he could. His heart pounded with a strangely loud noise that drowned out everything else.

Now he could see the house Peet lived in. It was just around the corner, an eternity away. An eternity filled with shadows creeping up around him and everyone he had ever met.

---

Keal started as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“I said, are you all right?” a voice asked.

Light blinded Keal for a moment. Then he got his bearings and saw that he was still sitting on the bench by the harbour. None of the piers were empty and no shadows were creeping anywhere.

He mumbled to the dock worker who had woken him.

“Sorry, must have nodded off. Long night,” he said.

“No prob. Just be careful the watchmen don’t catch you snoozing out here. They’re as like to rough you up as stick you in hack if they catch you nodding off.”

“Thanks.”

The dock worker walked off and Keal stood and stretched. Then, out of the corner of his eye he saw a shadow sliding off the bench from where it had been sitting next to him.

---

Peet put down two mugs of tea on the table.

“Nin is asleep upstairs. Now, what brings you here?”

Jayton looked at his old friend with a tired look in his eyes.

“I hate to bring this upon you, but I need your help with hiding her from someone.”

Peet dug out a pouch of tobacco, stuffed his pipe and lit it. He settled back in one of his homemade rocking chairs and let Jayton tell his story.

“It all started about two years ago. Nin’s mother had just passed away after we had left Probuyat. A client of mine suggested a large business deal that seemed good enough. I double checked the proposal and even the inventory, once I got it, and there was nothing suspicious about it...”

He wrung his hands.

“That alone should have been suspicious enough. But I could do with some extra money to make sure Nin was taken care of and there really wasn’t anything at all to raise an eye brow at.

“The sale itself went without problems and both the client and I got a large profit out of it. But then he came back the next day and accused me of cheating him.

“He cursed me before all the gods and said that he’d pray for them to take something as precious from me as I had taken from him.”

He let out a long sigh and took a sip of his tea.

“He raved on about this until I called a neighbour and together we got him calmed down enough that he stopped shouting. He was still furious and I was afraid he would do something rash so me and the neighbour called a watchman who dragged him away.

“When I later tried to find out what had happened I found out that the client had managed to get away from the watchman and had disappeared in a crowded market. The local magistrate didn’t want to do much more even though I knew both the client’s name and where he lived.

“The magistrate just didn’t feel it was appropriate to waste time on two business men who probably had cheated each other, as he put it.”

Jayton shook his head and continued in a strained voice.

“For a few days I was nervous, but nothing happened. Then a week went by and still nothing. I tried to track down the client, but he was nowhere to be found. His address had been deserted and his warehouse emptied.

“Eventually I stopped thinking about it. Nin was growing up fast and a business opportunity meant we had to move to one of the other small towns up the river for a few months. Getting away for a while was good for us both.

“At least until the horrible night where I found Nin sitting slumped in a chair outside the house.”

Peet held his breath at this. While he had not met Nin before today he still felt close enough to Jayton to instantly like the young girl.

“She was just sitting there as if she was asleep. But she wasn’t breathing.”

A tear rolled down Jayton’s cheek at the memory.

“No one had seen or heard anything. There were no marks. She was just... dead.”

Silence filled the room until Jayton found his voice and could continue.

“I lifted her and lifted her inside and prepared to see if I could find some kind of doctor in the town. When I came in I saw him standing there. The client. He didn’t look angry or even upset. Heck, I could have handled him gloating. No, he just stood there and then he told me that now we were even.”

For a long time Jayton said nothing.

“He then left the house, but when I tried to follow him to stop him he was nowhere to be seen. I tried asking someone in the street but no one had seen him. It was as if he didn’t exist. Had never existed.”

Jayton looked up at Peet and noticed that the old man did not seem surprised at his tale.

“Please believe me. Nin really was dead!”

“Don’t worry, my old friend, I believe you. But tell me, how did Nin come to be alive again?”

A look of pain crossed Jayton’s eyes.

“After Nin’s burial I felt no sense of release. It was as if she was still in the house with me, next to me when I travelled. For months it went on like this until, finally, I couldn’t bear it anymore.

“I started looking around for someone to help me. I prayed to the gods, but no one answered. None of them. Then one day I met a truly strange man.

“It was just after I arrived back in Probuyat. One night a stranger walks straight up to me, hands me a coin with a hole in the middle and tells me that he’s heard about my problem.

“It soon became evident that someone had tricked the poor bastard into believing that my child was only missing, not dead. So he had set out to seek employment as a tracker hoping to find her for me.”

Peet nodded.

“Yes,” the old man said, “that doesn’t sound too wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, apologies, please continue. The man wanted to work for you?”

“Yes. He claimed he was the best there ever was at finding lost items and people. Somehow I believed him and gave him a brief version of what had happened.”

Jayton’s face twisted down in a bitter smile.

“It turned out that he didn’t know the girl was dead so I tried getting rid of him. He seemed more annoyed than surprised at finding out Nin was dead. As if someone had specifically told him that he could find her, and where, so he could make some easy money.

“Before he left he repeated that he’d find her and bring her back. If only to annoy someone who’s name I didn’t catch. He left and I didn’t see him again. Not for a long time.”

“But,” said Keal, “you have to admit that I did manage to find your daughter.”

He was leaning casually against the door frame to the kitchen as if he had been standing there a long time.

“Hello, Peet. Long time.”

“Keal, never a pleasure.”

Jayton looked from one to the other.

“You know each other?”

A bitter laugh escaped both men’s throats at the same time.

“Oh,” said Keal, “we go way back. Do you know the rest of the story, Peet?”

“I’ve heard the rumours. Just wasn’t sure it was real. Or you.”

“Well, it was. Bit tricky, but doable.”

“Oh, dear. What a mess,” said Peet, “but I sure would like to hear how the story ends.”

“Short version is that I went beyond, found Nin and came back.”

Peet’s eye brows rose far up into his forehead.

“So it’s true after all,” he said.

“The long version will have to wait until Tep’s minions aren’t right on our collective arses. Who’s going?”

With that Keal walked over to the window and peered out into the street.

“No sign of them yet. We still have a little time. Go get the girl. Now.”

When Jayton move immediately Keal kicked the back of his chair and started pacing back and forth in the room.

“Move it.”

Finally Jayton seemed to register what was going on. He got to his feet with a desperate look in his eyes and looked pleadingly at Peet.

“I’m sorry,” Peet said, “this I can’t help you with. No, that would be too much for old Peet to handle.”

Keal made a snorting sound and glared evilly at the old man.

“Sure,” he said, “whatever. Now get the girl and let’s go.”

He added the last bit to Jayton who started walking towards the stairs.

After a couple of very long minutes he came back down with the two packs and a very tired Nin on his arms. Nin mumbled something and looked around sleepily. When she saw Keal her face lit up with a wide grin and she squirmed out of Jayton’s arms to run across the room and throw herself at Keal, hugging his waist.

“Keal,” she said, “I knew you wouldn’t leave me.”

With a grunt Keal tore the girl from his waist and held her out at arm’s length. He squatted down and looked her straight in the eye, no sign of joy or happiness in his eyes.

“Do you remember when I came to fetch you?” he asked.

Nin nodded.

“And do you remember those who followed us?”

Nin made a strangled sound in her throat that ended up as a frightened squeak leaving her lips. She nodded with eyes wide with terror.

“Don’t worry. They won’t get you this time either.”

Keal easily lifted Nin from the floor and into Jayton's arms. Then Keal took the heavier of the two packs from Jayton and headed back toward the kitchen.

"We'll leave out the back. Not that it matters much, but there was a small alley leading straight to the city edge back there."

"Where are we going?" Jayton asked.

"Don't mind that. The less said the better."

Keal looked accusingly at Peet who squirmed a step back.

"What?" Jayton said, "Peet? What's going on?"

Keal and Peet just looked at each other for a while. Then Peet seemed to find some measure of courage and straightened back up to face Keal.

"Don't worry. This time I won't," he said.

"Good. For your sake."

The look in Keal's eyes as he exited the room left no doubt in Peet's mind that Keal was not someone to cross.

Jayton cast a last questioning look at Peet before leaving.

"Hush, pumpkin," he said, "it'll be all right."

With Keal taking the lead they left down the alley towards the edge of town and the forest that waited there.

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"Awww, how cute," said Literfe, "the big, strong Keal's got a soft spot for the young girl."

He poked the scrying mirror a few times as the image wavered and became unclear.

"Hey!" he said, "I wanted to see what happens next. Who did that?"

Across the room the door had just slammed open and Rayd strode into her office closing the door loudly behind her. The force of her entrance had knocked the mirror askew obscuring the view.

"What," she sneered, "are you doing in here?"

"Oh, Rayd, Light of the Midnight Moon."

Rayd threw up her hands.

"I was merely basking in your presence," Literfe said, "hoping for a brief glance of my beloved goddess, sad and torn with violence though she is."

He sighed and gave Rayd a pitying glance. She returned his gaze with a frown and a short growl.

"You used the mirror?"

"Only a little. I always knew you were a soft touch after all."

"What?"

Rayd's head snapped around and she yelled at Literfe.

"What are you talking about, you lovesick dolt?"

Literfe gave her the sweetest smile ever smiled in this world and beyond.

“Oh, Rayd,” he whispered, “you have finally taken the side of love.”

There was a sick silence as Rayd’s mouth slowly opened and she just stared incomprehensibly at Literfe.

He chuckled.

“That man and his daughter. I have rarely seen so pure love. And here you are, sending one of your most valuable assets to help them stay together.”

Slowly, very slowly, Rayd started shaking her head from one side to the other.

“You’ll never admit it, I know,” Literfe said, “but there’s no denying... Hey! Put down that sword!”

There was a cracking sound as Rayd’s crimson blade burried itself in the wooden post next to Literfe’s head. The blade had passed straight through his neck before getting stuck in the wood. He tumbled to the floor as Rayd let go of the stuck sword that hang waving in the air. She took a step forward, grabbed Literfe’s collar and shouted.

“Stop that nonsense!”

She let go of Literfe and pulled at her sword. It came free eventually and she slid it back in its scabbard on her back.

“Ouch,” said Literfe, “I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“Then maybe you should keep your mouth shut.”

With a visible effort Rayd calmed herself down before turning to face Literfe again. He was still sitting on the floor with a hurt look on his face.

“Now,” said Rayd, “Get. Out.”

Literfe slowly got to his feet and walked to the door.

“I know what I saw,” he said, “whether you admit it or not you are fighting for love this time.”

After he left the room Rayd stood for a while looking at the now blank mirror. She was not doing this for love, she told herself. There were larger things afoot and cheating Tep out of getting this girl back would eventually be far more to her advantage than the small pleasure of a short term victory. That was, after all, why she had sent Keal to rescue Nin from the beyond in the first place.

She smiled at the memory of Tep’s face when he found out. There had been no doubt that Keal could pull it off. But that he had staged what later became known as the Great Escape where more than a hundred souls escaped back to the mortal realms had just been wonderful. Tep had been completely occupied with that for long enough to allow Rayd to stage her own Small Escape that Tep had not even noticed in all the confusion.

The other gods had kept far away from any kind of involvement on either side and Tep had not dared start a direct conflict with Rayd, but he had taken other actions against her. Such as doing his best to keep people alive rather than taking them just a few minutes before they really did die. This had especially happened in the few battles that Rayd had managed to create. It had spoiled all her fun.

Some of the other gods could not understand the animosity between the two of them. But they did not know what Tep had been hiding from them. And they would never know, if Rayd had anything to do with it. That was why she had to keep Tep so occupied that he did not have time to work more towards his own goals.

She walked over to the mirror and tapped it lightly almost caressingly.

“Now,” she said, “let me see how Keal is doing.”

An image appeared in the mirror again. Keal and the others were running through the edge of the forest heading back towards the ocean. Suddenly Rayd noticed another figure among the trees and she cursed.

“No!” she screamed.

She turned to the corner of the room where she had left Jinx chained to the wall. The chains were still there but the manacles were lying open on the floor. Rayd stalked over to the chains and picked up the manacles. One of the hinges had simply broken off. Cursed bad luck.

“Curse you, Jinx!”

Rayd hurled the useless manacles across the room and let out another violent curse when she saw them hit the mirror and disappear through its surface. She walked back to the mirror and tapped it again but no image could be seen. The mirror was not broken, but there was no sign of the manacles anywhere and she could not get an image back on the mirror.

She slumped down in the chair behind her large desk and looked at the collection of books and maps in front of her. She had the feeling that something important was eluding her. Somewhere Keal was about to be caught by Tep’s shadow minions and she would not allow that to happen.

“Enough of this sneaking around,” she said, “this time it’s war!”

A ripple went through the room as Rayd sprang up from her chair and gave a fierce battle shout with her arms raised high above her. She closed her hands into fists and pulled them both quickly down to her hips as she bent the space around her and disappeared with a thunderclap.

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As Keal raced down the alley he looked back to check if the others were following. He skidded to a stop and muttered to himself as he was forced to wait for Jayton to catch up with him. The merchant was not exactly in good shape and carrying Nin only made him slower. When they caught up with him Keal reached out and took Nin who wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tight.

For a brief second Keal got a flashback to when he had escaped from the beyond with Nin. The scenery had been different, but the situation had been the same. Back then they had also been followed by Tep’s shadow minions. This time, however, Keal could not understand why they could have tracked them.

Before attempting to free Nin Keal had done a little research, grudgingly assisted by Rayd, into what he could expect on the other side. He had found out that the shadow minions were essentially mindless creatures. Some references had even claimed that they were not individual creatures but merely elemental energies controlled by Tep himself.

All the sources had agreed on one thing. The shadows were not able to interact with the mortal realm except where they were specifically ordered to do so by whoever controlled them. That made it virtually impossible for them to actually track anyone on their own and they had to rely on someone controlling them every step of the way.

This made Keal very nervous because it meant that in addition to the shadow minions someone, human or divine, was also following them and tracking them. He had not seen anyone in neither the harbour or on his way to Peet's house which meant that it was most likely someone very competent. Maybe even Tep himself.

Keal smiled to himself as the three of them moved on again.

If Tep was down here things would certainly be interesting. Considering how often Keal had visited the gates since the great escape a year and a half earlier he had often suspected that the God of the Dead was doing his best to make Keal's life as unpleasant as possible. Dying was not fun. The only thing less fun, in Keal's experience, was the waking up again just after.

Shifting Nin to his back he checked the blades in his sleeves again and smiled a grim smile. If Tep really was out there perhaps it would be worth taking a stab at him.

They finally reached the tree line and disappeared into the dense woods. Keal let Jayton carry Nin again and stayed behind hiding in a tree trying to see if he could get a glimpse of who was controlling the shadow minions. Jayton wanted to stay behind but Keal urged him on to the harbour to try and secure a fast boat going anywhere but here. With some reluctance Jayton agreed and promised to go as soon as possible whether Keal joined them or not.

After a few minutes he saw the shadows move slowly and aimlessly toward the tree line. From his position above the ground he could see a bit into the town and saw the shadows moving back and forth between several streets. But they still moved in the right general direction.

Keal waited a while longer keeping an eye on the people moving through the streets. None of them seemed to notice the shadows. Except one person who seemed to always stay in the center of the area covered by the shadows. The person appeared to be a slim built man. He was wearing loose, dark clothes and a broad brimmed hat so Keal had difficulties making out any distinguishing features.

When the man was only a few houses from the tree line he stopped and gestured in the air. The shadows drew closer around him and he started walking at a brisk pace toward where Keal and Jayton had entered the woods.

Quietly Keal shifted on the branch preparing to lower himself to the ground again. He took a last look to estimate when the man would reach the trees and fell backwards down on the ground as something hard hit him in the head.

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The harbour was as busy as ever when Jayton reached it. The boat he and Nin had arrived on was being reloaded for its trip back to Probuyat and several other cargo carriers were also getting ready to get on their way before it became so late in the day that their crews would start hitting the bars seriously.

No one paid any attention to a man carrying a child. Not even when Jayton frantically looked back at the trees next to the town every few steps.

Jayton made his way to the other end of the docks where he had seen some smaller boats earlier when they had arrived. With any luck there would still be one or two small, fast boats. With a lot of luck one of them would even be ready to sail at a few moments' notice.

Nin had been sobbing a little as they ran but otherwise kept quiet and calm. Jayton whispered reassuring words to her as he walked briskly towards a sleek sail boat. Not many of the small boats had room for a large, bulky steam engine and most of the time sails gave greater speeds so not many were experimenting with the smaller versions of the engines. Most captains, not to mention crews, also had far more confidence in sails. There was something about boiling water and open fire that made them a bit nervous.

When they reached the boat Jayton could see a few deck hands lounging about casually on the deck while the captain was sitting on the railing quietly smoking his pipe. Only a few packs and a single barrel was left on the pier so it seemed like Jayton was in luck. The boat looked ready to sail.

With long steps he walked down the pier and hailed the captain.

"Who's there?" the captain said.

He was a young darkskinned man, maybe in his mid thirties, with a playful look on his face and feathered hat. His clothes was a mix of at least two different uniforms with some nondistinct pieces here and there. His entire appearance was that of someone who valued the freedom of his ship and did not care much about other peoples' affairs.

"My name is Jayton Fax. I'm looking for fast transportation."

"Greetings to you, then, Mister Fax. You've most certainly come to the right place, then."

One of two of the deck hands looked at Jayton and Nin with vague interest.

Jayton tried to size up the crew and the captain to get an idea of how he would best be able to get a spot on the boat. He was mainly used to dealing with captains on the cargo freighters and since their goal was profits, not freedom, they responded far better to direct negotiations than Jayton guessed this man would.

"Allow me to introduce myself," the captain said, "and my fine and most noble crew."

One of the deck hands chuckled. The others smiled and shook their heads.

"Or at least let me introduce myself and those lazy buggers sleeping over there," the captain added, "My name is Captain Layne, proud owner and captain of the fine ship The Tankard. And those lazy buggers sleeping over there are, well, some lazy buggers who keep insisting that they are my crew."

"Well, you pay us don't you?" the deck hand said.

"Do I?"

Layne thoughtfully put a finger on his cheek.

"I most sincerely apologise for that," he said, "it shall not happen again."

Jayton looked uncertainly from the captain to the crew and then at the other small boats. None of them seemed ready to go anywhere and only two of the three others in the harbour seemed to even have their crew nearby.

He turned his attention back to Captain Layne and decided to go for the straight approach.

“Captain, I’m pressed for time and in great need of fast passage away from here,” he said, “if possible I would like you to assemble your crew and be ready to leave within the next quarter hour.”

Layne lifted an eye brow.

“A quarter hour? Surely you can see that those lazy buggers could not even find their own heads so quickly.”

Nin slid down from Jayton’s shoulders and went over to the captain. She pulled at his jacket and addressed her in the self confident voice of a young girl who knows what she wants.

“I don’t think your boat is really fast. You’re just trying to sound like you’re very smart. I bet I could swim faster than you can sail.”

Layne looked down at her, amusement and outrage battling for control of his face. Eventually humour won, perhaps helped by Nin sticking out her tongue at him, and he knelt down and looked Nin in the eye.

“Oh, really,” he said, “and just who might you be to know so much about ships? No, don’t tell me.”

He winked at her and stood up again and addressed the crew.

“Gents! Get on your feet and pay proper respect for this most courageous young lady. Surely only an experienced captain would attempt such bold banter.”

Jayton started apologising and reached out to pull Nin back behind him but Layne laid a hand gently on his arm waved dramatically at no one in particular.

“Only someone truly experienced indeed,” he continued, “such as the mighty dark lady of the white waves herself. Or perhaps the mysterious and legendary Captainette of the South?”

Layne leaned down and whispered to Nin.

“What’s your name?”

“My name is Nin and me and my father need to go. Now.”

She crossed her arms and squinted up at Layne in what she hoped was a menacing way. Jumping up on the barrel Layne’s voice once more rang out loud and clear.

“Lads! Make ready the ship for we are in the presence than none other than the Nin of the Nine Seas. Get to it, lads, or you will soon regret crossing such cuteness most adorable.”

He jumped down on the docks again and padded Nin’s head.

“I take it you mean to pay for your voyage, Mister Fax?”

In response Jayton took out a purse and gave it to Layne.

“This should, I trust, make sure that any further theatrics takes place off the shore?” he said.

Layne opened the pouch and lifted an eye brow. He closed the pouch and gave a series of fast orders to his crew.

“I don’t know who or what you’re running from. And believe me, I do care enough about my ship and crew to look out for both. Care to give me some hint as to why you’re in such a hurry?”

“Suffice it to say that it’s neither the law nor anyone you’ll have run into before.”

Layne considered this for a moment or two.

“Guess that’s good enough for me. You can always tell me the rest of the story on the sea,” he said.

“You wouldn’t believe me,” Jayton muttered.

Within a few minutes the last things had been cleared off the pier. One of the deck hands was running back from the harbour master’s office after going there to clear up their account and get permission to undock.

With an air of smugness Nin walked back towards where the wheel was and stood behind it with her arms crossed playing the rule of pirate captain to the full.

Meanwhile Jayton had stored their packs safely in a cabin down stairs and paced impatiently back and forth. He tried to keep an eye out for Keal but could not see him.

When the lines had been cast off and the boat started heading out to sea Jayton still stood at the railing staring intently into the crowd in the harbour. Nin moved over to him and slid her hand in his.

“Will we see him again?” she asked.

“I don’t know, pumpkin,” Jayton said, “and sometimes I don’t know if I want to or not.”

Nin looked up at him, her round eyes open.

“But don’t you like him?”

“Oh, of course I like him. It’s just that whenever he’s near trouble isn’t far behind him.”

Nin shook her head not fully understanding what he had said. She pointed at the tree line.

“Is that him?”

Jayton leaned forward and squinted. There was a slight movement at the tree line where they had left the woods to go back to the harbour but he could not make out the details. Perhaps it was Keal, perhaps not. Either way he did not feel particularly tempted to go back to find out.

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The sound of feet on the ground woke Keal up. He quickly got to his feet ready to fight off shadow minions, Tep and gods knew what else.

“I’m sorry, Keal,” said Jinx, “I didn’t mean to hit you. I just threw it after Rayd but missed.”

Keal groaned.

“Of course you missed, you idiot. But at least I’ll give you a little credit for throwing them at Rayd.”

His head pounded and he looked at the ground. A couple of broken iron manacles were laying next to his feet.

“I’m sure don’t want to know.”

“She chained me up, but the manacles broke.”

Keal rolled his eyes, not wondering how manacles could possibly break when used against Jinx.

“And then,” Jinx said, “I threw them at her but hit her mirror instead. GuesSED they went through and when I saw they hit you I jumped after them hoping to lessen the damage.”

In the light filtering down through the leaves Keal could see that Jinx looked very battered. It was wearing its young man shape and its clothes were torn and through several large holes bleeding scratches could be seen. For once Keal actually took pity on Jinx.

“What exactly did you do?”

“Oh,” Jinx said.

It looked down at itself, rubbed a couple of the scratches and continued.

“I sort of ended in some brambles. Stings quite a bit. But not as much as where the shadows hit me.”

Both of Keal’s eye brows rose to the sky.

“The shadows?” he asked.

“Yes, there were some shadows moving around near where you fell out of the tree. I think they’re Tep’s? Anyway, I tried to convince them that they should go away but they just passed through me.”

“Jinx. For once I’m both amazed, impressed and happy you’re here?”

Jinx’s face lit up.

“You are?”

“Well, two out of three, anyway. You do know that touching the shadows is likely to kill even gods?”

A look of utter terror crept across Jinx’s face.

“No, I didn’t. Oh, no. Do you think the reverse it true? Because they seemed quite... different after they touched me. They sort of moved very strangely.”

“As far as I could figure out a while back they drain your life force out of you. Or whatever.”

Keal chuckled.

“Perhaps they got something slightly unexpected from you. Like your bad luck?”

The laughter that escaped from Jinx’s mouth made Keal wish he had not said anything. The sound was a mix of giggling, sniffing and outright madness. Jinx looked hopefully at Keal.

“Perhaps they took all of it? So I could finally make up for all the bad things I’ve caused?”

“Don’t know. But let’s just say that I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t test that theory on me.”

Seeing the crushed look on Jinx face made Keal sigh. No matter how many bad things happened with Jinx around he sometimes found himself with an irrational feeling of pity for the god. When it came down to it it was not exactly like Jinx specifically tried to do bad things to him. Jinx was just as cursed, maybe more, than the people it took an interest in.

“Forget that. Did you see where the shadows and their handler went?”

“They’re still around, I guess. They just seemed to start wandering aimlessly around after they touched me. Oh! There’s some of them over there.”

Jinx almost sounded happy to be able to point out where they were and even clapped its hands. Keal cursed as he looked up to see that the shadow handler had heard the sound and was motioning in their direction.

“Oh, no,” Jinx said, “I’m sorry, Keal. Look out, they’re coming this way.”

Keal gave Jinx a dangerous glare and the god started to withdraw into the trees. Before it left completely it whispered a short good bye to Keal.

There were no spots among the trees that looked easily defensible so Keal crept backwards away from both the town and the harbour hoping to draw the shadows and their handler after him. His opponents still seemed disoriented after their encounter with Jinx, but they were all still coming in his general direction.

For a while he played around with them moving first one way making enough noise to be heard and then sneaking stealthily in another direction to try and outflank them. He wanted to get close enough to get a good look at the handler. It might be Tep and if it was Keal just wanted to get really far away really fast. If it was not Tep then Keal might have a chance not only at surviving but also of actually defeating the handler. What would happen to the shadows then was anyone’s guess, but at least they would no longer have their link to the mortal realms so it should be impossible for them to track them. The last time he had been up against the shadows they had been directly under Tep’s control and it had been in the beyond so they had been very difficult to avoid and defeat. But he had succeeded and with his blades back he felt confident he could at least delay them for long enough that Jayton and Nin could get away.

After a few attempts he finally succeeded in getting a good look at the handler’s face. Not Tep. A wicked grin crept onto Keal’s face. He recognised that face. He had seen it not six months ago in a gutter in another town. Keal could not remember the name of neither the place nor the man, but he knew that the man had been easily killed. The man had tried to mug Keal and had quickly found himself lying with a slit throat in the mud and filth of a small side street.

Keal paused for a second contemplating what to do next. He knew the man had been dead when he had been finished with him back in the alley. So if he was here now it probably meant he had become one of Tep’s henchmen. Not as powerful as the shadow minions, but apparently with enough of a bond to the mortal realms that he was able to sense things and respond to them while still retaining command of the shadows.

This might cause problems, but it might also be something Keal could use. If the man was really here in the mortal realms chances were that he would be vulnerable to normal weapons. And especially vulnerable to the special blades he was now carrying again.

Looking around behind him he made sure that Jinx was really gone and then decided on a spot where he would lure the shadows.

He picked up two small stones and threw them simultaneously in almost the same direction making it sound like there was more than one thing moving around in that direction. As he had hoped the handler was not entirely fooled by the maneuver and spread out the shadows to cover a larger area than just where the noise had come from. This left a few shadows fairly isolated and Keal stalked towards them through the trees.

One by one he took down three of the shadows with a series of swift moves darting close, striking and then jumping back. As Jinx had found out it was vital to stay well clear of

the shadows' touch. As his blades slid through the shadow forms they disintegrated into nothingness, dissipating as mist before the sun.

Keal ducked down behind a tree and sneaked a peak around its trunk to see where the handler was going now. He was still some way off and had gathered the shadow minions closer around him.

"So you're scared of me," Keal muttered. "Good. That shows you're not a complete fool."

The handler seemed uncertain of where to search for him so Keal decided to play a little game on him. As he got a better view he could see that there were only a handful shadow minions left to deal with so he figured he only needed to take out a few more before he could go directly after the handler.

So far several minutes had passed, plus however long he had been unconscious, giving Jayton and Nin a greater and greater head start with every minute that passed.

With great care he circled back around the shadows and started making a small trap near the town. He pulled up a large branch and balanced it against a low hanging branch he had pulled back a little. Then he moved as far back as he could without the upright branch toppling over and let go while he quickly jumped in the other direction making sure he made a lot of noise when he landed. And then he kept perfectly still, crouched on the ground and ready for action.

This time, however, the handler did not fall for it but simply moved himself and the shadow minions slowly through the forest. There were too many of them together for Keal to take out so he needed another plan. He pulled out his guns and checked the chambers. All empty and no spare rounds left in his belt. Curses ran silently over his lips. He had been foolish to waste his last bullets on the old man who took his boots.

He was just about to move to a new position when he saw an opening. The handler himself had ducked down to examine the branch and had left the center of the group. Keal darted in and took out two of the shadows before slipping back between the trees.

The handler got back on his feet and snarled as he gathered the shadows around him and ran straight for Keal. There was no grace to the chase. Both Keal and the handler just ran as fast as they could through the forest. At first Keal tried to guide them away from the town and the harbour but he soon found out that it was all he could do to not be caught up by the handler and the shadow minions.

Every now and then he looked back. Both to check that the shadows were not too close to him and to check that they had not given up the chase and turned back to look for the others. They were still there and getting closer so Keal pressed himself harder and harder. And for the second time that day stumbled. At least, he just managed to think before he hit the ground, he was not unconscious this time.

The handler and his shadows quickly caught up with him and with Keal on the floor it was not long before his final breath had left his body.

"Oh, no," said Jinx, "not again."

The God of Bad Luck looked down on Keal and sighed. It had just wanted to say something to Keal, but had now forgotten what it was. It had, apparently, come back at a really bad time. And found out that the shadows had not drained all its bad luck.

Jinx felt its face go warm with rage. It was just not fair that things should always be like that.

“Enough,” it screamed.

The handler had retreated a couple of steps when he saw Jinx and were now looming near some trees with his shadows closely gathered around him. He looked from the corpse to Jinx and back again. In his mind the images of his own dead replayed themselves as they had so often for what seemed like an eternity. The last vision before his eyes had gone dead had been Keal’s impassionate face as he wiped the blood off his blade. A face that had followed the handler into the beyond and haunted him forever and ever. Until one day he had been given the possibility to avenge himself.

In his life he had never been a god fearing man. They simply meant nothing to him. This carried over in the beyond and therefore he had not recognised Tep when the mummified god had approached him. All he had been able to think about was the images of his own death so when the vague figure had told him what he needed to do to get his revenge. The figure had told him that it would not be enough to merely kill the physical body of the man, Keal, it would also be necessary to separate all the major limbs and organs as far as possible and make sure they were kept apart. Only that way could Keal be kept from returning and would suffer endlessly, his physical body alive but scattered all over the world.

Most of it had made little sense to the handler. All except the killing and dismembering part.

He had a wicked looking blade in his hand and was ready to finish the task. But then this strange woman had appeared just after his shadows had torn Keal’s soul from his body. The handler did not recognise Jinx in its new form but could feel some strange power emanating from it. A power that made every fibre in his dead body spring to life with a survival instinct that screamed at him to get away. But then the body would not be torn apart.

Jinx shifted its gaze from Keal’s body to the handler and the shadows. Its lips pulled back in a sneer and its eyes narrowed as it stood up, morphing into a powerful, muscular chimera made up of every beast imaginable.

A low growl escaped its lips and it threw itself at the handler and the shadows. The handler would have liked to turn and run but something told him that running was not an option this time.

With a swift movement the handler slid completely back behind the shadows and crouched down to wait for a chance to move around to the chimera’s side and cut at it with the blade.

The first shadow the chimera hit disappeared in the blink of an eye closely followed by the second. Then the chimera lost its momentum as it reached a half fallen tree and had to change directions.

This was the opening the handler had waited for and as the last of his shadow minions were clawed, bitten and ripped apart by the beast he hacked at the chimera’s underside.

His first blow opened a long gash down the chimera’s side. The second blow nearly took off a leg.

The chimera howled with rage and pain and turned to face him. It was too slow and it could not avoid the hard thrust that buried the handler’s blade in its shoulder. Its large body shivered and jerked a few times sending the chimera crashing into a tree. The trunk shook violently as the chimera slid down it to lay on the ground.

For a few moments the handler stayed crouched down awaiting the chimera’s final death breath. The blade had been yanked from his hands and was still lodged firmly in the beast’s body. As

its movements slowed down the beast's began to shift. It gradually lost limbs and wings and ended up as the young woman from before. The blade was still buried deeply in the woman's chest and she was bleeding heavily from the other wounds.

Somewhere deep in his mind he began to remember something he had been told back in the beyond. Something about someone following Keal around. Someone he should stay well clear of or suffer great curses. He spat at the figure.

"Who's cursed now?" he said, "What name do you want on your tomb? Jinx, isn't it?"

One of his hands moved carefully down to his belt to pull out another knife. It would be simple. A quick slash across the throat and a stab in the heart and that would be it. Just as he reached the knife's handle he felt sharp, cold steel pressing against his throat. He hissed but kept still.

"Do not move," Keal said, "let go of the knife and put your hands forward on the ground."

The handler did as he was told. He knew his body could just as easily be destroyed as it had the last time Keal had killed him. When he was face down on the ground he hissed at Keal.

"You're dead," the handler said.

"99 times and counting, yes, but then again, not quite. You didn't get to finish me off just like I will not let you finish Jinx."

"Why do you care? That bitch is nothing but bad luck to you and anyone else."

Keal very slowly and painfully pulled his knife across the handler's throat looking away as the gaping wound showed only rotted flesh and veins filled with dark, dried blood. A rasping sound escaped from the wound as the last air left the handler's lungs. The entire world was spinning around and it was all he could do to not lose consciousness again.

Reversing his grasp on the blade Keal hammered it deep into the corpse's skull and gave it a strong twist. He was unsure what had kept the body going but he was not about to take any chances so he slid his other blade into the handler's chest where his heart ought to be.

That being done he sat back his head spinning from the trip to the gates and back. He had gotten up far too fast for his liking this time and was now beginning to pay for it. Vomit streamed out of his mouth as he fell to his side unable to control his body for several long minutes.

Finally he regained both his vision and control of his body.

Slowly and painfully he raised himself to his hands and knees, then sat back and held his throbbing head for a while. He spat to get rid of the foul taste in his mouth, a mix of bitter vomit and rot and ashes. Then he crawled over and retrieved his knives before getting all the way to his feet, shaking heavily.

Even in his weakened condition he found enough energy for a kick to the handler's side. There was no real point to it, not even to check if he by some chance was still alive. To Keal it just seemed like the right thing to do there and then.

He stumbled over to Jinx and felt strangely relieved to see the god still moving slightly. He fell to his knees and started examining the body. Crimson blood soon covered his hands as well as the ground all around them, but somehow Jinx stayed alive.

The god struggled to open one eye a little and looked up at Keal as he was tearing strips from its dress to use for bandages, not caring that they would not be able to stop the flow of blood.

“Keal,” Jinx said, “don’t. Why...”

Jinx’s voice trailed off for a moment.

“Why do you care? I’m nothing but bad luck to you.”

With a grunt Keal tightened a tourniquet above the deep wound in Jinx’s thigh. The god groaned and twisted its head away in pain.

“Yeah, you’re bad luck,” Keal said, “but you’re MY bad luck. And no one’s gonna take that away.”

With great effort Keal started putting bandages on the other wounds, but Jinx stopped him. The god was very weakened and its eyes were shut as it whispered to Keal.

“Just. The knife. Pull it out. Now.”

Keal took hold of the handle protruding from Jinx’s chest. Where his fingers touched it smoke went up and he snatched his hand back with a scream. He looked at his fingers and found black marks where the metal had touched them. He tore another strip out of Jinx’s clothes and wrapped it around the knife handle before quickly pulling the curved serrated blade free. The strips on the handle were starting to smolder when Keal threw the blade as far away from him as he could.

Large spasms ran through Jinx’s body but they soon became less violent until they eventually stopped leaving the god gasping for air. Gasping, but at least breathing. It opened its eyes and looked at Keal.

“Thank you.”

Right before Keal’s eyes the wounds started to close and soon Jinx was breathing more calmly. Within minutes the god was sitting up against the tree looking better and better.

“Just give me a few more minutes and I’ll be okay. We can go find the others you were traveling with.”

“We’ are going nowhere. I am going and you are going somewhere else.”

Jinx gave a sad smile. Things were returning to the way they always were. It sighed and stood up, leaning against the tree.

“Of course, my friend.”

Keal winced at the last word.

“Then I’ll just head back home for a while. A little rest would be nice.”

When no objections came from Keal Jinx left the forest and the mortal realm behind with a small popping sound. For a few moments Keal stood there watching the empty air. Then he turned to the handler’s body and quickly searched it. Nothing interesting. Hardly surprising as he would have had no need for money or even other weapons than the shadow minions. Keal looked over at the blade he had pulled out of Jinx. It was still laying on the ground a few meters away. He wondered why the handler had still held on to the weapons when he could have gotten so much stronger powers from Tep. Or perhaps Tep had specifically not wanted the handler to realise precisely what was going on.

“Bloody gods,” he cursed, “why don’t they just mind their own business?”

He got up and started running towards the harbour at a steady pace. The fighting had left him a little sore but otherwise unharmed so getting to move his body a little felt nice. As he was running he thought about what to do next. Since the handler was dead it was unlikely Jayton and Nin would be followed. Tep’s henchmen were usually chosen for their strong individuality, also known as insanity, which made them ill suited to work together in teams.

The thought of joining Jayton and Nin crossed his mind but he pushed it aside. As much as he liked them, especially Nin, he knew that life as a merchant would not be to his liking. He needed more freedom to go where he felt like and he had always felt best when he was on his own.

A little rest would do him good, though, so maybe he would stay in Pinchtown for a while. It was large enough to provide him with some well paid work or, if all else failed, he would not mind working the docks for a few weeks. A little hard work never hurt anyone.

It did not take him long to reach the edge of the trees where he stopped to take a good look before he moved out into the open. The docks seemed quiet enough. There were still a lot of workers loading and unloading boats, but nothing out of the ordinary. Keal tried to spot Jayton and Nin but they were nowhere to be seen.

He moved a little further out and then he saw the small boat leaving a pier at the other end of the harbour. On it he could just make out Jayton’s form and he nodded quietly to himself. Good, he thought, they had found what looked like fast transportation away from here. Hopefully far, far away.

Keal turned away and started walking up to the town. Perhaps Peet could help set him up. It would not be the first time.

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There was silence in Rayd’s war room. Maps of the area around Pinchtown were scattered over the large table amongst books on tactics, strategy and history. The air was tense as the three gods assembled kept their distance to each other. In the end it was Literfe who could not stay quiet any longer.

“So why are we here, O Light of my Night?”

Unlike what had happened earlier Rayd did not throw something at him, but instead looked at him levelly. She turned her head to Jinx who, in an old man’s body, was sitting meekly in a chair by the wall.

“You two have been getting on my nerves for a long time. That’s no secret. But you’ve also managed to give me a few ideas and help shape certain... events to my liking. And you both seem to have a slightly better grasp of how to deal with the nature of humans. Apart from rage, obviously.”

She paced over to the mirror on the wall and tapped it lightly. An image wavered into view showing Keal sitting in a chair in Peet’s house. The old man had just put down two mugs of steaming tea and sat down. Though the mirror did not allow them to hear what was being said it was clear that Peet was suggesting something that Keal was keenly interested in. The two men’s arms moved animatedly and they were looking through maps and scrolls as the image faded from the mirror again.

Rayd turned to the others and looked hard at them.

“I take it you recognised both men in the view. Keal, of course, we all know. And he’s not the problem. It’s the other man, Peet as he calls himself these days.”

“Wait,” said Literfe with a frown on his face, “yes, I remember him. But he’s one of the ancients. From before the war, from the old age?”

“What’s he doing?” asked Jinx.

“I don’t know,” said Rayd, “that vision we just saw in the mirror is the best I’ve been able to find out. The ancients have a way of blocking out scrying devices. From the maps on the table, however, it does look like he wants Keal to go into the wilderness. No doubt in search of something quite unpleasant. Remember, just because the ancients haven’t caused problems for us lately they must still be kept down.

“My guess is that he wants Keal’s help due to his habit of not staying dead for long. I’ve found that to be very useful from time to time”

Remembering the recent fight outside Pinchtown Jinx nodded agreement. It probably would not have survived if not Keal had returned from the beyond. It distractedly scratched a sore spot in its chest and spoke in an unusually quiet voice.

“Poor Keal. Does he even know who this Peet is?”

“As far as Keal’s concerned,” said Rayd, “Peet is just an old merchant with a lot of connections. In other words, he’s someone Keal will not stay clear of unless something very special happened. Unknown to most it was actually Peet who put Jayton in contact with Keal and thus caused the great escape to happen. Peet has some very long term plans, I’m afraid. Just like I’m worried about the fact that the shadow minions seemed to pass straight past his house without bothering him in the least.

Keal probably just thought the handler was going directly for Nin, but I have a nagging suspicion that Peet either managed to completely escape the handler’s attention. Or he worked with him.”

“But why?” asked Jinx and Literfe at the same time.

“Why indeed?” said Rayd.

She started pacing back and forth, plans, possibilities, options springing to her mind. She did not like any of them anymore than she liked the ideas she got for what Peet might be up to.

“We can’t interfere directly with him. That might bring him, and others, out of hiding and we’re not ready for another confrontation with the ancients yet. But we must do something to foil whatever his plan is.”

“What do you suggest?”

“If you can’t remove the arm wielding the blade,” said Jinx, “remove the blade.”

Rayd offered a small smile at the quote from one of her ancient texts.

“Precisely. We need to get rid of Keal. Make sure he’s as far from Peet as possible.”

“But if Peet really is an ancient,” said Literfe, “he’ll be able to get to Keal no matter where we hide him. Unless...”

“Unless he’s dead,” continued Rayd, “and I’m very certain Tep is not ready to allow Keal back yet so that is also out of the question. There is however another solution. A compromise of a kind.

“Jinx, I need you to stay really close to Keal for a while. Where he goes, you go. Where he wins in dice, you make sure that he doesn’t. Got it?”

Jinx looked very uncomfortable.

“But Rayd. Isn’t he in enough trouble when I do my best to stay clear of him? If I follow him around things are sure to go really bad for him?”

“I’m counting on it. Literfe, I’ve got another task for you that I’m sure you’ll enjoy just as much as Jinx will be enjoying its.”

“Anything for you, my love.”

It came out before he could stop himself and his smile faded when he saw the calculating look in Rayd’s eyes.

“Yes,” she said, “I knew you’d say that. Was counting on it. Now here’s what you do...”

The two other gods looked at each other as Rayd explained precisely what they should both do to get Keal out of the ancient’s grasp. Both felt very uncomfortable about being so used by Rayd, but neither felt they had any choice. Most importantly, neither of them wanted Keal to be an ancient’s pawn, but Jinx was also always pulled toward Keal and it was so tempting to just let go and try to be with him always. Maybe, Jinx had often thought, that was the key to undo the misfortune that rained down on Keal when Jinx was around.

Literfe had far other reasons for doing as Rayd wanted. He simply had no choice, being completely and utterly in love with the strong goddess. A few times he had tried to not let her do things that went against his beliefs, but it had failed every single time. Sometimes he would sit by himself and curse himself for thinking up the old love conquers all phrase in the first place. He had meant it as something good, something positive. Instead he had been caught by the flip side of the expression and was now helpless to go against what his beloved wanted of him. Even if she did not love him he must still do as she bid. For to refuse would be to refuse his own love for her.

With a content smile Rayd watched the two gods leave her room. She looked at the maps and flipped through a few books before nodding to herself.

“Oh, Keal. You’re going to hate me for this. If for no other reason then because you’ll owe me big time. And we both know it’s just a matter of time before you’ll be mine again.”

Rayd left the table and turned to the mirror once more. She conjured up another image of a small boat on the ocean in the middle of the night. The boat was rocking gently on the calm sea and a few deck hands were quietly gathering up ropes or clearing away various things. Unlike the crew on the large steam freighters these men were dressed in good, warm clothes suited both for working on the open sea without the benefit of the sweltering heat from a steam engine and for being fairly decently clad in the towns. One of the two men picked up a small basket with the evening’s catch. The scales of several large fish glinted in the moon light as he moved across the deck.

When he came to the ladder bellow he stopped and took a step aside to allow a young girl to crawl up on the deck. She had changed out of the worn dress she had on when she had got on

the ship with her father and were now wearing more practical clothes. Loose breeches, a shirt and a warm jacket. Since she got on two days earlier the crew members had changed their opinion of her. At first they had taken her for an ordinary young girl, but it had soon become apparent that there was more to her than met the eye. Once they had left Pinchtown behind she had changed. Not quickly and not all that much. She had just gotten a more confident air about her and she could be seen to stroll around the boat as if she owned it. The crew and the captain humoured her in this. Partly because her father paid handsomely for the trip and partly because they found they liked the little girl. She seemed to make their work a little bit easier when she looked at them with a smile on her face. And when she from time to time returned to how an ordinary six year old behaved she would clap her hands enthusiastically when a particularly large or multi coloured fish was caught or when the crew raced up and down in the rigging.

On this particular night the young girl went up to the bow and looked out over the ocean. Even though it was a quiet night the last sailor on the deck stayed topside a bit longer to keep an eye on the girl. There was not much risk of an accident, but with children something could always happen. While he was standing there he got the distinct impression that the girl was waiting for someone. The man walked to the stern where the nightwatch was keeping the wheel steady. They did not have a specific course set and were just aiming in the general direction of a group of large islands a few days down the coast and some way off it. He nodded at the helmsman and exchanged a few words with him. From here he could only just see the girl who was still standing there watching in the night. When he saw another figure next to the girl he felt reassured and decided to go down below and get a little sleep. He was sure the woman would look after the girl.

“Good evening, Ma’am,” said Nin, “I was afraid you wouldn’t come.”

“Oh, don’t ever worry about that,” said Rayd, “old auntie Rayd may show up late once in a while but she’ll always get there. It’s the way of things.”

Nin looked up at the black clad woman and wondered which particular things Rayd was thinking of. She was still just a young girl and did not always understand what her aunt was talking about. Actually she almost never understood. But Rayd had always been nice to her and talked about how she was so very priceless to her. That always made Nin feel good, special.

“Will you stay long this time? Dad is here, too.”

“No, no, dear Nin. Tonight is just a short visit to see how you are doing. You make me very proud, you do know that, don’t you?”

A warm smile spread on Nin’s face and infected Rayd who suddenly found her leaning on the rail with one hand affectionately on Nin’s shoulder. She suddenly realised that she really was proud of Nin and was no longer just saying it to inspire the young girl. Her gauntleted hand gently squeezed Nin’s shoulder before she knelt down to look her straight in the eye.

“Don’t ever forget this, Nin. You will grow up to become a great leader. The one who will gather the towns in a large nation and be the cause of wealth and prosperity.”

And eventually the largest war the world has ever seen, she added in her thoughts. Nin just smiled at her and tried to give her a hug. This was always made a bit difficult by Rayd’s battle armour and so it just ended up being Nin’s hand holding Rayd’s neck. They smiled a secretive smile at each other.

“I know,” said Nin.

For the briefest moment Rayd had the uneasy feeling that Nin really did know all of her plans. The moment passed briefly, though, and Nin once more felt like a child to her.

“I will see you again soon, Nin. Now go get some sleep. Something interesting will happen tomorrow.”

With those words Rayd disappeared and Nin obediently went back to the ladder and crawled down below to find her bed in her and Jayton’s cabin. As she drifted off to sleep her mind filled with wondrous thoughts of how she would take care of everyone in the world and put an end to all suffering and every problem.

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Darkness was settling around Peet’s house when Keal packed his belongings and prepared to head north in search of the things Peet needed him to find. Most of the things Peet required would not be difficult to obtain, they just required more travelling than the old man was prepared to do himself so he had offered to pay Keal well and while Keal was still a little suspicious of Peet he did not mind the extra cash. Besides, he told himself, it was not like he would be working close to Peet while he was out on the road.

Peet had given him some fairly detailed maps of the area north of Pinchtown. They were far more detailed than any maps Keal had seen before and he toyed with the idea of having a few copies made for reselling. With communication being as difficult as it was maps always fetched a good price. As long as he held on to the originals Peet would never know. And even if he should find out Keal did not really care. Chances were that Peet expected it of him anyway and it was not in Keal’s nature to disappoint people. Killing them and stealing from them, yes. But you are hardly disappointed once you are dead.

Keal thought about this for a moments before smiling acidly to himself as he recalled his numerous visits to the gates. Okay, so sometimes people can be disappointed when they are dead.

Back in the kitchen Peet prepared a bundle of food for Keal. It was nowhere near enough for the entire trip, but it should last him long enough to either get to another town or find a caravan or some nomads he could buy new supplies from. If that did not work out there was always hunting to fall back on. The large forests were filled with large animals, birds and berries, an unavoidable consequence of the human population nearly disappearing completely when the weapons went off.

When Peet returned from the kitchen he first dumped the sack of food on the table to Keal could put it in his bag. Then he went over to the fireplace and took down a small clay jar and brought it to the table.

“As I told you,” he said, “there might be some problems getting the dark blood wood. I have tried to negotiate a deal in advance but you never know with these things so I want you to have these just in case. Use them to make sure they keep the bargain. Or use them to avoid the bargain all together. That is up to you.”

He opened the jar and spilled out almost two dozen revolver cartridges making Keal grin. With this much ammunition he would definitely be able to get Peet a very good deal on anything. The agreement between them was that any money saved counted as a bonus for Keal and the

blood wood was the most expensive item on Peet's list. It was also the smallest as Peet only needed enough for some decoration on a lamp. The idea of simply stealing it rather than even trying to bargain for it entered Keal's mind and, judging by Peet's affirmative nodding, also his face.

"Do what you need to do, Keal. Just make sure you bring it back," Peet said.

"Will do. I'm good at this. Remember that."

They shook hand a final time before Keal swung his back up on his shoulder and left the house. He breathed deeply from the warm evening air, a distraction used to take a good look at whoever was in the street before heading off. He knew Peet expected some kind of trouble on this trip even though the old man had not specifically said so. The money had quite simply been too good for this to be a normal trade run.

A couple of old people were sitting in rocking chairs a few houses down and two men were freighting a large crate on a too small cart pulled by a too stubborn mule. No kids were out playing which was not surprising considering how late it was. It also reassured Keal a little. He hated street kids. They could quite simply create so much noise without anyone noticing or complaining that it would be easy for one or two of them to keep watch and follow him around. He would detect them eventually, but it was always a hazzle to loose kids if they followed him in a town. He adjusted his bag a little and headed off towards the western part of the town rather than straight north.

It took him a couple of quick turns and several back trackings to spot the person following him. It was a skinny girl in really worn out clothes. He had noticed her at first when he passed her because she looked very worn even for the beggar role she had assumed. There were beggars in all the towns, but she had just taken it one step too far. Plus, she had a good looking face, behind the layer of mud, so she could easily have gotten work as a bar maid, servant or even easier as a pleasure girl. It had been easy for him to spot that she did not fit in. It had not, however, been easy to spot her following him. Not until he noticed that all her worn clothes actually served a very interesting purpose. They could easily be turned inside out or reshuffled so she got a completely different look. She had also changed the way the mud was smeared on her face even adding a little red colouring to throw him off. But in the end her eyes had given her away. She had not averted them as beggars normally did so he had been able to recognise them and now he was sure she was following him.

"What to do about you," he mused.

An idea presented itself and he started heading down to the docks. There was bound to be lots of dock workers and sailors in the bars down there and with the right incentive one or two of them could easily be tempted to take a special interest in the girl. It would not be pleasant, he thought grimly, but such is life. She should have stayed somewhere safe rather than following him around if she was not prepared to get in trouble.

As he passed the first few bars he slowed down a bit to see what the girl would do once they were in slightly more busy streets. He rounded a few corners to give her a little freedom to change her appearance. She seemed unaware that he had noticed her and would still from time to time dart down side streets to try and get ahead of her. Keal liked playing this game with her. It definitely beat the shadow minions that had followed him a few days ago when Jayton and Nin had been in town.

Pretending to consider going into a specific bar for a drink he waited for her to catch up with him. The entrance to the bar was right around a corner so she would either stick her head around the corner or sneak slowly trying to remain unseen. Either way she would find Keal standing with a meter of her looking straight at her. After a few moments had passed without the girl showing herself Keal smiled approvingly and looked down at the street. His shadow did not crawl out from the corner, but it was cast away from the building so she might have been able to see it without showing herself. Definitely a clever girl.

He turned his attention back to the bar when two drunk sailors exited. They were in the middle of a loud argument about who was better at romancing girls. Keal smiled a predatory smile. This was just the type of people he had been looking for down here. He slurred his voice and took an unsteady pace toward them.

“Scuse me, gents,” he said, “but I’s couldn’t help overhearing your conser... convas... conversation.”

“Oi!” one of the men said, “ger off, drunk. Or I’ll bash yer head in.”

“Sorry, gents, sorry. Pardon me. It’s just. You see, there’s this girl you see?”

He pulled out a bottle of wine, took a swig and offered it to the men with a conspiratorial wink.

“She’s turned me down, see,” he continued, “and that’s just ain’t right. S’not like she’s worth a damn and I’s thinking... maybe she’s just weird.”

The two drunk men had quaffed most of the wine while Keal raved on about how this girl was just unreachable. Keal was beginning to think that they perhaps were too daft to get the drift. Finally one of them seemed to catch on. At least the delay had caused the girl to creep around the bar where she had appeared behind a barrel a bit down the street.

“So...” one of the men laughed, “you’re saying that she dumped you and now you simply don’t believe she’s right in her head?”

Keal bashed his chest in a decidedly unmanly fashion and continued.

“Course she ain’t. Here I am, got good money, you know, and she’s just a poor girl. And she turns me down. That just ain’t right. Sure, she’s good looking and all, but still.”

Both men laughed at Keal’s bewildered look. The comment about her looks stuck in one of the men’s head, though and he laid his hand on his shoulder and whispered, very loudly.

“Ere, point her out to us and me friend and I will check if she’s right or not. Just get us another bottle of this stuff first.”

Keal was just about to stagger into the bar when he gave a surprised look and pointed at the girl.

“Oh! That’s her. You fine gents go do your thing and I’s’ll shall be waiting in the bar with the finest wine.”

The two men looked from the girl to Keal and back to the girl. Then they started toward her and called out.

“Hey, you, girl. Get over here. We’d like a word with you.”

When the girl saw the two large men heading straight for her she quickly darted back down the alley. This only caused the men to set off at a trot after her. As soon as they had

disappeared from view Keal straightened up and went into the bar where he caught the bar keeper's attention.

"In a few minutes those two sailors will come back in, probably in the company of a young lady. Could you please get them a round or two of a somewhat drinkable substance? Enough to make sure they don't remember too much tomorrow?"

He put a small pile of coins on the bar and left not bothering to notice the wicked smile on the bar keeper's face nor the way he looked up at some dusty bottles sitting at the back of the bar. The bar keeper went over and pulled down two of the bottles and dusted them off. Then he called over one of the serving maids and told her to keep a look out for the two sailors.

Meanwhile, the girl had run down the alley to get some distance between herself and the two sailors. She had been too far away from Keal to hear what they had talked about except for the last part where Keal pointed her out to the men and they had started towards her. She did not for one second believe that they just wanted to talk to her. The alley opened out into a larger street where several people were milling around in more or less drunken states. Before the men reached the corner she had slipped behind a group of people and quickly pulled her outer layer of worn clothes off. A few of the men in the group whistled at her but they soon lost interest when they saw that she had a new layer underneath. A very body covering layer. The old clothes were discarded in a heap after she used them to wipe as much of the mud from her face as she could. Snatching up a random cup she forced herself in between two men in the group. At first they looked surprised and blinked, not knowing who she was. A few cheers and cups clinked together changed that and they decided it did not matter who she was as long as her hands were not on their purses but on far more interested parts of them.

The two sailors came out into the street and cursed when they found out they had lost the girl. They tried asking if someone had seen her but got nothing useful. At some point they even asked the girl herself, but she just giggled and offered them a drink. Eventually they looked at each other, shrugged and headed off back to the bar hoping the man they'd met had kept their promise and left some drinks for them.

After they had gone the girl detached herself from the group and followed the men back. Not a lot of time had passed during the chase so she ran back through another side alley hoping to catch up to Keal. Her efforts were rewarded. As she came round a corner she saw him head off back in the direction he had originally come from. She was just about to start after him when she saw a figure move in the shadows on Keal's right and follow him a few paces behind him. Intrigued she kept her distance and followed both figures up through the town and was surprised to find that while Keal still took detours and looked back he seemed completely unaware of the other figure stalking him. At long last Keal finally seemed confident that he was not followed and headed directly north out of Pinchtown.

Once they left the boundaries of the town it became far easier to follow Keal as he lit a lantern to be able to see his way. The girl could easily see where he was going so she could take her eyes from him to keep a good lookout for pot holes and rocks that might cause her to slip or make some noise that would give her away. Some few hundred meters into the forest she noticed that the other figure following Keal was no longer in front of her so she picked up her pace to get closer to Keal. While she did so she took extra care to keep her eyes and ears open in case the stranger was one of Keal's accomplices who had been covering his back and might ambush her.

Rounding another bend in the road she nearly walked straight into the stranger who was standing at the side of the road. Keal had stopped a not long up the road. The figure motioned for her to be silent and then walked a few paces toward Keal calling out to him. The girl was just about to dodge into the forest but something held her back. A feeling that she was just about to become extremely lucky if just she dared take a chance.

“Keal,” Jinx said, “wait up.”

At the sound of Jinx’s voice Keal froze completely. He did not turn around, a sick feeling spreading in his stomach and ice running down his back. He could hear footsteps behind him and Jinx’s voice rang out again, much closer this time.

“I’m sorry, Keal. So very, very sorry. But it’s for the best.”

The girl moved quietly closer to them both and pulled out a slim throwing knife and focussed on Keal’s back. Only a few more paces and she knew she could place the knife straight in the back of his skull. Some part of her brain tried to tell her that there was something wrong, but she did not listen. It did not matter that the strange figure seemed to have vanished in thin air. Only Keal mattered.

“Keal,” Jinx pleaded, “please trust me. I don’t mean to hurt you. I’m so sorry.”

The feeling in Keal’s gut turned into utter resignation. Somehow he knew precisely what was about to happen and that he was powerless to change the outcome. He let go of his bag, which fell clattering to the ground, and let his head sag forward a bit as he simply waited for the throwing knife to hit him. The lantern broke and went out as he sagged forward with a thump.

After, when the girl went to retrieve her knife, she was unable to find the body. The bag was still there and she later rejoiced when she found the large amount of money and valuable things in it. But the body was gone. She was sure Keal had neither gotten up nor been dragged away by someone else. Despite the warmth of the night she shivered and drew her shirt closed at the base of her neck. Quickly and quietly she gathered Keal’s bag and the knife laying suspiciously by itself in the middle of the road. Then she sat completely still with her breath held until she was absolutely certain she could not hear or see anyone else nearby and then she ran into the forest not stopping until she finally fell over a fallen branch. By then she was far enough from the disappeared body that she just let herself collapse and breathe heavily until she could relax a bit. She had no idea precisely what had happened. She just hoped Keal’s bag would be enough proof to her employer and that Keal’s body really had disappeared completely and that he would not come after her.

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A cloaked figure walked slowly through the mist just outside the large gate. It gave off an eerie glow that lit up the mist before the figure itself became visible. The area in front of the gates was barren and littered with dark rocks on either side of the hard packed dirt road leading up to the gate.

“Shhhh,” Tosco said, “here he comes. Quick, hide.”

Rayd, Literfe and Jinx humoured the old dragon and moved behind the large form of the dragon. They exchanged looks and for the first time all three of them were actually smiling content smiles in anticipation of what was to come. All three of them had different reasons for smiling, but in just that moment they agreed on one thing. This was best for everyone.

Keal, the cloaked figure, walked up to the gate and looked up at Tosco. He let his hood fall back and crossed his eyes just standing there with a tired expression on his face. He briefly nodded to Dragling at the other side of the gate before talking to Tosco, his head giving a slow shake from side to side.

“Go ahead, Tosco,” he said, “let’s get it over with.”

Tosco nodded at Dragling who’s voice boomed in the gloomy mist.

“Attention!”

Both dragons snapped to attention, much to Keal’s bitter amusement. As usual he sat down on the ground and started looking through the rocks on the ground to find a particularly nasty looking one. It came as a great surprise to him that the dragons had finally seen fit to actually get the largest rocks out of the way. Only small pebbles were left. He picked up a handful and let them slide from one hand to the other.

“Ah, uhm, yes, Keal,” Tosco said, “we decided to get, ahm, a little cleaning done for the, uhm, great occation.”

A small shower of pebbles rained off Tosco’s scales. The old dragon chuckled and motioned to Dragling who moved forward and lifted itself off the air on its great wings.

“Now what, you dimwits?” Keal asked, “Where the hell is he going now?”

Tosco chuckled and cleared its throat loudly before pulling out its ledger and a large scroll. It sighed as it put the ledger away not needing it this time. Then it unrolled the scroll and began in a deep voice that quickly reverted to its lighter confused sounding voice.

“On behalf of the, ahm, uhm, never mind that bit. It gives great pleasure, oh, obviously not to you Keal. Don’t look at me like, ah, that, please. Oh, here it is.”

It cleared its throat again.

“It is hereby decreed that on his one hundreth visit to the gates to the beyond Keal is most graciously welcomed as an honourary member of the Guardians of the Gate...”

Keal’s jaw dropped and he just stood there gazing up at Tosco wondering if the dragon had finally lost its senses completely. The dragon continued.

“Due to services rendered to, ahm, certain parties, that’s also not important. Let’s see, ah, here at the bottom. This honourary position entitles Keal to a full dress uniform, blah, blah oh, this is my favourite part: and a permanent position outside the gates themselves.

“Welcome, Keal. You, ah, can take Dragling’s place for now. He’s got some, ehm, training and tail polishing to do, I think.”

“What?”

“Go on. See? Here’s your uniform. And then you just, well, sort of stand over there. Not much to it, really.”

“You mean... stay here? Not go through? Not go back? But why?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? Someone thinks you would be tired of, ah, all this going back and forth so they decided to give you a break.”

The three gods stepped out from behind Tosco. Keal rolled his eyes at the sky.

“I should have known.”

“Relax, Keal,” Rayd said, “consider this a vacation. Tep will not be able to touch you while you’re here. Just relax and don’t listen too closely to what the old fool here says.”

With no more comment than that all three gods nodded to Keal and left leaving him looking confused and bewildered. It took a few moments for him to gather himself and look at the uniform Tosco had pointed out. It was not a bad uniform. Well cut, comfortable looking. It was even in his favourite colour: black. While Tosco discreetly looked away he put it on and then went to stand on the other side of the gate. He shuffled around a bit and eventually settled for a casual position leaning his shoulder against the stone wall beside the gate. Tosco nodded approvingly.

Keal shifted a few more times just to be sure he was really comfortable. Then he looked out into the mist feeling the worries of the mortal realms and the weariness from the last couple of years slowly seep out of his body. Where he had seen it as a bleak, misty place before it now looked almost as if green meadows spread out before him, the sky turned blue and he swore he could hear birds singing in the distance.

“Yeah,” he said, “I could get used to this.”

THE END