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The game of bone-rattlers was a simple one that involved every participant being in possession of four dice. Every round, one person would be the “dealer”, and they would roll their dice. Meanwhile, every other player would place their dice in what they might guess to be the outcome. Whoever got closer to the result without going over, won. In the event of a tie, whoever guessed the most dice was the winner.

The winner would get to decide who shared a story.

With the storm raging outside, the first couple hours of playing involved the draxani desperately trying to lose, always calling out values that were way too high. In the rare event they did win, they’d quickly ask one of their fellows for a story. The stories shared this way would be barely a handful of sentences involving some tiny personal anecdote.

“I once found a small mouse at the edge of the road and ate it.”

But, bit by bit, they began to relax after the tenth or so time Liam pointed at the Goddess to share a story.

“The Jawl opened its maw wide, and a gout of acid spewed forth, melting the face of the mountain clean off!” Maridah had quickly gotten into the groove, altering the illusion of her form to adjust to the narrative. Her flea-sized aspect being the one responsible to physically move the dice as needed. “And it was then that the Hunter struck, calling down an arrow to pierce through the roof of its mouth! Killing the monster!”

Tentative cheers and small shrill noises of laughter were shared amongst the draxani.

Liam watched, and shared little stories of his own, learning more about his partners in crime bit by bit. After a while, he began to piece things together.

Most of the draxani were three or four generations separated from the Trovan kingdom, their families having gone through similar stories as Grauch’s. People who’d not been in agreement with the establishment, finding themselves persecuted, and the Three Deserts becoming a more welcoming venture than staying behind.

They were hardy folk, without land, without guilds, without a lineage. They’d grown up in the streets, odd jobs and odd lives, surviving as best they could. Thievery had been the

bread that filled their bellies when work was scarce, bruises were a nightly companion. And eventually, what little fortune and grace had fallen upon them ran out.

Of the twelve, eight knew one another by virtue of having shared the same cells. The other four had just happened to be the products of happenstance. Each and every one saved by a tiny voice that showed them visions and taught them of the “true” ways of thievery.

The group was no crack-team of elites, but they were sharp, and they knew the lay of the land.

Liam wasn't entirely certain of how he might make use of them to try and get close to Khalid, but for now getting to Al-Sarilica was their priority. Figuring out what the noble mage was up to came after.

The city of Al-Sarilica was approached under the unintentional cover of a sandstorm.

The group had set out as soon as the previous storm had relented, and had made it roughly half-way to their destination before a new one hit. They were left with the choice between waiting until their water ran out, or to hit it, and in the end Maridah's guiding illusions had been what let them be more reckless than they normally would have.

They finally reached the city at the first signs of dusk. The guards at the gate didn't even bother to ask questions, they just ushered the group through and into the relative safety of the empty streets of the city proper.

“Seek a family that might offer hospitality for a fortnight. If you must bunk together, no more than two in any household.” Liam instructed, handing over a handful of gold coins for each draxani. “Call the Goddess' true name if you need help, or if you find anything.”

“The Whisperer answers all prayers.” The reptilian helpers chanted in unison, nodding as they took to the empty wind-swept streets.

Liam watched them go for a very long moment. “That's quite the slogan you've got there going.”

“True belief is born of the soul. The soul only answers to the heart. The heart is a part of the mind. The mind needs ideas to latch onto.” She replied. “If you seek to find me a

Champion, then this much should be clear to you. A perfect Champion would not merely embody my power, but my ideals. They would be the means through which those concepts would take root amongst my followers.” The grandiose illusory speech came to an end with a huff, Maridah switched to plain English. “Now tell me what you know of him.”

Liam put his thoughts in order as he walked the empty streets. Nighttime had already come, and there was no reason for anyone to be walking the streets. Not when the storm was still blowing over them. There were hints of their presences, small signs of light or lingering smells of food, but Liam was mostly trying to take in the city itself.

Al-Sarilica was not unlike Doeta in purpose. It was a fortress city, created for the protection of the Caliphate, placed at the very border of its reach into the Three Deserts. But unlike Doeta, Al-Sarilica had trade, it was a port of safety for any merchant wishing to head further south, as well as a safe haven for anyone coming from the south. It wasn't as heavily circulated as other places, but it had enough commerce that one of their temples was to the Merchant.

“Khalid al-Ashtar.” Liam called the name as he tucked his hands into his pockets. “To understand him, you'd need to understand his family. The al-Ashtar household are pureblooded najasil. They're serpent-like mortals that evolved from the nagul, a ground-magic monster; the process robbed them of their innate magic, but they keep a strong connection to the earth.”

“I have not heard of that race before.” Maridah tried to keep her voice serious, but there was a definite edge of curiosity in it.

“Not surprising. They popped in near the end of the previous Age, Basilisk God had kind of toyed around with their evolution for a while and forgot about them when the War of Fire came up. By the time he remembered they existed, they'd gone all the way into becoming a down and proper mortal race.” His fingers lingered on the sandstone bricks, feeling the erosion of a city that was trapped in a sandstorm more often than not. “They can't mingle bloodlines with other mortal races, though, so they remain relatively rare. That's where Khalid comes in. A spirit sired him.”

“I believe I can see the pattern.” Maridah muttered. “A budding spirit fell in love with a mortal, and the Weaver used this as a way to grab control of their fate. Destroying the spirit would follow soon after.”

“Right on the first try, though other things made that all the more complicated.” Liam nodded along. “Khalid's mother was newly married at the time, and she successfully played the pregnancy off as being her husband's. This mostly worked for a time, with

Khalid being raised as the future heir of the household, a decision that looked mighty fine when he started to show some insane talent with magic.” He chuckled.

“Unfortunately, things didn’t go as planned. In his early teens, the Weaver made her move, and the truth came out soon after the spirit died. Khalid’s mother was banished, and Khalid himself would’ve likely died if he hadn’t become the most powerful living mage in the family by age twenty.”

“What’s his current position?”

“To call it complicated would be an understatement.” Liam answered. “Way back when he was a boy and things came out, things got bloody. By the time the dust settled, one of the branch families had taken over the household name, and Khalid had been given a choice. He could either renounce any claims to becoming patriarch, or he could be banished. He chose the former.”

“That doesn’t seem particularly complicated.”

“At the time it didn’t seem like it might be... but it’s been roughly five hundred years since then.” He laughed. “And the average najasil lifespan is a hundred and fifty.”

“And he’s remained the most powerful mage in the household throughout this whole time.”

“Indeed, only growing stronger since. Which the patriarchs and matriarchs have not appreciated. He’s even survived a few assassination attempts.”

Maridah scoffed. “At that age, who hasn’t?”

“You’re not wrong, I guess.” Liam sighed, coming to a stop as he spotted a metal gate.

“So what’s the complication?”

“Hm?”

“Your list, when you’d described Khalid, you’d placed him as the hardest one to recruit,” Maridah said. “He wouldn’t have been on the list if the task were impossible, so I assume that means what keeps him here is neither love nor loyalty.” The Goddess’ voice drifted off, mixing with the wind. “Similarly, you are uncertain of how to approach this, meaning that what binds him to this place is also not something as simple as a magical contract or some curse.”

The gates that stood before him were nearly three meters in height, with metal bars thicker than Liam’s thighs. The hinges were similarly brutal in nature, comparable to his

torso and four on either gate. It all felt monumentally heavy and impregnable, just as much as the walls they were mounted on. It was a castle inside a fortified city.

“Right on both accounts.” Liam agreed. “We won’t be approaching this like some sort of transaction. We can’t offer him a life of luxury, he already has one. Can’t offer to destroy his family, or for him to take over it, he’s had ample chances for both. Can’t offer money, he has no need for more. Can’t even offer magical secrets none has seen before, his magic’s been steadily improving and won’t be hitting a slump anytime soon.”

“And yet he’s on the list.”

“And yet he’s on the list.” He agreed, lips curling into a grin. “What keeps him here is his pride. That’s going to be the core of our approach.” Leaning closer, he poked the metal gate. A tiny touch that drew sparks as the enchantments within it reacted, producing sparks that jolted him, forcing Liam to pull back his hand. It was a warning that to try and force his way through would be a painful endeavor. “Now that we’re here, the next hurdle will be finding a way past these.”