Chapter 32

When Lyndis was awake, she found herself underground, upon a bedroll in a rocky alcove. While sparsely decorated, there were series of tomes, vials and assorted packs resting on several shelves. The most important bit was a fire to keep her warm, it’s comforting flames dancing away to an unseen tune. She noted a pile of her things resting close by, stacked ever neatly. Right, her friends had rescued her from certain doom. For the longest time in the previous eve, she’d expected it to be part of a dream, the last flickers of sanity in her life keeping her from madness. Yet as she poked and prodded herself, reality was given weight, she in fact had escaped.

Sighing in relief she groaned and stretched, finding no remnants of pain or sore limbs. Healing magic, she imaged had spirited that all away, leaving her good as new. Thoughts tried to linger on the dream she’d been having before she awoke, something sweet and soothing. As she sat up the viridian scale thumped against her chest, bringing focus. Right of course, how could she be so foolish? She caressed the diminutive thing with a smile, Cordenth had been there.

Wrapped in his embrace of green and onyx, she had told the dragon what had happened. Sunflower like eyes had filled with concern, worry, then frustration on her insistence to refusing to warn him earlier. She’d faced the storm with a touch to his snout, instilling in him the despair that she’d experienced, that no matter what had happened to her, she hadn’t wished such a fate on him. This blunted his fire, had him pull her close.

She’d never known friends like this. Always in her line of work, there had been acquaintances, allies, those in which you could trust to get the job done. You shared coin, watched each other’s back, but often this was a fleeting thing. To risk one’s death to save another often came secondary, for one’s own skin was highly valued, yet that foolish dragon and his ever more foolish paladin had tossed everything to the winds to rescue her.

“Fucking idiots.” She said with a smile, tossing on her onyx vest and trousers. Part of her wanted to add half a dozen more insults to this pair, but found the words dying in her throat. It would appear as though they were growing on her. As she shoved on her leather boots, the words came with an affectionate hiss, “Surely like mold.”

As she stood tall, stretching herself, a familiar voice squawked after a series of clicking talons upon the stone.

“She’s up, she’s up!” Krotos exclaimed, his feathers all fluffing up in surprise, ears standing tall. He bounded to her with a bounce in his paws, eyes fraught with delight, crown feathers each rose as a song of chirps left his yellow beak.

“Oh come off it you songbird!” Lyndis had to fight the laugh as she resisted the gryphon battering his head against her in an affectionate nuzzle, fingers glided through feathers as he continued his joyous symphony. “I hardly knew you!”

“I can be joyful of your safety!” Krotos pulled back, beak half open in a smile, “Besides, it’s customary for a gryphon greeting to bump heads and nuzzle.” He curled around her with a few steps, tail swatting her legs, “The others are going to be so happy you’re up!”

She rolled her eyes, guessing she couldn’t be *that* upset with his display. Gryphons, the rested a hand on his head, giving the catbird a scratch on the chin, “Who were you supposed to be, my nanny?”

“Someone had to watch over you through the night.” He warbled, moving into the touch, “Feku had first watch, I took the other.”

“How long was I out?” She searched out to the caverns behind the catbird, seeing flickers of light that seemed to travel on forever. “And *where* are we? Looks like we’re in the bloody Foggy Mountain mines.”

“Oh, we didn’t go *that* fire.” He laughed, “You were just out for the evening. Missed a *mighty* fun celebration.” His chest swelled with a prideful chirp, “Of which I bested Arcturus, Merlia and even Shandalar at Talon Twist.” His ears splayed as he remembered she hadn’t been around, swiftly explaining the sunelf and how they’d procured her services to rescue her. “Not to mention Natassa, if she hadn’t gotten word to us, it would have been quite some time locating you!”

A moment passed, the bard had done that? Her arms crossed, that didn’t sound like her. She’d *never* go into a bad situation. “Already with the lies?”

“Cross my feathers and hope to see them plucked!” Ears stitched themselves to his neck, “Not that I’d *like* them plucked, but it’s truth! If I had to be one to guess, she was rather fond of you, worrying over you like a mother hen! Had to shoo her away, like every thirty minutes.”

That certainly was new, she bit her tongue as the gryphon began to guide her from her alcove into the caverns proper. He slid a mana lantern tied to rope around his neck, padding his way across the stone. She asked him to take her to see Arcturus and Veledar, after all, she might as well thank the two idiots.

“And what of the kobold with me?” Her heart darkened, replaying the moments that had led to her rescue, where Azzik had lost his life. “And the corpse.”

Krotos winced, “We found a box for the dead one, think they buried him this morning, a sack of coins by his side. As for the other one, Feku was it? She’s happy as a gryphon on Fireday, singing away in Shandalar’s makeshift kitchen, green scales and everything, strangest reaction I’ve seen to the death of a loved one. Could this be a kobold custom I’m not aware of?”

“I suppose.” Her brow furrowed, admitting she didn’t know much of kobolds and their ways, it *always* could have been the answer. “But I bet it wouldn’t hurt talking to her.”

“I couldn’t imagine losing someone like that.” Krotos sighed, “Had a grandfather, Demetrios, after Leandros died, he was never himself. It was like part of himself died with him, and without it, he was a ghost, merely a shell, drifting along not fully there, waiting to be reunited with his husband in death.” He gave a concerned chirp, “I could see if she’d gone a bit mad.”

In her time to the surface, the gryphon had informed her of everything that had been going on. How they were now getting ready to plan for the assault on the castle, steal both the scroll and the book before Lumara could recover, evidently her rescue had started a fire in Lumara, the ships would be back any day. “Here I thought the entire thing would have been canceled.” She remarked as she stepped into the false sun.

“The dragon was very persuasive.” Krotos fluffed his wings in the morning air’s chill, “Shandalar herself is pulling strings, lit a fire under Lumara’s balls we did.”

“Lets just hope his stubbornness doesn’t have the whole thing going tits up.”

“And you’re not concerned?”

“Came this far didn’t I?” She laughed, “Have to say, it adds a bit of spice to the entire affair does it not?” She pumped her arms, “Make victory ever sweeter.”

“You’re a strange creature.” Krotos rose an eye.

“Aren’t we all.”

With a stretch and shake of his feathers, Krotos left her for the caverns, evidently now that she was up, he was free to go enjoy breakfast with the others. She found Arcturus in the grass, sword out, performing his morning ritual, chanting his oaths under his breath with each swing. Veledar was nowhere to be seen.

“Not hungry? Or are you taking a page from Asterion when it comes to eating?” She asked, padding her way over.

He gave a final strike before stepping back and sheathing the blade. Brushing a hand over his onyx gambeson, his face brightening as he eyed her. “Lyndis, good to see you up! Hope you slept well!”

“Not any different than most nights, just a green dragon to keep me company.” She replied, “Yourself?”

As he plucked up his pack, padding his way over he merely laughed, “Just a dragon mumbling my name in his sleep.”

“He mumbles in his sleep?” She could picture the crimson beast eyes closed, kicking a leg as he dreamed away about his knightly companion, “Oh that’s fucking adorable.”

“Adorable?” Smirked the paladin, “Don’t let him hear you saying that.”

“What’s he going to do, set me ablaze?”

“He *does* have an image to maintain.”

“Sure, after all the trouble of coming to get me?” She dismissed the idea with a wave, “Hardly. Speaking of the crimson lug, where is he?”

From the caverns, the scaled beast emerged, his crimson scales seeming to shimmer in the morning light. He stretched his body, curled his tail, fluffing his wings before holding his head high, trotting over with a pleased expression on his snout.

“Arcturus!” He circled around the knight with a soft warble, lowering his snout, nuzzling, then placing a kiss upon his lips. “I had the most wonderful dream…Well, mine are always wonderful…but this one was…exceptionally wonderful. You and I were both in it-”

He blushed, caressing the dragon’s cheek fondly, “Perhaps it can wait, after breakfast, when we’re alone?”

“Ah yes, no sense in the others getting an intimate gleam into my inner workings, good thinking Umraadi.” He replied with a growl, swishing his tail, “Wait until you hear what it was…and what *you* were doing.”

“I can hardly wait.” The reply was accompanied with a nervous laugh before he kissed the dragon on the cheek, “There we’re even.”

   “Hardly in the slightest." Veledar rumbled in the back of his throat. “My kisses are at least worth ten or more so of yours back." He curled his tail around him with a grin. “Possibly even more...You may never be out of my debt."  
  
  “How is that hardly fair?"  
  
 “Never said that it was, merely fact." Veledar clicked his tongue, tossing his head, “What a terrible predicament you find yourself in.”

“Indeed.” The knight’s reply came with hooded eyes, before their noses crossed and they kissed yet again.

Lyndis was left blinking, dumbstruck. She knew the dragon was giving the knight intimate eyes before she was captured, but it had already evolved into something more? She pinched herself to make sure that she wasn’t dreaming. She wasn’t. “When did this bloody happen?” She exclaimed.

Veledar pulled away, his frills fluttering, “Just right this moment. Are you blind?” He gasped, “Arcturus, Lyndis has gone blind, quick, we must get the cleric!”

“I’m not bloody blind!”

The dragon sighed with a playful smirk, “That’s a relief.”

“I meant this.” She gestured between the two of them, “When did you become an item?”

“I’m a dragon Lyndis, not an item, are you sure you don’t have to sit down?”

Her arms crossed as the dragon snickered, thinking himself so clever. It was Arcturus who leaned upon his scales, eyes sweet as candy, regaling her how they had confessed their affection for another. There was kissing, hugging, and something that had Arcturus politely end it there with red cheeks as Veledar rumbled with pride. Lyndis could only happily congratulate them.

“Course I owe Merlia some coin, blasted thing.” She shook her head as they began their walk towards the caverns.

Veledar cleared his throat, “And while I’m pleased, and acknowledge how great and *grand* my love life is, I didn’t rescue you so you could fawn over my scales or steal spicy glances. Granted, I’ll enjoy them so, continue, but don’t let them detract from you duties.”

She rolled her eyes, “First morning back and you already wish me to ogle you.”

“And no more avoiding your responsibilities now.” He clicked his tongue, “Nor lazing about until my book is safely back in my clutches.”

“Avoiding my responsibilities?”

“You *did* run away from home, granted this entire endeavor was rather…clever”

Rolling her eyes she gave a mocking bow, “Then accept my humble apologies your brightness, whatever was I thinking, getting kidnapped? Won’t happen again.”

“See to it that it doesn’t.” He dusted his paw at his chest, “I won’t be there to lend a wing *all* the time.” Before Arcturus could counter him, he cut the man off with an extended wing, “Neither will Arcturus.”

“Hey!” The man protested.

“See? Arcturus already finds himself unable to reach you.”

“Because of you’re wing!” Arcturus laughed, trying to stroll around the red-orange membrane, only to find the dragon following him, keeping them apart.

“You’ve already made your point Umraadi, she doesn’t need a continual demonstration.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at his pleased with himself expression upon his snout, peering past his wing to the frustrated paladin. When the dragon turned back, they shared a knowing smirk. It was then the image of the prideful, arrogant dragon dropped for but a moment. His muscles relaxed, wings pinned, the scaled neck lowered until she could grace him with her hands.

Saphire pools met hers, his voice lowering, “I am glad that you are back in our safe paws…Arcturus was terrible worried about you.”

“I’m sure that *he* was. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone *you* were worried as well.”

“Me worried?” He scoffed in amusement, “Never.”

“He was.” Arcturus added, only to get a wing lightly bopped on his head.

“Umraadi, you’re ruining my draconic image! What will she think if she images me all frightful?”

“A true friend.” She scratched his chin, putting an end to his moaning, “Besides, who is going to sneak your sorry asses into the castle?”

“There seemed to be a new gryphon righting for your job.” He teased, “Natassa I was told.”

“That overgrown turkey couldn’t hold a candle to me.” She poked his nose, “I’m not worry.”

“Don’t be so confident Lyndis, she also brings another quality to the table that you do not, she can sing.”

“I wasn’t aware that was a quality you were seeking? Are you forming a troupe now?” Brow rising, she laughed, “Arcturus on the lute, Natassa singing, where does that leave you?”

“My exceptional charisma.”

“Now you’re taking the piss.” Hand on his cheek, they shared a laugh.

“You’ve convinced me.” The dragon rumbled, holding his head high, averting his gaze, “Suppose we keep you on, someone we know.”

“Wise choice.”

As she strolled with them, searching the pair from foot to tail, she appreciated the rareness of what she’d found. Not many in her travels had been as such, willing to stick their neck out for someone else, especially at a risk to their own lives. They were connected to her now if she liked it or not, even more so than before. When hope had seemed furthest from her mind, they had arrived, just as she envisioned.

Swinging an arm around Arcturus’ shoulder she laughed, “Still…thank you two…you don’t know how much that meant to me…I didn’t…” No more words came as she gave Arcturus a hug, he of course returned it.

“Don’t mention it.” He replied, “Though I don’t like making it a habit of leaving my friends to die or be left in the wings of crazy gryphon inquisitors.”

“Oh, I’m *your* friend now am I?”

“Are you not?” He laughed.

“The dragon insists were coworkers.”

“Because you are.” Veledar tilted his head.

She rolled her eyes as he nosed at her with a rumble, clearly trying to tease her. “Nah, you’re my mates. And as a mate, let me tell ya something.” She punched his nose and then to Arcturus’ shoulder, “Both of you are daft idiots that I can’t believe you did what you did. Barging in after someone you hardly met, only after a few weeks? What in the blazes were you thinking, you could have gotten everyone killed! Why I’ve never seen something so unbelievable, stupid, foolish!” As they smiled, proud of themselves she could only laugh, “Guess you’re my fools huh.”

“Who is the bigger fool?” Rumbled Veledar, “the fool or the one who needs to be saved by one?”

What laughter came in the wake of their comradery would have to continue elsewhere, as their stomachs all rumbled as one, pulling them back to task.

“I’d be careful when we go." Arcturus warned. “Feku was cooking food to feed an army last I checked. She practically tossed a rope over me to stop me from doing morning oaths." Arcturus laughed. “Believe Merlia was close to popping.”

    “I did not think gryphons and dwarves could conceive a...you meant the food.....hmmppf.." Veledar snorted, and rose his head slightly to look away from him. “I would like to see the little lizard try to feed me that much. She will find my appetite can be quite large." Veledar placed a talon carefully on his snout. “Do you think dwarves would be slowed down by that much food? Perhaps I would be safe to taunt her some more? Whilst she is unable to defend herself?  
  
“Be mindful, think it’s too early for you to start a fight and ruin all the prepared food.”

“It’s never too early for that.” Veledar rolled his eyes.

“Alright, whatever she is cooking.” Lyndis rubbed her belly, “Killing Cthulhids be hungry work, come on boys, I’m starved!”

\*\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

Down into the caverns they went, around winding passages of stone, chatting away at last night’s adventure. They relived spells, sword strikes and a few applications of draconic might. It wasn’t until they rounded the last corner, getting a powerful whiff of a menagerie of various scents did talk turn to anything else. Then it became a matter of groans, drooling mouths and the growling of their stomachs, despite the over the threat of an over zealous cook.

“Mornings!” Came Feku’s voice as they rounded the corner, she was carrying a silver tray, piled as high as she was with toast. It was so stacked that the little lizard had to cut open a window so that she might see.

This *dining* hall, if one could call it that, was an extended area of the cavern, lit by floating mana lanterns above. A table had been hastily procured from the stone, bearing the tiny rectangle marks of conjuration. It was a smorgasbord of various breakfast foods, from eggs, ham, bacon, to sizzling sausages. The alluring scent washed over them all, demanding they sink their teeth into it. The others were already here, sampling the culinary delights, Asterion placing himself away from the others, content to eat in the corner.  
  
    “Do you need any help Feku?" Arcturus asked as Lyndis took a seat, as the little lizard carefully made her way to the table.

“No I can do this, morning master Crimson Sky!” She replied, clearly trying to put on a good appearance for the crimson beast. “Expert cook Feku has it handled, don’t worry lady Lyndis, I have coffee soon after!”  
  
    Lyndis sighed, taking her seat among the table, right beside the dragon who planted himself between her and his blushing romantic partner. There seemed to be every breakfast food imaginable, pancakes, waffles, ham, bacon, crispy strips of potatoes, fruits of various colors, and even oatmeal. Had she simply spent all morning getting this made? She sank into the cushion of her seat, snagging a tankard and pouring herself some water.

“Run while ya can lass.” Merlia burped from her chair, she was draped in a dark red blouse. She rubbed her stomach with a groan, gesturing to her half eaten plate, “She’s gonna kill ya.”

Asterion on the other hand was shoveling his food into his mouth at a near constant pace. He merely glanced up from his mound of assorted food to give them a nod of acknowledgment before returning to his feasting.

“Where is Shandalar?” Asked the rogue with a laugh.

“Wisely knowing when to avoid the festivities.” Moaned Merlia.

“I don’t know, she seems to be a wonderful cook!” Happily teased Krotos, only to get a fork of pancake shoved against his beak.

“Then if she’s so good, why don’t ya eat my fill!”

“Maybe I will.” The gryphon purred, snatching her offering with his beak. As she scowled he merely winked, “Anything else you want to put on my tongue?”

“Not now ya lewd bird.” Merlia scoffed, “Feel like I be nine months pregnant, ready to burt!”

It was then that Feku bolted back in, quick as a flash. She smiled, procuring a pot of coffee upon the table with several cups. “Toppers up!” She exclaimed before dashing out without another word.

“So…whats with you? ” Veledar snorted, searching the groaning dwarf and happily chirping gryphon.

“I’ll say you look like you’re sick.” Arcturus muttered, grabbing himself a cup.

“Is the food poison?” The dragon snapped to Lyndis, “A kobold that tries to poison a dragon, Lyndis how could you?”

“It’s not poison ya daft lizard.” Merlia groaned, leaning back in her chair, “The wee wone keeps insisting on we eating.”

Veledar cocked his head with a growl, “Then why not snap your snout at her and say no? If she insists, threaten to burn her alive.”

Arcturus sighed, resting a hand upon the dragon’s flank, “For the last time, the answer isn’t to threaten everyone with fire.”

“Although it *does* work. No one wants to be set on fire.”

“True.” Laughed Lyndis, sipping her cup, “Though use it too often and no one will believe you.”

Merlia scoffed, “Ya think I havn’t tried that ya daft fools? It not be that easy!” She rubbed her belly, eyeing where Feku had departed, “The wee one be just too darn cute…I just can’t say no to her and crush her wee heart…although.” She winced, “It feels like I be dying, Arcturus, be a paladin and shoulder my burden for me wouldn’t ya?”  
“Apologies, but this doesn’t seem to be a burden that I should shoulder.” Countered the knight with a playful smirk, “You agreed to it, finish it.”

“Ah, of course ya say that ya bastard.” Groaned the dwarf before her eyes went wide, “Oh I know!” She grabbed her plate, shifting it to the floor, “Ulga, help me out, I need saving!”

The spirit had taken on the appearance of a diminutive black panther, curled around the dwarf’s chair. Amber eyes flicked to the plate before she wiggled her nose and sniffed a piece of meat.

“Come on, eat it, I need ya help.” Pleaded Merlia, shaking her fork, “Ya can do it lass.”

Despite the sniff, the panther would not be swayed. With a risen head she padded away before resting beside Veledar with a soft purr.

“Ulga, what ya doing? Sleeping with the enemy? Come on lass, ya got to save me, I know ya don’t eat, but the kobold’s going to be the death of me!”

    Ulga did not respond, and just tapped her tail softly against the floor.

“As everyone should, it would appear as though your spirit enjoys my company.” Boasted Veledar, rolling a paw to his chest. “As is natural.”  
  
 “I have eggs, hope everyone still hungry!” Feku cried, scampering in with a bowl practically half her size. Within was a scrambled mess of yellow and white.

“Anyone seen Shandalar?” Arcturus grabbed an apple from the table, talking a large bite.

    “I saw her." Feku held up a claw. “She did not sleep she said." She placed the claw to the tip of her pebbly snout, tapping the floor with a food. “What did she say elves did…I know!" Feku's scales started to take on their mossy green appearance. “She said Elves do trousers instead of sleep!"  
  
    “Are you sure that is what she said?" Krotos smirked, beak half full of eggs.

“Course I know what I say!” Hands went to her hips, brow furrowed, “She say elves like to enter trousers!”

“So it would seem the elf is more salacious than she lets on.” Cooed the grey and blue gryphon, “I’ll have to have a chat with her-“

“For the last time, she doesn’t want what you’re offering!” Merlia roared, smacking him on the back.

“Nonsense, everyone wants a gryphon.”

“Why would they want a gryphon when one could share company with a dragon?” Scoffed Veledar, before lowering his thrust his snout into a plate of ham, loudly slurping and chopping away.

“Could ya act more civilized?” Merlia yelled, “Yer going to make me sick!”

“Then look away.” Rumbled the dragon, before moving onto another plate.

Arcturus was the one to laugh, “Best not lose your breakfast, else you’ll have to eat some more.”

Feku crossed her arms, snout wrinkling as she shot daggers at them all. Her green scales took on a more red hue, “Don’t stop dragon from eat dwarf! Else you meet my wrath!” She then smiled to the newcomers, “Now eat up knight man, Lady Lyndis-“ She met eyes with Veledar and bowed, her snout touching the floor, “And most of all you, the most handsome of dragons.”

As the others scoffed and challenged Veledar on his prideful fact, Lyndis was too focused on Feku as she scampered back to the kitchen, looking ever so pleased with herself. The princess couldn’t grab herself any nourishment, not when the kobold was clearly having such a crisis, how could she even be such good spirits, especially after what had happened to Azzik?

Like that, the good cheer around her faded away, leaving the biting chill of those final moments. Lyndis was once more trapped to her chair, watching in horror as the events unfolded. Without a word she rose up, slinking away from the table as Merlia and Veledar got into a squabble over dwarven throat singing being *rubbish*.

Right on her tail, Lyndis excused herself and followed the bard all the way back to the makeshift kitchen.

The soft light of luminescent mushrooms clung to the wall, painting the stone with it’s orange light. Feku was humming to herself, working over a cast iron pot, placed upon a sizable stone that glowed with the intensity of a forge. The area was surrounded by shelves that were filled to the brim with various exotic spices and herbs, a stepstool next to them to allow the little lizard access. The air was aglow with delicious sizzling and pleasant aromas, asking Lyndis to retreat and go begin her meal with the others.

“Morning Lady Lyndis, you come to help?” Asked the kobold, grabbing a ladle of displacer beast bone to stir the pot of sizzling foam, “No need princess help on happy day!” She beamed, “Miss magic lady show me, this make whatever I want!”

Her brow rose, recalling something similar in Veledar’s mom’s home. “And why cook if it summons what ya want? Seems redundant does it?”

“Not redoodant!” She scoffed, grabbing an egg from the shelf and cracking it over the pot, “Conjured food not as good as fresh. You want Glowroot gumbo?”

Was she in denial? Her own mind fragmenting or sectioning off the traumatic events to protect itself? Lyndis sighed, moving ever closer, “Feku…Did you sleep alright?”

“Bit lonely but I manage.” Shrugged the cook, before adding a dash of pepper, “But bright day ahead! Tonight you go get dragon book!”

“So you heard about that huh?”

“Uh-huh!” Feku beamed, tiny islands of green scales starting to blossom in her grey sea of scales. “Big bull tell me all about it!”

“Feku.” She grabbed her gently, meeting her gaze, not meeting sadness there, but untold joy. “It’s okay to take a break, relax, grieve. “

“Not when people hungry!” With a swish of her tail she’d slipped free as a ding sounded through the hall, directing her attention to another area of stone, complete with an iron door to act as a makeshift oven. “Gryphon bread ready! Yum! Blue and girl gryphon love!”

“Do…”Her voice lowered, already hating for having to do this, to snap the little one out of her delusions for her own good, “Do you know that Azzik is dead?”

“Yea, of course.” She rolled her eyes, “But not for long, just have to go on adventure. Then he come back! It like old stories I sing.”

She blinked, that wasn’t what she expected. The poor thing had concocted this fantasy to convince herself to not feel sad. “Come back? Do you understand what death is?”

“I not child.” She groaned, “Go ask bull man, he promise!”

“Strange.” The rogue stroked her chin, that couldn’t be right, “I havn’t known him to lie as of yet.”

For a moment Feku came to a stop, releasing an exasperated sigh, “He tell me vault have scroll to bring back many dead, one of them be Azzik!” She bounced on her talons, “Don’t you see! Yes it sad for little while, but we see him again soon enough!” She spun around, arms outstretched a smile wide as her snout, “Then we can go back to cooking, singing, and I can tell him of all crazy adventure I have! Oh, and we can see handsome dragon!”

“Oh, and I’d stop calling the *handsome* dragon as such, else you wish to be his servants.” Lyndis gestured, “Sure he wouldn’t mind two kobolds.”

“Don’t threaten with good time!” She grinned, only to then shoo Lyndis out of the kitchen with a gnashing of teeth, “Wait your turn if hungry, I cook!”

Some magical promise to bring back her beloved? Lyndis found herself drawn to the stoic cleric who would offer such a reward. As the others enjoyed their meals, Merlia sneaking herself away, Lyndis placed herself down on a cushion beside the minotaur. He grunted at her in acknowledgment.

“Have you come for a hymn to Korde before our battle this evening?” He asked with a grunt, “Or perhaps to give thanks that we achieved victory to rescue you?”

“Don’t think your god and me would get along much.” She gave him a sly grin, “I heard about what you did for Feku.”

“The kobold?”

“Indeed.” She nudged at his side, “Thought it was sweet of ya. Knew that deep down you were a big softie, putting on a hard outer layer.”

He crossed his arms, eyes steeled, “I assure you, I am not soft, I am as hard as I’ve ever been.”

“Did someone say they were hard?” Krotos leaned back, a salacious smirk on his beak.

“I meant my demeanor gryphon, not my dick!” Snarled the cleric, tossing his bowl in the general direction, not swift enough to strike the catbird on the head. “Go back to the dwarf, she will tolerate you.”

“Still.” Lyndis chuckled, “Was a nice thing you offered to her, though one begs to question, why lie to her?” She met his gaze, trying to read those pools of brown, “Just doesn’t seem your type.”

“I’ll excuse your ignorance, but there was no lie.” He sighed, the cold exterior he exuding breaking away for but a moment, “I once found myself where she is now, reached a low that I thought I could never crawl out from. Someone showed me kindness, gave me a light to strive for in my darkness. I returned what was given to me to her.”

How sweet, she didn’t tease him about it any longer, considering he might take it as a slight against his honor. Instead, she nudged at him, “Speaking of which, forgot to bloody thank you.”

“You need not.” He rose a palm, “While your methods are detestable, you’re needed for our quest.”

“With her and that, I think you might be starting to like us big guy.”

He huffed, averting his gaze, “I’ll admit…you’re not…undetestable.”

“I’ll take it.” She kissed him on the cheek, only to get a hardened gaze in return, she recoiled with a laugh, “Alright, alright, not up for that yet, but mark me.” She grinned as he snorted, “We’re going to be friends.”

\*\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

Upon Shandalar’s return, the dining alcove was converted into a command center. Gone were the food, plates and tankards, replaced with rolled open maps of the castle and the detailed blueprints of it’s layout. Alongside these were parchments of endless notes, of which the sunelf explained were patrol routes detailing their enemies method of attack.

When questions came about the Cthulhid and it’s ability to read minds, the possibility arouse that their plans had already been discovered. The grim reality settled upon each of their spirits, asking if they still wished to see this adventure through. Veledar and Asterion looked upon this and scoffed, their conviction resolute in the face of this hurtle.

“Besides.” Huffed the dragon, thumping his tail, “If they knew of our plans, why go about interrogating Lyndis another time?”

“And you blasted it’s head apart.” Asterion added.

“Astute observations.” Shandalar thumbed through her notes, “Nor have my agents suggested anything different in their defensive plans. The only change has been the recalling of ships now that they know the dragon is here…The attack must be tonight if we are to have any success.”

“Excellent.” Hissed Veledar, “The sooner we storm this castle, the swifter my treasure, my book, and this entire ordeal is truly at its end.”

“Untrue dragon. You think they’ll just let you get away with retrieving your things?” Shandalar brow rose, “They stole from you the first time, what’s to stop them from doing it again?”

He hadn’t an answer, merely to puff out his chest and insist this time he would be prepared. This did little to sway her skepticism.

“Which is why we need to deal a decisive blow.” Shandalar tapped the hidden vault, the one belonging to Nigel. “They will be forced to forget the dragon and focus on other things. It is why retrieving the plans of the uniter are of the highest priority.”

“And my scroll.” Asterion grunted, gesturing to the vault. “I won’t allow you to forget that.”

“Of course, that as well. Which is why I suggest us splitting into two teams.”

“Splitting up?” Veledar cocked his head, “Despite my *expertise* in handling myself, I’ve always heard splitting up is never a good situation in these adventuring groups.”

“Which usually is the case your brightness.” Lyndis smirked, “But in this case, smaller group, harder to detect and find, if they do, keep the enemy on their toes.”

Shandalar nodded, “But before we discuss the plan, there is another matter.” Reaching under the table she procured a leather pack, “Feku has donated a few magic items that she stole-“

“Not steal, extended borrowing.” Insisted the kobold, who had taken a seat beside Asterion. “Consider it all gift.”

The dragon’s nature was roused as he snatched the pack between his teeth. “Of which I’ll thank you for such a donation.”

“Happy to make dragon happy!” She beamed.

Oh, he was going to like her. The others around him were far less pleased with his decision, each of them giving him a look as though it could kill. “Oh, don’t be surprised.” He snorted, “I am the leader of this endeavor, clearly her gifts were to me.”

“That’s an incorrect statement.” Shandalar stated flatly, “While you *play* leader dragon, it is Arcturus and Lyndis who are the true masterminds of this-“

He ignored whatever point that she was making, already starting to poke and prod at his newest treasures.

“Come on ya red bastard, let us see the magic items!” Merlia barked, “Insteada hogging them all for yourself! Come on Arcturus, tell yer hubby ta listen to reason!”

He wasn’t going to listen, they had proven adequate enough to rescue Lyndis, surely they didn’t need any more assistance for his treasures. Besides, he had already donated items from his hoard to them, what more did they want? He thumped his tail as they gazed upon his bag, already counting his items as their own. That was until his gaze fell upon Arcturus, the man’s softened expression cutting right through his defenses.

“You know.” Arcturus gave the dragon a knowing smirk, that he was the key to victory. A hand laid upon his withers, “Every advantage you give us is another chance of success to see your treasures returned to you.”

“So, your argument to me is your lack of competence?”

“Consider it…An investment.” He scratched the dragons chin as his nose neared, “Besides, I doubt you could even use the items in there.”

Averting his gaze before the paladin had him gifting away *all* of his treasure, the dragon relented with a growl. “Very well. Don’t say that I can’t see reason.” He grabbed the bag and tossed it into the center of the table, “Have at it you vultures.”

“It’s like pulling teeth out of a tug of glue!” Merlia replied with venom.

“Just hurry swiftly before I change my mind.” He snorted, not even Arcturus’ brushing his cheek scales could quell the sting within his scaled chest.

Shandalar emptied the sack’s contents across the table, an assortment of magical goods that seemed to wink in the light. There was a ring, headband, bracers and even a hammer on display. She explained that she had been identifying them all morning when they were sleeping.

“We elves have more time on our hands than the rest of you.” Added the sun-elf when they seemed surprised, “Being that four hours is adequate amount of sleep.”

The first item to be handed out was a band of silver, one she merely described as a ring of protection. It would envelop the wielder with a minor forcefield, requiring more effort to injure them. It would even deflect the basic energy crossbows that Lumara employed, a weakness for which they always equipped physical weapons as well.

“How about the cannons from the airships?” Veledar inquired, grabbing the diminutive thing between his paws, the surface was cool to the touch.

“The field is much too weak for them.” She explained, “Far greater magical protections are needed to repel firepower of that magnitude. Still, with it, you will be nigh invulnerable to their most dangerous asset against you.”

“How can dragon even use?” Feku asked, “Ring small, his paw big. Make no sense.”

Veledar closed his eyes, focusing on the ring. He allowed magic to rush up his arm, through his digits and touch upon the diminutive thing. It whispered to him and he answered, opening up his very being. In a breath the object began to grow and shine as bright as the sun. When it dulled, it was large enough to slip around one of his digits. “There we are, good as new.” He rumbled, admiring it as the kobold gasped in astonishment.

“Magical items, once attuned, shift their size to fit the user.” Explained Shandalar, “If there are no objections to the dragon having such an item, we can move on.”

The hammer was of dark silver, it’s handle inlaid with crimson cloth. Across it’s surface were images of thunderbolts and cracking stone. This was called Construct’s Bane, it’s impacts increased by ten-fold to beings made of magical stone or metal. Asterion was the one to take it with a satisfied snort.

“With it, your metal warriors will shatter like glass.” Boasted the warrior, marveling at the weapon, “I will be a worthy wielder of this weapon.”

Shandalar moved onto a set of bracers, bright blue leather with designs of moons stitched into them. “Next we have the bracers of Archery."  
  
   Arcturus grabbed them, tossing them to Merlia. Of which the ranger let loose a joyful cheer.

    Merlia just stared at the bracers, running her fingers over the moons. “Not da most dwarvin thing I could think of.”

    Shandalar raised an eyebrow. “I have yet to tell you what they do."  
  
“Doesn’t take a genius ta figure out what bracers of achery do lass.” Scoffed the dwarf with a grin. “Let me guess, they help guide me arrows.”

    Shandalar wrinkled her brow for a moment, “Yes that is what they do." she moved her finger down the list. “Then we have the headband of the sun. It has the power for the wielder to throw out four rays of fire magic from their fingertips. Only once a day however before the magic needs to recharge."  
  
“If no one cares, I’ll take that.” Lyndis slipped the golden band over her head, the center of it a metallic symbol of the sun. Her eyes closed as her hair rose and fell with a breath.

With these additions to their arsenal, Arcturus was starting to feel bad for their enemies. He pictured his dragon, proud before groups of energy cross bow wielding mortals, unable to stun or injure his scales, the dragon laughing at their efforts.

“Now back to the matters at hand.” Shandalar tapped the maps, “It would be best for us to go at night, again, when their defenses will be at their weakest. All that shall remain in the castle would be the garrison and the metallic warriors in which they employ. With a bit of finesse, we should be able to elude them long enough to retrieve our targets.”

The teams they were going to be split into were to capitalize on their abilities. Asterion, Lyndis, Merlia were going to the vault to retrieve the treasures and the scroll, of which Feku insisted that she was tagging along. When protests were raised, Asterion was the one to vouch for her, insisting if she possessed the heart of a warrior, she should be allowed to help her comrades.

“And you’ll all be needing these.” Shandalar wove a hand, several pouches flying off the shelves and into each their hands.

Arcturus ran his fingers across the velvet like surface, the pouch no larger than his hand. What was so special about this? As his brow rose, the elf was already there to cut him off.

“These are bags of holding. While mundane looking, Rothdell created these for higher skilled mages. Inside is an extra dimensional space, capable of holding up to one thousand pounds of material.” She tapped one at her side, “While remaining virtually weightless for the wielder.”

“Hot damn, you were holding out on us!” Lyndis squeeled, eyes beaming with delight, “I’ve always wanted to get my hands on one of these, but six?”

“Think of all the loot we can gather and transport.” Veledar rumbled, nosing at Arcturus’ palm.

Attention was brought to the upper levels of the map, where the central courtyard was located. “After we have retrieved our objectives, I have arranged for an airship to descend and pick us up.”

“How deep does your infiltration go?” Asked Arcturus, “How many units actually serve Rothdell?”

“Enough to pull off such a maneuver.” She replied calmly, “This ship will be captained by William Striker.”

 That captain? Arcturus blinked, recalling the name, “The captain of the RLA Destiny B?” It was the second ship to bear the name, after Dreadflame had destroyed the first one over Entis. William was known to be good with the troops, sporting a sailor’s beard and known to employ mostly non humans as his crew.

“The very same. He will also be moving Gus and his family from Entis, as with our recent activities, they will no longer be safe.”

Another life altered. Arcturus grimaced as Krotos’ ears pinned, realizing that after this was through, he and his family would be fugitives. The gryphon’s beak opened and closed several times, before he resided himself to silence.

    “If we have the airship, why not just blast our way in?" Asterion snorted, smashing his fist into his palm.  
  
   “Energy cannons that line the walls.” Arcturus gestured to the blueprints, “Not to mention the fortresses around the city. If they suspected a ship had gone traitor they’d blow it out of the sky in a matter of seconds.”

“So if not using an airship, how precisely do we get in?” Veledar growled, “You don’t think we’re just going to waltz right in.”

“That would be inadvisable. You saw the inquisitor had wards against shapeshifting. One could assume that would be the case within the castle.”

“Don’t tell me.” He rolled his eyes, “I’m going to have to shrink myself and hide in one of your bags of holding?”

“Not even in the slightest.” Her fingers caressed downward, to a doorway three levels down, “Here it connects to the sewers, a hidden entrance that isn’t on any other map. My agents discovered this weeks ago, it leads directly to the laboratory.”

Arcturus wrinkled his brow, a cold invading his thoughts. At a glance, there appeared to be little amounts of guards or patrols that crossed the area.

“It was spotted that only under nightfall did people emerge from this doorway. They had horse drawn carts, filled with mis-shaped sacks.”

“Who cares about what sacks they had.” Veledar growled, “Long as it gets us insides.”

“I’ve always found sacks are important.” Krotos added with a chirp, only to get withering looks. “What?”

Secret entrance to the castle, odd sacks being carried out? A direct pathway to a strange laboratory? It was hard not to figure out something dastardly was coming from that place. Arcturus shivered, fear building within each breath on what horror they would find. This also was where the dragon’s book was being kept.

“And that would leave Arcturus, Crimson Sky and myself to the laboratory. It will no doubt have magical defenses of which I will have to disable. The knight the dragon should be adequate muscle to protect me while I gather information on the Uniter.”

“And retrieve my book.” Veledar added.

“Yes, of course that.” She rummaged through her goods, handing Lyndis and the others each a rolled-up parchment, sealed with a wax signet of an eye. “With these, you shouldn’t get lost.”  
  
With that the plan was formed. They spent the next few hours discussing the guard movements and various spells that would be required to distract, avoid or if it came to it, subdue them. As it progressed, Krotos even offered to assist, given that if he was going to be a fugitive he might as well help. He was assigned to the laboratory, as another set of eyes and hands could always be useful. Shandalar gave a short bow as they concluded, a cloud of anticipation resting over them all.

“Now all that is required is we wait.” Shandalar searched over them all, “Prepare your spells, check your equipment and be ready, for after tonight there will be no second chance.”

Veledar could only pad away in thought, counting the moments until he was reunited with his treasure and book. Months of slights against his pride were about to come to an end, he could not wait for this weight to be off his wings.