

The air was still, the sun above slowly toasting the grass and earth below. Not many trees lined the edge of the river, and any amount of shade would be welcome for those who dared to venture so close to Skull Gorge. Many rumors still linger after the days of the Red Hand. Some believed members might have holed up in the villages that were carved into the rock face. Others still murmured that the spirits of those mercilessly slain roamed the stony horizon, tormenting and adding in the fools who dared to seek treasure. And all agreed that a number of treacherous creatures inhabited the region, contributing their own brand of chaos. Many dared to venture in. The number who came back alive, and sane, could be counted on a single hand.

But for now, all she could focus on was the ringing between her ears.

A slow, labored groan left Sera's lips, slowly opening her eyes, trying to get them to adjust to the light. "Man, if this is heaven, it's not to me expectations," she muttered to herself. She had to blink hard, her eyes taking a long time to adjust to the bright sunlight. Looking left, she was able to take note of a stream, it starting to widen as she looked to her right. The stream widened in this direction, it fading over the horizon, starting to disappear between a rather impressive rock wall. "It looks a little bit like Skull Gorge, actually." Her heart then sank at the prospect. She met one of the adventurers that survived Skull Gorge. Granted, it was hard to understand him as the druid kept switching languages. She knew that being near there would be bad news. And if Greifer made this his first stop, things wouldn't end well for both of them. She knew she had to get out of here.

She went to push off the tree, but felt that she couldn't get leverage. She then tried to move her arms, but they were pinned against her side, her hands tucked into the pockets of her pants. Gazing downwards revealed that she had been tucked into a rather large burlap sack, curled into the fetal position. She quickly started to curse, trying to wiggle to get an arm free. If she could cast a spell, she'd be able to burn free of her confines. She twisted her torso, but that rewarded her with a sharp pain shooting up her side. "Gah!" she shouted, fighting back tears, her body ceasing up. She paused, trying to take in a deep breath to calm down. The pain came back in the same spot, and she coughed, unable to fill her lungs as full as she knew she could.

"OK, this is not good," she said to herself. "I'm tied up. Again. Maybe some broken ribs. And my 'partner' is nowhere to be found." She wanted to scream, which upon reflection, would be a bad idea given how defenseless she was. She'd been in worse, but this certainly didn't play into the multitude of escape plans she always ran through her head. The only benefit to right now was that she was out of direct sunlight, and she couldn't see a worn path in around her, so she'd be safe. But for how long?

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Greifer quietly watched as the water finally stopped running red, signalling that the dried blood was out of his fur. After a while, he didn't even know if it was his own or that of his enemies from the night prior. He flopped back into the shallow stream, eyes closed, muzzle above the waterline, letting the cooling liquid flow over his form. He was drained, both physically and mentally. Seven days of torture, followed by a mob fight, then concluding with having to dead sprint away with an extra nine stone in tow. He certainly wasn't expecting to play the white knight role, having watched Sera lose rather

impressively to their captor. 'She crafty fighter,' he thought, 'but too eager. And fragile.'

The cold sting of the stream was finally getting to him, especially piercing through his exposed scars. When he couldn't stand it he finally sat back up, shaking his form to splash water everywhere. He slowly stood, feeling every muscle in his legs and waist plead for mercy. He had to push it aside, for he knew that they had several more hours of travel to get to his safe haven within Skull Gorge. Returning to the bank of the river, he gathered the couple of fish he managed to catch, along with his armor, and made his way back to the nearby tree that he stashed his 'companion.'

He didn't bask on the thought on how good the midday sun felt against his hide. Let alone the fact that he was outside in the sunlight for the first time in half a fortnight. His head was on a swivel, keeping a lookout for anyone who would give them away. As he got closer to the tree, he could hear Sera talking aloud to herself. 'No doubt trying escape route,' he thought to himself, knowing that she couldn't. He made sure to find a strong burlap sack from the trail store they passed.

Sera continued to try and break out of her burlap prison. Whatever the sack was made from couldn't be of this plane. She tried to twist again to gain leverage, only managing to aggravate her broken ribs, causing a yell of pain to escape her lips. She breathed in sharply as she realized that she lost her balance, falling away from the tree she was perched on and thudding on her back. "Nomeno ui zyak pothoc!" she yelled to the sky, her voice booming like thunder in the crystal-clear day. Hearing a chuckling form above her only caused her heart to sink, and she slowly opened one of her eyes.

The fact that she was looking at clawed feet was a good start. She then gazed upwards along the leg, then pausing once she got to the form's waistline. He was carrying bundled armor in one hand, and several fish in the other. And she knew he was a he, because of the rather impressive sheathe, hanging exposed, demanding to be looked at. "Um," Sera finally forced out, "Why are you naked?"

Greifer scoffed firmly. "Why you look at crotch?"

"Because you're naked. And you still haven't answered my question."

Greifer dropped his armor onto the ground, kneeling down to grab onto the back of Sera's burlap. "I needed bath. Even if cold." He set Sera back to upright, undoing it partly so that she could get her arms free. He then bit off the head of one of the fish, chewing it loudly. "Better?"

Sera relished the idea of having her arms again, trying to stretch overhead, again being hampered by her ribs. This spark of pain caused her to cough heavily, using the crook of her arm to cover her mouth. She sighed softly, though a red flag soon raised in the back of her mind. A metallic flavor was sitting in her mouth, and a look to her arm confirmed her theory. "Not in the slightest," she finally answered.

Greifer had just discarded the remaining bones of his first fish before he glanced over, seeing the blood against Sera's arm. "Was worse," he commented, going back to eating. "Vomit earlier. Leader hit hard."

Sera shuddered for a moment, using the sack to wipe away the blood. "No need to tell me." She huffed before she looked back to the gnoll. He looked different in the full sunlight. His fur was a lighter shade of brown than she thought. And he had about as many battle scars as she'd expect. Especially on his shoulder. But it was his left eye that she wondered about most. "How did you lose that?" she asked

aloud, not managing to stop herself.

Greifer huffed at the question, the area of flesh moving, mimicking an eye shifting to look directly to Sera. He watched her visibly flinch from it, a toothy grin forming in response. "It still there. Not as good as before, but functions." He tore a chunk out of the other fish he had caught, shaking the gore from it before offering it to Sera. "Person who fix also help you."

Sera gingerly reached for the chunk, picking out what bones she could see, she then focused as best she could, forcing a flame into her palm to begin charring the fish. "And this person is?" She finished the cooking of her small meal, wondering why Greifer never answered her. She then peered up to Greifer again, then sighed as she saw one of his arms pointed directed to where she hoped to avoid. "Oh joy," she sarcastically murmured, taking a bite of her fish. "They better be worth it."

"They are trusted," Greifer said, already finished the last of his meal. "Good chance not be followed."

Sera quietly rolled her eyes. "At this point, Allwein isn't who I'm worried about..."

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Desolation. The village the duo was traversing through showed many signs. The archways, meticulously carved out of the mountain side to act as windows and walkways, have started to fall victim to the harsh winds and constant sun-baking. The earth between foot was dry and crumbling, and stepping to close to the edge could lead to harsh drops if it gives way. Sand and soot whipped about on the near constant breeze, adding more discomfort to the dry heat. Pots were strewn to and fro, the ones still in single pieces covered with large cracks. Greifer had to hold an arm up to his face to see where he needed to go, the lack of shade starting to get to his sense of direction.

The afternoon sun was also cooking Sera's brain, still bundled up in the burlap sack. She had, however, managed to convince the gnoll to let one of her arms hang free. 'If I'm going to be immobile, I want to at least not be defenseless,' she recollected. A disgruntled sign slipped her lips currently, though, turning her head to try and look where Greifer was. "You didn't have to carry me, you know."

"Air thin here. You slow us down." Greifer paused again to wipe the sweat from his brow, taking a moment to shift Sera's added weight as he carefully stepped amongst the debris.

"But I feel so useless right now. Just give me a ch-" She quickly bit her tongue as she looked up, seeing a rather large vulture looming overhead. The bird started to descend, and Sera grew more nervous, raising an arm up gingerly, aiming it towards the creature. "I got a bad feeling about this vulture."

"True. If it dies, you die."

"What?" Sera's tone grew harsh. "Would it not be a case of 'we die?'"

"I on good terms with Rysstdra." Greifer had turned now to face the vulture, the bird landing on a nearby rock formation. What could pass as a chuckle slipped from his lips, clearing his throat. "Zanmi bezwen geri. Pa gen lènmi suivi. "

Sera's ears burned at hearing the Abyssal tongue. And the fact that Greifer spoke it to the bird was unsettling about their supposed safe haven. She was able to shake off the fuzz in time to see the vulture

step down from its perch. Lowering its head to the ground, it sketched a crude arrow into the loose earth. It released a high-pitch screech before spreading its wings, again taking to the air, flying in the direction of the arrow. "Well," she asked, still a little befuddled, "what happens now?"

"Now?" Greifer started, surveying the terrain of his adjusted course. "Now I walk more. We are near her home."

"Finally! Getting tired of being coped up in this blasted bag, being dragged around by a fur ball."

"You watch tongue!"

Just as Sera was about to protest, both of them grew quiet. The hot air of the day had become still, and was slowly being shaken by high-pitched squeaks and yip. It seemed to echo across the canyon, steadily growing in volume. And number of sources. Greifer grew visibly tense, adjusting the straps affixed to the sack. But Sera could hear things clearly. Even in her weakened state, she could pick up the undertones of the Draconic tongue. "Start running."

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The afternoon sun beat down harshly on the grass and earth. Luckily, though, the setting sun finally gave the shade a chance to be cooler than the surrounding air. The stream continued to quietly bubble along towards Skull Gorge, adding a bit of ambiance to the day. Ants had crawled out of there subterranean home, the group feverishly working on the discarded guts and bones of a fish.

A lone elf was inspecting this find, watching the ants finding little pieces of still viable meat, ripping them free, dragging them along the dirt back to their home. His attention was diverted, however, as his ears flicked to the sound of movement. At this point he realized his break was over, pushing himself back onto his feet and turning to see a mustached human coming towards him. "It looks like he came this way, Captain Allwein."

Robert made his way down to the elf, one hand clutching to the handle of his broadsword. His right hand was wrapped in a heavy bandage, and held in place with a sling. His eyes were bloodshot from having little sleep, and from pent up rage towards both of his former prisoners. "Good work, Pharom. Anything else?"

Pharom nodded, taking a moment to brush a errant lock of silver hair back into place. "Aye, sir." He started by pointing to the lone tree on the bank. "As you could possibly guess, sir, it looks like he stopped under this tree for some length of time. Possibly trying to dry off from when he caught fish in the stream." He his then pointed along the ground, starting from the main road. "It looks like they came from our camp in the Reaching Woods to here, then left again heading along the stream."

Robert nodded. "Good. Any sign of the girl?"

The elf nodded. "Faint signs, however. There were only one set of tracks along the earth, those made by the gnoll. Found signs of bleeding along their path since they left the woods. And the shopkeep we passed mentioned about a burlap sack being stolen from him, along with rope. Realistically, she was hurt from the fight, and is now being carried by the gnoll.

"Well then," Robert plainly spoke. "Easy enough to track."

"I wouldn't follow after then, sir."

Robert paused at hearing those words, a disgruntled look forming on his face. He slightly unsheathed his sword, then forced it back in to emit an metallic clap, trying to unsettle the elf. "And why not?!"

Pharom didn't seem to flinch at the sound. While he respected Allwein's rank, no one truly knew who he was aside from Michael. He wasn't going to be scared down. "The reason I say this, sir, is because the tracks they're making are leading right into Skull Gorge. I'm sure you've heard the rumors. Extreme heat, poor water quality. The area being overrun with kobolds, goblins, and the gods know what else. And the Red Hand."

"That's enough," Robert chimed, watching Pharom go quiet. "So what exactly are you trying to say?"

Pharom was perplexed on what he was seeing and hearing. He felt his explanation was obvious enough. "I'm saying that going in there after them would be a death trap. The fact that one of them fathom the idea suggests knowing the lay of the land. A possible safe haven for them to recover." He was becoming slightly more agitated in tone, seeing that his leader was showing no concern. "Walking into the gorge with an army this size would only attract unwanted attention and spell disaster!"

Robert continued not to waver for a short while, then finally gave a defeated sigh. "You're right. It would be irresponsible. However, I still want them found."

"Of course. If I may suggest, sir?"

"Hmm."

"We leave troops to camp here for a few days. The weather feels to cool off, making it more bearable. We also send a small regiment to the Skullwatch mining town, in case they continue through the canyon."

Robert nodded, turning face to make his way towards the division of guards he had with him. "Fair enough. We'll continue toward Arabel. Success or failure, I expect to hear from you quickly."

Pharom gave a bow, forming his right hand into a fist before placing it over his heart. "Of course, sir." He waited a beat before peeking back up, watching Robert give instructions to his entourage before he, and most of the men, headed down the path back towards the Reaching Woods. "Spero che la morte del suo cugino lascia la sua mente presto," he muttered to himself in his native tongue, knowing his approaching companions wouldn't understand it. "L'Ultima cosa che ha bisogno di questo esercito è un leader in difficoltà."

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Sera's vision was constantly being jarred, unable to get a clear view of her pursuers. At random intervals she was using her lightning magic, trying to create some form of distraction and chaos to unsettle the chase. Though all it was truly doing was riling up her pursuers. The creatures could easily be described as tiny, bipedal crocodiles, their hides a ashy brown that allowed them to blend into the terrain. However, all they were doing was driving her mad with their constant yipping. She knew they

were up to something ulterior, if only she could not be jostled so she could understand their cries.

Greifer, meanwhile, was more focused on running. His ears and head were on a swivel, trying to judge numbers and locations as he jumped around rocks and over the terrain. His thighs were aflame from this extreme effort and his previous fatigue, and the human's constant shifting and spell casting wasn't helping. He knew that if he stopped they'd easily be outnumbered. And this wasn't even taking into account that Sera was in a limited fighting capacity. He was disoriented from having to sharply turn and dodge, unsure if he was still going the direction that Rysstdra's vulture pointed them in. He had to keep moving, for their li-

"Fall!!!" Sera shouted out, shifting her weight hard, forcing Greifer down to a knee. He was just about to push back to his feet as several arrows whizzed past both of their heads, the kobolds who fired them shouting in frustration before disappearing behind a corner. Greifer growled loudly, moving in a crouched stance, preparing to turn left and chase after them. Sera saw this and reached behind her, tugging hard on his left ear. "Don't! It's an ambush."

Greifer snarled at the thought, stopping short of the corner, tilting his head to get his ear back under his control. "How you know?"

"They're speaking Draconic. And frankly, their trapping skills make rangers look amateur. Hang a right!"

Greifer nodded, heading the direction indicated. A group of the kobolds re-emerged to try and give chase, but two of them were instantly met with Sera's lightning strike, turning the first into ash and crippling the second. The gnoll continued to run hard terrain, seeing a drop off point ahead. He slid across the loose earth, slowing his momentum. Both felt a moment of weightlessness as they skidded off the short plateau, Greifer's claws digging into the soft ground. He gave a grunt as he settled their combined weight on his arms, silently hanging. He mustered a bit of strength to pull himself upwards, eyes and ears panning the path they came down. "Not followed."

Sera could help but to gaze down, their forms swaying ever so slightly. Even though the drop was no more than ten feet, the fact that she was still bundled in the sack made even this small distance perilous. She swallowed her heart before looking towards the sunset. "Which is odd. We might have gotten them off our trail cause I can figure out their plans."

Greifer scoffed. "For now," he muttered. He then let go of the ledge, preparing his body to land on the sand below. Both of them gave yells of surprise when the ground gave way, the duo being enveloped in a cloud of dust. Greifer landed with a hard thud onto his bottom, both of them gasping for air from the drop. They were sitting on a crude tarp, at the bottom of a twenty foot deep hole. "Bay blag ap maltrete a," he muttered, trying to get to his feet again. He then yelped in pain, falling onto his butt again before grabbing at his left ankle.

Sera winced at the yelp. "Batobot tiric ti ultro bensvelk," she griped, seeing the gnoll clutching at his joint. She then looked up, seeing that the kobolds had assembled around the rim of the pit. Some had tilted their heads, looking down to the pair, others had crude bows drawn. "So what happens now?!" she shouted up to them in their native tongue, sending them all into a panic.

"She's speaks the tongue of dragons!" they shouted amongst themselves, Sera's ears attune to their comments. "No wonder they were able to elude us!" "They must die!" "I always wondered what gnoll tasted like!"

"What causes noise?" Greifer asked in his confusion of the chosen tongue. A glance upwards revealed about fifteen kobolds, all with arrows ready to fire. Just as he gave a resigned sigh, his nose perked to a familiar smell. "Sera. Watch."

Sera looked to the rim of the pit just in time to see one of the kobolds clutch to his own neck, gasping for air. Even from so far down, she was able to see a look of pure horror on its face, just before its head popped like two fingers against a grape. The rest watched this happen, then witnessed it happen to a second. Then a third. It was at this point that they all scattered, leaving behind only the soft howl of the wind. Sera knew what had happened had to be magic from a school she never thought to have witnessed first hand. "Wha-" she started, biting her lower lip as footsteps could be heard getting closer to the rim. "Greifer?"

Greifer just smiled. "Sera, meet Rysstdra."

A hearty laugh could be heard from above as the figure reached the edge, kneeling down before peering in. "Well well, Mongrel. The bones were right after all."