

Tails and Tribulations

The slowly sinking sun cast long shadows down the town's dirt-packed streets as the town's apprentice mage lit yet another pole for the night to come. A trio of gadget-bedecked kobolds argued about the merits of different alloys under a yet-unlit lamppost, taking no notice of the figure making her way up the western road.

Long black hair framed a heart-shaped face, inlaid with oddly purple eyes whose shape spoke of Azlantian ancestry from the far eastern lands. As if to suborn expectations, rather than the sashed robes of that country's fashion, she instead wore the revealing outfit of a Vishanti wagon-born traveller.

A sheer scarlet top contained what appeared to be a bounteous chest, leaving bare an olive-skinned midriff, while tan breeches hung loose from her waist. A purple sash completed the ensemble, overlaid with a black leather belt holding a couple pouches. Almost as a finishing touch, a sheathed dagger hung off her right hip, serving as an obvious warning not to try anything untoward.

Ignoring the occasional passerby's curious stare, Sharilar hefted her travelling pack and strode up the path towards the town square. The farmlands were already midway through harvest, and she did not relish spending another night out in the chill and damp of harvest season. Her natural form would be able to weather it fine, but a room at an inn would be much more comfortable!

Foot traffic was already dying down as folks sought shelter from the cool breeze already beginning to blow though the spell-lit roads. Pausing at the well in the middle of the plaza, she checked each of the signs and noted to her disappointment that there was only one tavern this time. She'd long since learned that meant shoddy service and bedding, unless you were willing to share your bedding.

Still, the open door of the "Hen's Teeth" glowed with an inviting warmth. Sliding a slender hand into her money pouch, the travelling kitsune counted out the coins she had left. It should be enough for a meal and room, but she was going to have to find some work soon.

The common room was about half full as she entered, but other than a few appraising eyes her entry did not seem to draw much notice. Thankful for that, Sharilar made her way to the bar, where a portly, scarred fellow was busy scrubbing out a beer-stained mug.

"What'll ya have?" he asked, barely looking up from the cleaning.

"I'll take an ale, chicken, and a room for the night." Her contralto voice and lack of an Azlantian accent sometimes threw those who heard her the first time, but this proprietor took it in stride. Setting the mug aside, he sized her up a moment.

"As long as nothing's missing in the morning, and any menfolk you bring to your bed keep it down, 5 silvers for the room, and 3 for the meal," he replied after a long moment.

Sharilar just nodded and counted out the coins under the old man's watchful eye. Once all eight of the coins lay on the counter, he swept them up with one smooth motion, dropping them into a jangling pocket as his other hand produced a rusty bronze key from under the bar with practiced ease.

"Go up the stairs, second room on the left. If'n ye need a bath, there's a trough out back. Beth'll have yer food shortly."

Taking the key with a murmured "Thank you," the shapeshifted kitsune slid it into a pouch and made her way back to an unoccupied table, setting her bag on the floor below it. It was a relief to finally set her pack down - despite being enchanted, carrying it for extended periods of time always made her shoulders ache.

Reaching back, she took a nice long stretch, feeling her shoulders pop while her out-thrust chest caught the attention of several males. She had to hide a smile as she held the pose just a few moments longer than necessary, making sure that several were looking her way before letting her arms fall back down. First the bait, now the hook.

Slipping her fortune-telling deck out of its own pouch, she ran her fingers reverently over the well-worn card backs before beginning to shuffle. Some tavern-owners looked dimly on her adopted kind's activities, but based on the bartender's comment on bedding she should be fine here.

A soft cough caught her attention. One of the younger farmhands was standing across the table from her and was obviously trying to sneak a peek down her top while pretending to pay attention to the cards. "Good evenin' miss, this seat taken?"

"Not at all," Sharilar responded, adding a slight purr to the words. "I was just preparing my deck for a reading. Have you ever wondered what lies in your future?"

"Now an' then," the teen replied with a hint of a leer that showed he thought he knew where this was going. "Though sometimes ah can't even tell where ah might end up by the end of th' night!"

"I may be able to help with that," she replied as she fanned and folded the cards. "For the price of a silver or two."

And so the evening went. Several men wandered over in transparent attempts to get into her bed, and each one went away short a few silver and with a hint of their future. There were a couple that she had to admit she might not have minded bedding at first, but once she saw into their minds any attraction she had felt vanished like a soap bubble.

The next day went similarly, as did the one after, with more than a few curious girls asking about their fortune in love. By the fourth day, however, it seemed word had gotten around that she was not putting out, and Sharilar found herself sitting alone and nursing an ale for most of it. At least, until another traveller made his presence known.

Sharilar never read her own future that often. When you've had your very being turned inside out and stretched across all of space and time, small questions kind of lose their importance. As for large ones... there was the occasional glimpse, but never enough to make sense of.

Still, at times like this, boredom often led to her toying with her deck. Shuffling over and over, maybe drawing or laying a couple cards before returning them, the spread incomplete. She was on her third half-hearted attempt to divine anything that the fates may have to tell her when the room went quiet.

Most gathering places usually have a background hum of conversation, as individual knots of people discuss whatever happens to be of importance. This goes unnoticed most of the time, but when it stops, the silence can be louder than a cannon.

Looking up from the Knight of Blades that she had just drawn, Sharilar saw what had caused the sudden interest in all the patrons. Standing in the doorway was a large, blonde-haired human, clad all in metal plate. A sword that looked nearly the same size was slung across his back, but there was nothing aggressive in his posture, and within a few moments conversation returned to its normal background hum.

The warrior remained at the doorway a few moments, his gaze sweeping across the room before settling on Shar's table. As she watched over the edge of the card, pretending to focus her attention on it, the man strode over and settled into the seat opposite her, his every movement punctuated by a soft clank.

Returning the card to the top of the deck, Sharilar placed it back on the table and folded her hands over it. "May I help you?" she asked as several scenarios ran through her head.

"I have heard there is one with the blood of a sibyl, a true Seer, in these lands." The man's voice was deep, the sort that could shake a person to their core. The way his tongue stumbled over

the Vishanti word made it clear he was not familiar with the language, but whomever this was, he had dealt with her adopted people in the past. "I see you have a Vishanti fortune deck. May I assume you are the one of whom they speak?"

Spreading her hands to shrug in nonchalance, the dark-haired gypsy kitsune replied, "I do not know if it was me they spoke of, but it is true you are speaking to one touched with the Gift." Taking the deck back in hand, she began to slowly shuffle the cards, watching the armored warrior carefully for his reaction. "Is there a concern you have that the Fates may provide insight into?"

To her relief, at the response, the blonde-haired warrior seemed to relax minutely at her response. When her people had lost their lands in the Great War, they had taken up a nomadic lifestyle, making their home among the other races of the world. Not all lands had been hospitable, and even to this day there were some that would kill a Vishanti gypsy in a heartbeat if given the chance.

"It is not simple fortune-telling that I need, I am afraid. In the ruins of Ashtalon two days walk from here, strange, unnatural things are stirring, and I believe it is related to a band of cultists that rumor says has taken residence therein."

"Cultists?" Sharilar's eyes had narrowed slightly at the mention of unnatural beings, but as soon as the word cultists had fallen from his lips, the purple in her eyes had begun to subtly blaze.

"Aye, of some being whose name I cannot pronounce. They simply refer to it as 'The All-In-One' and claim it will grant never-ending life to all who serve it. What they grant is not life however, but transformation into one of their creatures. I fear that if they are not dealt with, they will force this 'gift' onto all who live near."

"And how can a humble sibyl assist you with this?" Sharilar asked as he finished, forcing herself to relax.

"There are magical wards in place, placed by the cultists, but I do not have enough money to hire a mage. I do not have the time either to wait to find one willing to go for a treasure share, and I fear the nearest Temple of the Sun is too far to receive help from there in time. I would like your assistance to see if perhaps you may see a way that would allow me to make it into the ruins safely."

Sharilar raised one dark eyebrow in response. "You do realize that the sort of information needed for that is a bit more specific than what a Fortune Deck can normally provide."

This time, it was the warrior's turn to shrug. "That is why I sought out a Seer. There are tales of Vishanti Seers who could glimpse the future when provided the right question, and while it is a

slim hope, it's all I have. Whether you have the answer or not, I leave on the morn, as this can wait no longer."

As he spoke, Sharilar watched his eyes, confirming for herself that he was serious and truthful. As he finished, she allowed herself a slight smirk and leaned forward. "Well, you can count yourself lucky then. It just so happens I have some magical ability myself, and a rather large dislike of cultists. You've just gotten yourself that magical assistance you didn't have time to find."

The sudden frown on the human's face made it clear he didn't believe her. "Where I go is dangerous. You look rather... ill-equipped to fight," he finished, a bit of uncertainty in his last words..

Sharilar let out a short laugh. "Don't let my excessive charms fool you," she said, giving him a fox-like smirk despite her current human appearance. Setting the deck down, she spread her hands above the table, and called on her natural heritage to bring forth a ball of light.

In illumination, it was not much brighter than a torch, and with a thought she reshaped it into a small fox. "Satisfied?" she asked as she mentally directed the little light-creature to pad over to the warrior's side of the table and sit in front of him, wagging it's tail like a puppy.

"It appears you do have some talent in the Arts," he admitted after a moment. "I will not stop you then, if you truly wish to go, but I cannot guarantee your safety, miss...?"

"Sharilar, but my friends call me Shar." Bringing her hands together, she let the light-fox wink out. "And I do hope we can be friends..." This time it was her turn to trail off, tilting her head slightly. "I don't believe I got your name either?"

"Morgan Longshire, Knight of Prima, at your service."

A full moon shone through the threadbare drapes, keeping the room lit in twilight as Sharilar finished undressing for bed, having finally allowed herself to shift back to her natural foxlike form. A few cantrip castings and the clothes would be clean for tomorrow, but that could wait for the morning.

Sitting on the bed, the vulpine woman rested her elbows on her knees and muzzle in her hands as she ran the day's event over in her head. Of course it had to be a paladin! Prima was the deity of justice and order, so it made sense that one of Her warriors would be the one to go after a group like these cultists, but the same traits that made them so useful also tended to make them somewhat inflexible at times.

Well, it could be worse, she thought as she laid back, still half-on and half-off the bed. He could have been from Rhenimere too. Compared to most other humans, those from the kingdom of Rhenimere were extremely intolerant of other races, and one of them would spit her in an instant if they knew her nature, let alone where she drew her magic from.

At that thought, a soft whisper began in the back of her mind again, that ever-present soft scratching at the mental door she kept shut against the things-that-never-were, the things-that-should-not-be, and the things-that-cannot-be. A quick mental thump and it quieted back down.

For not the first time, she wondered what her life would have been like if she had not been forced into that ritual years ago; if she had never been turned from the light of the stars to the darkness between. Years of practice had honed her control over that chaotic Otherness that had once nearly driven her insane, and turned it from a curse, to a tool like any other. Of course, not all, or even many had the force of will that she had needed to overcome it. Those that failed... well, unnatural things, as Morgan had said, was one way to put it.

Which brought her back to the problem at hand. When travelling among the caravan, La Familia, she had been able to walk around as herself, as had her parents, but in all but the largest towns they had assumed human guise due to the rarity of kitsune in this part of the world. After the near-corruption of her very being and recovery from the same, Sharilar had left the caravan behind as she worked to master her new self, so that if she failed she would not threaten the extended family that had raised her so well.

Travelling solo had also allowed her to let her hair down and her fur out, but for the first time in several seasons, she would be travelling with someone else. While her human form was just as much “her” as her kitsune form, it never felt to her as if it fit quite right; like a shirt that was too tight. Her last travelling companion, Luna watch over him, had been accepting of her vulpine nature to the point they had even been part-time lovers... at least until the ambush by orcish zealots of Khorne had taken his life, and nearly hers as well.

Without thinking, she rubbed a couple fingers over the black fur where the gash in her side had been. Magical healing never left scars on the body, but injuries of the heart always took much longer to heal. Even for those who, as the Vishanti put it, “leave their tears in the past and love for the sake of tomorrow.”

That Vishanti gypsy philosophy is one that Sharilar had tried to live up to, though it was hard at times; even more so after Elwynn’s death. As an elf, he’d had centuries ahead of him, that were lost forever on the point of an orcish spear.

Closing her purple eyes tight and flattening her ears, Sharilar shook her head as if to try and clear it. She was just woolgathering now, rather than looking at the problem at hand. It’s not like Morgan was her type, after all...

Mentally putting the stoic paladin she had seen at the table tonight against the elven bard she had nearly asked to lifebond with, she could barely contain the laugh that threatened to bubble up. Gods above, she was acting like a brooding teenager! Maybe she should seek out one of those villagers that seemed interested in a good lay, just to get it out of her system.

Still, she mused as her mirth subsided, this trip would be at least four days, potentially without being able to fully relax. Her self-invitation had been a spur-of-the-moment impulse, and while she wanted to be there when those bastards' bills came due, maybe it would have been better if she had not said anything and just followed behind. The horse was free from the wagon now, though, so she would just have to wait and see if the water it found was drinkable.

Sitting up, she took a short stretch, then swung her legs onto the bed and laid herself back down on top of the unneeded blanket. For all her fretting about the situation, she would just have to do what she always did, and follow her wit and instinct, and let the Fates handle the future.

When Sharilar arrived at the outskirts of town the next morning, Morgan was already waiting with a pair of horses. Although he seemed less than confident given the lack of protection her outfit provided, he did not remark on it as they got settled in and began the two-day ride.

The first few hours were rather quiet, with the two travellers mostly choosing to keep to themselves, apart from a few times where one pointed something out to the other, such as a section of the road to avoid, or a falcon in the distance. Finally though, curiosity got the better of the shapeshifted kitsune.

"So, how did you find out these sorts of things were going on out here?" The paladin's only response at first was a puzzled look, and the gypsy seer just shook her head slightly in response. "You don't seem to be a local any more than I am. Cultists that follow any of the Old Ones usually work in secret - it's one of their greatest weapons and defenses. Almost anyone could be one and you might not realize it until it's too late." Trusting the horse to continue to find the path, she took a moment to lock eyes directly with Morgan. "I know from personal experience."

Morgan looked back into her own eyes for only a moment before he quickly averted his gaze, turning slightly to make it seem as if he was paying more attention to the road than to the woman with the strange purple eyes. For a short while, neither spoke, but eventually it was the paladin who broke the silence first.

"I... had a vision."

"A vision?" Sharilar repeated. "And this vision didn't provide you any instruction other than 'they're here, go get them'?"

"I wish it was that clear," he replied with a sigh. "But the gods above and below rarely take direct action, lest their opposition reply in kind and bring forth a true Godswar."

They rode on for several minutes before Sharilar spoke up once again. "And?"

"And what?"

"Well," she replied, rolling her shoulders a moment to work out a few kinks from the riding. "If the gods can't directly interfere, what did they tell you?"

"Um..." The paladin chewed his lower lip a moment in thought. "At first I felt a presence, strong, but kind. Stern, yet just. I then felt a woman's hand on my shoulder, and somehow I knew it belonged to this presence, that Prima herself had deigned to give me this message." The more he spoke, the straighter he sat, a tinge of pride creeping into his tone. "It was like I was floating above the world as she turned me, and pointed to what looked and felt like a pestilence that was trying to infect anything it touched. I saw men, women, and children turned into things that I couldn't even explain how they moved."

Sharilar could hear him shudder as armor plates shifted, but after only a moment he continued. "Those things then bowed to a dark figure that I could not see, but felt, like a void of nothingness- no, worse than nothingness, something the opposite of both existing and not existing at the same time." Morgan shook his head. "Sorry if I sound a bit crazy there, but that's honestly how it felt."

"Oh, I can believe that entirely," Sharilar responded, looking askance herself as she briefly recalled her own experience with servants of the Old Ones.

"There were others who had already joined the fight. People, animals, the forest itself. And suddenly I was there too, fighting among them." Morgan stopped, then shook his head. "That's pretty much all I remember. The only other thing that I can recall is that for some reason one of the others fighting seemed to stand out. A fox, of all things, black as obsidian."

The last sentence hit Sharilar with all the subtlety of a crossbow bolt, and it was all she could do not to visibly react. "That's... quite unusual," she finally managed to reply, mentally adding 'and very interesting.'

"I know, right? I once saw one that was all white, when I was travelling to the far north with my teacher, and I've seen plenty in these lands with fur of red or brown, but never black. Do you think it means something?"

The shapeshifted fox just gave a small shrug. "These things have a way of happening, whether we want them to or not. What matters more is what comes after, and that comes down to your steel and my magic."

Morgan looked like he was about to say something in response, but thought better of it and turned his attention back to the trail they were heading down. The rest of the day's travel went similarly with little conversation, eventually leading to the pair setting up camp at the edge of the Longwood as the sun dipped below the horizon.

One of the first purchases Shar had made was a magical pack that extended the space inside to store more inside than it should be. She had already gotten more than her money's worth out of it, and again it proved its worth as pieces of a tent were pulled out and assembled into something that could provide some small measure of protection and privacy.

Her paladin travelling companion on the other hand carried his travelling supplies a bit more mundanely, in a bundle wrapped behind his riding saddle. By the time he had stripped some of his armor and started unloading, Sharilar had finished with her task and was searching for rocks and wood for a firepit.

Supper was some waybread and dried meat, with a bit of small talk comparing life under a church with life among the caravan. The conversation continued on and off, until Sharilar found herself yawning in the middle of recalling an amusing story involving a dog, a shipment of flour, and the caravan master's son.

Trying not to smile, Morgan took the momentary interruption to stand up and stretch, the popping of his back audible to Sharilar's sharp hearing. "I'd love to listen to the rest of that story, but I need to be well-rested for tomorrow. We made better time than I'd thought and I think we can make it to Ashtalon by midday, if we start early enough."

Sharilar tilted her head slightly, then nodded. "Fair enough," she responded as she also levered herself onto her feet. "Sleep well, and Luna watch over your dreams."

The blonde-haired paladin paused halfway to his tent at the blessing, to glance back. "A moon-follower, eh?" Shar started to answer, but he had turned around and was already performing a small genuflection. "Prime guard you, both tonight and tomorrow. And please, remember I'm the one that should be doing the fighting." The worry in his voice gave the kitsune gypsy a bit of pause, as the divine warrior turned back and crawled into his tent to bed down.

Shaking her head, she turned back and slipped into her own tent, reverting to her natural black-furred form as the tent flap closed behind her. He was a good man, but damned patronizing. Still, she admitted to herself as she stripped out of her clothing, it was hard to blame him given that she didn't exactly look like a ruin-walker or master of any magical arts. Appearing as an unassuming fortune-teller had served her well for a long time, and likely still

would, but at times like this she sometimes found herself wishing she appeared just a bit more imposing.

Setting the outfit to the side, she gently touched that deep reservoir at the core of her being, calling forth the slightest bit of Otherness to bathe her clothes and herself in a black un-glow. Cause and Effect bent just slightly as fingers and tongue twisted in ways that should not have been physically possible, the unpronounceable words so quietly spoken even Sharilar could only just barely hear herself. As the last syllable fell from her muzzle, reality reasserted itself, leaving herself and her outfit as clean as if they had just been washed. A bath in a nearby stream would have been much more relaxing, but she wasn't about to risk it less than a day's walk from a potential cultist stronghold.

"Speaking of which," she murmured to herself as she slid her fortune deck from her belt pouch, "let's see if the Fates have anything interesting to say."

Shuffling the deck, she reached inside herself once more, to ever so gingerly brush against the dark tapestry of stars overhead, preparing herself to see what possible future lay in store for her at the ruins of Ashtalon.

The first card, showing where she came from, depicted the Knight of Blades. It didn't take much mystic ability to determine who that was referring to! It did show though that there may be more to this trip than just a vision for her so-called "protector."

Slowly, she drew the second card, indicating where she was at now, and flipped it over. The Fool, reversed.

Instinctively she half-folded her ears back as she looked at the card, the surprise no doubt evident on her face if anyone had been there to see it. While she knew she had volunteered herself rather spontaneously for this, she wasn't going to let a chance to prevent what had happened to her from happening to others slip by. What the cards seemed to be telling her though was that she was possibly being too reckless with this. Tailtip twitching uncertainly, she placed it next to the Knight of Blades and drew the next card.

The Tower. As she looked at it, for a brief moment there was another image superimposed on the card, a crumbling spire of stone, half-collapsed, but with a black light she was all too familiar with shining from the top floor. Then, the image faded, leaving her with just the image painted on the card itself.

Well, now she knew where they needed to go, Sharilar thought as she placed it onto her blanket, in its proper place depicting her journey's destination. The fact that the tower representing destructive conflict also lined up with their enemies holing up in one was typical of the perverseness of the universe, especially when dealing with that unfathomable Other.

The next card, representing the obstacles in their path, depicted the Wagon, but like the Fool earlier, it was also reversed. Two headstrong people going head-to-head with no backing down... hopefully that was referring to the head of whomever this cult is, and not the paladin not approving of the source of her magic. It's not like she liked it much herself, but in life, sometimes you just have to play the hand you're dealt.

That left two cards. Curious, Sharilar drew the next card, representing failure, and snorted softly. Death. Doesn't take much knowledge to translate that card, considering where they were going.

The final card represented what would come of success. Furrowing her brow, her ears perking forward out of curiosity, she flipped it over.

The Sorcerer. Rather than a concrete image like the Tower, this one gave her a feeling of burgeoning power as she held it. A sense of something just beyond the horizon, figuratively and literally.

Shaking herself a moment to rid herself of the trepidation she was beginning to feel towards tomorrow, Sharilar returned the cards to the deck and replaced them in her silken belt pouch. There was no point in going back now, and whatever was going to happen was going to happen, one way or the other. All that remained was seeing what end they would bring about.

The remainder of the trip went smoothly, and the midday sun found the unlikely pair standing outside the crumbled remains of what used to be city walls. It was almost eerily quiet, with only the sound of the wind accompanying them.

"No guards?" Sharilar asked, affording the paladin a quick glance as she kept a lookout for any movement.

The soft clanking from the shrug Morgan gave in response sounded like an avalanche in the quiet surrounding them. "Overconfident. Would you set guards if you had limited manpower and plenty of magic to watch for you?"

Shar just shook her head a moment in disbelief. "Well, no one ever said that cultists were the brightest bunch, but the last bunch I had a run-in with were at least competent."

"Last bunch?" The surprise in the paladin's normally serene tone was obvious, but Sharilar put it aside as she turned her full attention back to the crumbled wall. A few murmured words and twisted fingers let her focus past the physical reality around them, her eyes unfocusing- or maybe hyper-focusing would be a better words as she peered into the foundations of reality itself.

Within moments, metaphor overlaid reality. She had discussed the effect once before with a student of the arcane, and found to her surprise that everyone sees the fundamental nature of the world differently, based on their own expectations. A mage whose experience with magic was primarily through writings, for example, would see spells and magical effects manifested as words written onto the object of the casting, or floating in the area affected. A healing priest may see everything in auras, with positive affects a healthy blue while negative effects show a scarlet color.

For Sharilar, magic manifested as threads, weaving in and around the tapestry that she had learned to view the world as. Hue and brightness told her what to expect, and how thick the cord was typically gave her a clue as to how hard it would be to sever.

A few moments of searching led her to find the loose end she was searching for. Tracing it quickly led to the first of what appeared to be two or three spells layered on top of each other. Tightening her focus, the threads glowed with a malignant indifference to the world around them as she examined them in greater detail.

“Looks like... an alarm spell, tied in with a trap to engulf the trespasser in flames. Hardly original, and whomever did this was sloppy. Typical for Far Realm cultists, too wrapped up in their ‘transcendence’ to really think.” Morgan said something in response, but his question or comment went ignored as the kitsune began to carefully separate thread from thread, more unpronounceable words falling from her lips as she unweaved the alarm spell and let it fall to nothingness. A few more twists allowed the trap spell to do the same, and with the wards barring their way gone, Sharilar let her attention fully snap back to the “real world” around her.

The first thing she noticed was the strange look Morgan was giving her. “What? Did I suddenly grow a second head, or sprout a tail or something?” Shar asked, half-jokingly. When she’d first started making use of her abilities, more than once a ghost of her actual tail had appeared; particularly when she drew on her own innate kitsune magic. She’d managed to get that mostly under control, but she’d also been concentrating fairly heavily to stop any signals escaping the alarm spell before it disintegrated.

“That... spell, just now- I’ve been around more than a few magic users and it did not sound like any magic I’ve ever heard. There was something.. off.. about it?” The paladin’s brow seemed to furrow even further, hands waving a bit as he sought the words to describe his concern. “I know I don’t understand the language, but the sounds just... felt wrong.”

Sharilar just gave him a small shrug. “Not all magic is the same, even when it is the same. Hells, you’re a paladin. If I was evil, you’d be able to tell in a heartbeat, wouldn’t you?”

“Barring certain masking magics, yes.” The reminder seemed to put him at least a bit more at ease, but the sudden hawk-like stare sent a shiver down the kitsune’s spine. “Forgive my

impudence, but I had to double-check. I see no sign of any magic that could block me out, and your soul seems about as clean as anyone else's in Prima's eyes."

Mentally, Sharilar raised an eyebrow at that. She knew herself fairly well, and while she couldn't argue that assessment, she also knew where she drew her power from, and how it had nearly brought her to ruin. "Well, thanks for the vote of confidence," she responded after a moment, schooling her expression into nonchalance. "Now I believe we have some cultists to deal with?"

"I have some cultists to deal with." The tone in Morgan's voice this time was firm. "While I don't know what experiences you may have had with these sorts of people, I am armored. You, are not."

"And what would you do if they have more than one layer of wards, hmm?" Sharilar asked, trying not to bristle at the sheer dismissal in his words. "Besides I have no need of armor for protection."

Within moments, black and purple shadows erupted from the ground around her feet, rising up to engulf her. Before Morgan could react beyond drawing his sword, the shadows had enveloped her entire body and melded with it, giving her very form a shadowy appearance.

"See?" Sharilar said, allowing herself a bit of a smirk as she lifted a hand in a gesture of traditional showmanship, small tendrils of shadow rising from it. As a whole, the kitsune gypsy's human form appeared mostly unchanged - the only major difference was that her entire body now had a shadowy tint, as if she was just the slightest step out of phase with the rest of the world. Here and there, tendrils of darkness rose from her to dissipate almost instantly, enhancing the impression that this was a being of shadow. Only her purple eyes remained fully unchanged, almost seeming to glow from within.

"Hmmm..." Morgan had lowered his sword once it was apparent this wasn't some magical attack on the gypsy woman, but still seemed far from pleased. "And this would protect you from bolt and blade?"

"Better than some armors," she replied, resting her hand on her hip. "Now, can we-"

Morgan barely had time to raise his sword again as a creature barreled out of the ruins to slam into Sharilar's back, cutting her off and causing her to stumble forward. Whirling around, she found herself face-to-seeming-face with her attacker. In shape, it was human, but it had neither hair nor clothing on its leathery body. In place of a face was several slits and whorls of flesh, but despite the lack of eyes it could obviously speak. Reflexively taking another step back, she felt the longsword it carried slash at her shadowy form, but this strike bounced off with little effect.

The thing's focus on Sharilar was its downfall, as Morgan stepped forward, his sword flashing with holy light. It swung down mercilessly, cleaving through its left shoulder in one smooth stroke and embedding itself firmly into the creature's torso.

The wordless howl it let loose made it clear that it did indeed feel pain as green, syrupy goo oozed from the wound. Raising a hand, Sharilar joined the assault, a darker green liquid spraying from her palm directly into what should have been the creature's face. As its few features began to melt under the acidic stream, it took another wild swing, this one missing entirely.

Stepping forward, Morgan pulled free his sword, still glittering with golden light, and swung once more. This time, the keening wail it had been crying fell silent as its head smacked into the ground with a wet plop, shortly followed by the now-headless body.

For a few moments the only sound was heavy breathing as the two adventurers took stock of themselves and the thing that had attacked them. It was Sharilar that broke the silence first.

"Well, so much for going undetected."

That earned her a glare from Morgan, but it was obvious his heart wasn't fully in it. "If I told you to go now, you'd just follow anyways, wouldn't you." It was more a statement than a question, and Sharilar gave him a half-smile in return.

"Now you're getting it," she replied, gesturing towards the dilapidated stone structures past the crumbled wall. "Lead on, o holy one."

Shaking his head in mild exasperation, Morgan stepped over the stone debris left by the wall and led the way down what had once been a side street. Sharilar followed a short distance behind, looking and listening for any foes approaching from the sides or back.

The next several minutes were tense, as the pair made their way deeper into the ruined city, with no signs of opposition. The tower in the middle seemed to loom over them as they drew closer- especially to Shar, as it matched what she had seen in her momentary vision the night before.

Despite trying to keep her attention on the area around her, the tower seemed to grow in her awareness with each step closer. It was with a bit of chagrin that she nearly ran into Morgan without noticing, who had stopped just before an upcoming major intersection, one hand half-raised..

Peering around the broad-shouldered warrior, Sharilar spotted the small group of malformed creatures down the left road. Each was like a small bag of flesh on legs, with oddly-placed

mouths and arms that came out at different angles at each one. There weren't just one or two either, but at least 20 of them milling around the remains of a fountain in the next intersection,

Giving what she hoped was a comforting pat on his shoulder, Sharilar stepped forward, murmuring a call to distant mists. Within moments, a fog surrounded them that was so dense that the shapeshifted kitsune couldn't even see her own hand in front of her face.

"This won't last long," she whispered urgently, giving Morgan's pauldron a slight tug. "Let's move, quickly."

As they exited the fog onto the northbound street, Sharilar paused, listening intently. After a moment, she gave the paladin a nod. "Doesn't sound like they noticed us. Let's keep moving."

As they resumed their careful travel, Morgan couldn't help commenting, "I could have taken them, you know."

"You mean we," Shar corrected with rolled eyes. "And yes, but we don't know what their leader is up to while we play with his discarded toys, so the faster we get into that tower, the better." "Discarded toys?" Morgan stopped again, turning around to face the gypsy woman. "Those things looked a bit more deadly than a child's plaything!"

"Perhaps," Shar acknowledged, "but tell me: did they 'feel' to you like the stalker we killed at the entryway?"

That made the paladin pause in what had been about to become a lecture or rant of some sort, and when he replied, it was with a more thoughtful tone. "I sensed no evil from those creatures, just..." he paused a moment, as if seeking the right words. "...confusion."

"Confusion is probably a good way to put it." This time, it was Sharilar standing with arms crossed, giving the lecture as if the paladin was a recalcitrant child. "Those are usually the first experiments a devotee of the Shapers of Flesh performs, practicing in the re-working of living tissue. Once they finish practicing on their lessers, they then use the knowledge to 'perfect' their own forms and those of their allies."

As the look of dawning realization on Morgan's face quickly turned to horror, Shar simply gave a small nod in acknowledgement, her voice softer now. "Yes, those were some of the cultists we came here for, and if their master is not dealt with, they'll eventually perform similar experiments on others who didn't choose this fate."

"Well, hells." Closing his eyes, the paladin took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "I'm not going to ask how you know about all this, because I really don't think I want to know." Opening his eyes, he forced himself to look directly back into Sharilar's purple orbs. "I sense no malevolence in you, and while the danger is great, this is all... a bit out of my depth," he finished

lamely, waving a hand around to encompass the whole situation they were in. “Still, Prima trusts in me, and I cannot let down that trust. This doesn’t change what we came here to do, it just makes it more urgent that we make it to this leader as quickly as possible.”

Sharilar found a smile tugging at her lips as he finally made the change from “I” to “We,” and she stepped forward to give the newly-resolved paladin a pat on the shoulder. “Then let’s get a move-on before the fog dissipates.”

The remainder of the trip to the tower went without incident. A few more wandering abominations did appear, but were easily bypassed via summoned fog or distraction, leaving them standing before the darkened opening to the enemy’s stronghold.

“Any wards?” Morgan asked, sword drawn as he nervously looked around the small courtyard surrounding the former Mage Tower.

Sharilar concentrated for a moment, before shaking her head. “Nothing that I recognize, but the entire tower seems infused with magical energy that I literally cannot describe. It’s like the world itself is twisted inside.”

With nothing more to do, the two adventurers stepped through the yawning portal, blinking their eyes to adjust to the sudden change in lighting. The foyer was fairly bare, only containing a table, a few chairs, and stairs upward. Standing on the stairs however, was another humanoid figure, flanked by two shadowy figures.

The man in the center could have passed for human at a first glance. Wearing only a pair of breeches, bronzed skin reflected the light from the entrance in a way that suggested his skin literally was metal. They could see his muscles move with each slight shift, as if the metallic skin was molded directly to the muscles underneath.

The finishing touches however clearly marked him as no longer purely human. Below each muscled arm was a second, and in each of the four hands was a darkly-glistening blade. In the middle of his forehead was a third eye socket, containing a softly-glowing crimson gem.

The figures on either side were indistinct, almost as if they were made out of fog. A cloud of darkness surrounded each one, and a careful look showed that they had no lower body, instead fading to merge into the cloud around them. While Sharilar didn’t have the education that many mages had, she knew extraplanar beings when she saw them.

“So-called heroes of the people, here to prevent my mistress from opening the way to the future. How terribly cliché.” The bronze man spoke with a honeyed voice, every word oozing with contempt.

Morgan stepped forward, his knuckles whitening with how hard he was clenching the hilt of his sword. “I’ve seen what you monsters have done to the people who followed you; the corrupted

creatures you've turned them into. If it wasn't us, it would be someone else to stop your horrible acts of depravity."

"And not all of us are heroes," Sharilar added quietly as she reached down into herself for that cold, dark reservoir of power, her purple eyes locked onto the two shadows flanking the four-armed man.

That elicited a short, sharp laugh from their opponent. "Depravity? We only seek the perfection of this poorly designed form that the universe coughed up. They sacrificed themselves nobly, for the greater good."

"Greater good? You dare call that corruption the greater good?" Morgan took a step forward, visibly angry now. "You twisted not only their bodies, but their very minds!"

"My mistress did no such thing. She only opened them to the majesty of the universe! Just like your little kitsune friend there," he replied with a smirk, pointing directly at Sharilar.

"Kitsune?" Confusion replaced anger as the paladin looked over towards his travelling companion.

The metallic four-armed man continued on, not even giving her a chance to reply. "I can sense the power of the Great Ones flows through you as well. Did you come here to steal our secrets for your own?"

To Morgan's surprise, Sharilar actually growled at the bronze being, her eyes almost seeming to glow as they turned from the shadowy escorts to focus directly on her accuser. "Only because of bastards like you," she growled between gritted teeth as her form itself seemed to waver within her shadowy cloak, as if she were out of focus for a moment from the rest of the world. "Fine, you want my attention? You've got it."

As she finished, her form snapped back into solidness. In build she looked exactly the same, but black fur covered her body once more, while purple eyes glared out over a fox's muzzle. A single black bushy tail angrily swished behind her as triangular ears folded back above the same black hair she had sported moments before.

As Morgan stared, trying to process the sudden change, the newly-revealed kitsune slashed a hand in front of her, spitting out a few words that seemed to slide out of reality itself, and the two shadow-creatures flanking the four-armed man folded in on themselves, and vanished with an audible pop.

For a moment both Morgan and their opponent stood there, the paladin staring at the fox-woman, and the bronzed sorcerer staring at where his minions had been. "Well?" Sharilar

spat out, her head turning and gaze locking with Morgan momentarily. "You going to just stand there, or are we going to deal with this corrupt kisama?"

While the meaning of the word was lost on the paladin, the intent got through his momentary paralysis, reminding him of why they were there. Putting aside his questions until after, Morgan charged forward, bringing down his sword with enough force to cleave a lesser being in twain. The four-armed sorcerer barely had time to react, raising his upper arms to deflect the blow as his lower ones drew swords from his hips. As the blade struck, a metallic sound rang out, proving this creature truly had his skin replaced with flexible metal..

Even with the metallic skin, the force of the blow was enough to draw blood, or at least what Sharilar could only assume was blood, as the purple liquid ran down his forearms and dripped off his elbows. As he brought the swords up, Morgan stepped back, letting the two swords slice off strips of metal from his plate armor rather than flesh.

For long moments the two circled each other as Sharilar drew on that unknowable Other once again, fighting the urge to just slam it between the four-armed sorcerer's eyes, and used it to enhance the paladin's speed and accuracy. Swords darted out on both sides to strike, but each swing or stab either landed ineffectively or was deflected by the other's blade. A couple times the sorcerer attempted to shape a spell with his free hands, but each time he did so Sharilar countered it with a spell of her own.

As the stalemate continued, Sharilar found herself reaching even deeper into the illogical, unfathomable nature of the Deeps, feeling the chaotic energy that had so nearly overwhelmed her once upon a time pour into her. For but a moment, she became a conduit for its power, and using all her will, forced a portion of pure insanity into the very being of the bronzed man.

The reaction was immediate. His upper hands went immediately to his head, nonsense words falling from his tongue as the points of his swords dropped towards the floor. Taking advantage of the momentary opening, Morgan struck, and struck again, dropping the metallic being to his knees.

As Sharilar released her mental grip on those primal energies, she fell to one knee, breathing heavily from the exertion of controlling and channeling so much nether energy directly. The pause in her mental assault allowed the sorcerer to regain a few moments of lucidity.

"YOU BITCH," he hissed, managing to barely parry a sideways blow from the paladin with his left blade as he fought to retain control of his faculties.

"In the flesh," she replied, managing a tired half-smirk as that moment passed and the bronze creature's eyes grew unfocused once more.

A moment of pity flitted across Morgan's face, but he could sense the evil rooted in this one's heart. Steeling himself, the paladin called on his own divine bond once again. The sword, once more shining gold, swung down, cleaving the metallic being in twain.

Purple blood exploded everywhere, coating his breastplate and splashing near Sharilar's outstretched hand, before dissolving into a black smoke that faded away. The remains of the creature quickly shriveled shortly after, as if he had suddenly aged a hundred years, leaving nothing but bones.

Morgan kicked the bones aside, then strode over to the black-furred kitsune, looking her over. "Now tell me, what did he mean when he said you channel the same power he does? There's been something strange about you this entire time, and I don't mean your race. I've heard tales of your folk, but I've never heard of any that could send a man into madness."

Sharilar tried not to cringe at the paladin's astringent tone. "It's a long story. Is this really the time?"

Morgan gestured with his sword to the empty room. "No opposition remains. I doubt this cultist's so-called mistress will destroy the world in the next five minutes." Swinging the sword back, he rested the point a few inches from his supposed ally's neck. "So tell me why I should believe you aren't one of these cultists yourself?"

Glaring up at the paladin, Sharilar nearly spat her response at him. "Fine. You want to know why I was so hot and bothered to come after these bastards? Cultists just like them kidnapped me and used me for one of their rituals. Because of them, instead of being blessed by the moon, I'm tied right into that Outer Darkness they so love, and it nearly drove me insane. There's things out there that even their sorcerers don't know of, and things no one should ever know. I will damn well not let this happen to another person if I can stop it."

For a few moments there was silence, as grey eyes looked into purple ones, then Morgan nodded slightly and sheathed his sword, before offering his now-free hand to help her up. "There was no falseness in your tale, and so I apologize. The tales of the kitsune gypsies that make it across the Sword Peaks emphasize their trickery, and I had to be sure."

Taking the offered help, Sharilar levered herself to her feet. "And the fact you already had a vision of a black fox assisting you in this fight didn't?"

Morgan's face momentarily went white as snow as the kitsune brought that fact to mind. "Well... I'll be damned," was what finally came out.

"Let's hope not," Sharilar said, slapping him on the back and giving him what she hoped would come across as an encouraging grin. "I've yet to hear of a paladin who Fell due to being overly cautious."

As the color came back to Morgan's cheeks, he managed a suitably ashamed look, giving her a small nod. "Up the stairs then, I take it?"

Sharilar nodded, the two walking over to the bottom step and starting up the first flight together. After a minute though, it was clear something was not right.

The paladin was the first to notice it. "Shouldn't we have reached the next floor by now?" He asked, glancing back just to confirm that the floor wasn't right below them. The stairs continued downward, out of sight and farther than he had sworn the tower was tall, but the tower wall was still on his left side as it had been the entire time, and even more stairs continued upward..

"It's..." Sharilar chewed over several word choices, before finally settling on one that made sense. "The dimensions in here are twisted. Everything loops back on itself."

"So what do we do, keep walking?"

The black-furred kitsune just shrugged. "Unless you have any better ideas."

After what had to have been at least fifteen minutes of walking, they finally found themselves exiting into a stone room, bigger than the tower itself had been. Above them rose not only more stairs, but platforms as well, and at all sorts of angles. Directly above their heads was another set of stairs, sideways and edge-on to them.

"Prima's mercy," whispered Morgan as he took it all in. "How are we supposed to find our way in this?"

"Very carefully?" Sharilar responded, drawing a glare from the blonde paladin. "Did you really expect that we'd just walk right into their leader's presence without anything else try to stop us?" Morgan looked about to say something, but then thought better of it as Sharilar gestured to the randomly arranged flights of stairs. "Just think of it as a maze in three dimensions."

Tentatively, Morgan started up the stairs, with Sharilar right behind. The first flight of stairs felt solid under his feet, as did the free-floating platform it led to. Taking the second set on the right, he proceeded with more confidence, only to suddenly halt at the archway at the top.

"What's wrong?" Sharilar asked, trying to peer past the suddenly immobile armored warrior. When he didn't immediately answer, she carefully slipped past him, mindful of the lack of railing and open air below, and found herself looking at empty air. "Huh," she commented absent-mindedly, and stuck her hand through the archway.

“Aha!” she exclaimed, then stepped through, her body swinging down and disappearing. Morgan quickly moved to the edge, peering through to find himself nose-to-muzzle with Sharilar, who was kneeling on the opposite side of the stairs and looking back up at him.

“Like, I said, it’s twisted on itself. Gravity is reversed by the archway, and the next set of stairs is there.” Sharilar stood back up on the underside, pointing down(up?) to another set of stairs that continued at a right angle to the flight they had just come up. “Just take a step, and you’ll swing right around.”

Slowly, Morgan rose and took an experimental step, and felt the world whirl around him, making down up and up down.

“Now see? That wasn’t-” A retching sound cut Shar off mid-sentence as Morgan’s lunch made a reappearance, gravity taking effect as it went over the edge to splatter above(below?) them. “Eck, that going to happen every time?”

Wiping his mouth, Morgan just shook his head. “Why can’t they just have a normal flight of stairs leading to rooms guarded by normal evil demons...”

The kitsune seer just shrugged. “If this was normal, you wouldn’t need me here now, would you?” Not waiting for an answer, she turned and continued along the stairway a bit farther, but paused, turning to look back as she realized he was still trying to lever himself back to his feet. “Try and just focus on the stairs, see if that helps.”

Trying to ignore the impossible environment, the vertigo-struck paladin managed to stand , keeping his eyes on the stone stairs and black bushy foxtail before him. “A... little,” he admitted after a moment as he forced everything else out of his mind. “I... should be able to continue, but you’ll need to protect us both if we’re attacked out here.”

“Now there’s a change,” Sharilar replied, a hint of teasing in her voice. “We should be fine though. The entire point of this area is likely to delay intruders, not stop them.”

The pair made it through the remaining stairs with little trouble; Sharilar leading the way, with Morgan focusing purely on the stairs and black-furred tail before him. Several times Morgan got a small reprieve in the form of a lab or hallway, and while they heard signs of movement, they did not run into any other living beings. In several of these rooms they saw dropped objects of odd shapes and construction, suggesting that the occupants had left in a hurry.

Finally, after travelling further than they ought to have needed to given the size of the tower, they found themselves before wooden double doors that looked to be made of oak. Unfamiliar characters were scrawled around the edge, and almost seemed to flex as Morgan looked at them. Each door had a large brass handle, which seemed to have the majority of Sharilar’s attention as she leaned in close to examine them.

After a few moments, she straightened back up, taking hold of both handles.. “Not seeing any magical shenanigans on the handles, and any chance of surprise we had was long gone, so here we go.”

As Morgan drew his sword, Sharilar attempted to turn them, but the metal levers barely moved. “Huh, seems to be locked.”

Morgan’s brow furrowed at that. “So after facing strange creatures, a powerful sorcerer, and stairs that defy the laws of reality, their final defense is a lock?”

Sharilar shrugged, stepping back from the doorway. “Sometimes the mundane can succeed where magic fails - especially when anyone with sense would have expected magical obstacles. So, master paladin,” the kitsune said as she turned to the divine warrior, waving an arm towards the doors, “shall we demonstrate your delicate lock-picking technique?”

The circular room had once been a mage’s study, but where a desk had once stood, a stone altar loomed. Before it crouched a woman with flaming red hair and piercing green eyes. A threadbare mage’s robe hung off her shoulders, and under it a simple strip of shockingly yellow cloth bound her chest. Around her waist was a golden loincloth, the fabric pooling between her knees. Tomes in varying ages and conditions littered the floor, but the red-haired woman paid them no heed as she sketched out markings on said floor with a piece of blood-red chalk.

She ignored the first loud thump, as well as the second, putting the finishing touches on a rune shaped vaguely like a snake in a seizure. The third one coincided with a groaning sound from the wooden doors, finally pulling the woman’s attention from her scrawlings.

Frowning, she rose, raising a hand to cast a fortification spell, but she was a moment too late. The doors slammed apart, the still fastened lock flying across the room as the blonde-haired and silver-armored paladin who had smashed through them stumbled to a halt. A moment later, a black-furred fox-like woman, dressed in gypsy clothes and sporting even darker hair and purple eyes, strode through the shattered opening to stand next to the warrior as he caught his bearings.

“Ah. the sacrifices have brought themselves. How convenient,” When the red-haired woman spoke, her voice sounded like claws across a chalkboard.

“There shall be no more sacrifices, of any kind,” Morgan responded, raising his sword to point it at the woman “In the name of the Lords of Light, prepare yourself for judgement.”

She let out a loud laugh at that. "Your gods are but children compared to mine! If- don't touch that!" the robed woman screeched out as she noticed Sharilar kneeling down a moment to examine the writings on the ground.

"Not bad penmanship, but you got your xrlf mixed up with your phtmp. Not to mention, this little bit here," Sharilar added as she pointed to another section of illegible scrawling, "you got your alephs backwards." Ignoring the surprised looks from both paladin and cultist, Sharilar rose back up, brushing dust off her breeches. "If you'd tried to activate this, not only would it have failed to provide a pathway for the King in Yellow, but you would have turned the tower inside-out and opened a 6th dimensional pathway through Betelgeuse to Cthugha's domain."

The two others just continued to stare, and Sharilar held her hands out in a semi-shrug, splaying ears just a little. "What? I happen to like not having my universe turned inside out because someone doesn't know how to cross their ts properly."

The woman's cheeks darkened and she almost seemed to tremble in growing rage. "I will NOT be talked down to by a lowly animal! I am the greatest shaman of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and I do not make mistakes!"

"Well, miss 'shaman,'" Sharilar replied, perking her ears with a foxy smirk, while Morgan wavered between confusion and amusement. "This 'lowly animal' apparently is better versed in inter-dimensional linguamatics and planar harmonics than you." She paused but a moment, before adding with an even bigger smirk, "not to mention a better dresser."

"I will NOT BE INSULTED BY THE LIKES OF YOU!" The shaman was practically screaming now. "MAKAT'N T'LRG! COME FORTH AND FEAST!"

Smoke rose from the ground, shaping itself and solidifying into a lanky wolf with red-brown fur and glowing red eyes. It tensed to attack as the crazed shaman began to ready another spell, but Morgan took a step to the right, interposing himself between the summoned beast and Sharilar.

"You get the shaman," he called over his shoulder as a golden glow began to radiate from his sword and armor. "I may be no mage, but I know a hellhound when I see one! This one's mine."

Barely taking the time to nod, Sharilar sidestepped left, her own hands weaving in counterpoint as she identified the shaman's incantation and pulled the interleaving threads of magic apart with her own counterspell. "No more reinforcements for you!"

"Fool bitch!" The shaman practically spit the words at the kitsune. "I don't need summons for you and your pet paladin. Have a taste of my true power!" Her hands moved again, this time in

ways that Sharilar could not follow, and suddenly everything around her seemed to shift into gloom.

"Really?" The black-furred fox-woman shook her head, voice dripping with sarcasm, then looked right at the shaman, glowing purple eyes seeming to pierce the sudden gloom surrounding the kitsune. "A little darkness is your 'true power'?"

The shaman looked taken aback a moment, then quickly launched into another spell. Sharilar tried to follow it, but this time she only realized what it was a moment too late, as an olive-green cloud faded into reality, an indescribable stench already beginning to assail her sensitive nose.

"Oh *cough* well done," Sharilar managed to get out, sparing a glance towards Morgan in time to see him deflect a blow from the hellhound. While his armor sported several deep scratches, she saw no signs of blood from him, and several deep gashes in the hellhound's side were already leaking fire. Fighting back the nausea, she envisioned the spells surrounding her and once more unwove her opponent's magic, sending the cloud of stench back to nothingness.

The shaman had taken advantage of the momentary opening to run back to the makeshift altar. Several glowing symbols hung in the air, pulsing black as she started to draw out another one.

Sharilar's jaw dropped open, her ears flattening as she identified the spell the crazed red-haired woman was trying to assemble. "By all the- dammit woman, I told you, if you try that spell now, you'll erase us all from existence at best, and trap us all in nothingness at worst, yourself included!"

Finishing another sickly-glowing rune, the robed shaman turned back to gloat at the gypsy seer. "One way or another, I shall wipe away the insult of your existence, and my Lord shall reward me well."

Reaching deep, Sharilar gathered a ball of concentrated madness in her clawed hands. "You think you know your so-called Lord? Here, have a taste of what they are truly like!" Taking a step back, the kitsune practically threw the mass of tortured dimensions and impossible colors at the shaman.

As it struck, an unearthly howl rose from her throat. She clawed at her own face like a wild animal, tearing bright red strips of flesh from it as her eyes tried to roll back into her head. Falling to her knees, the crazed woman seemed to regain lucidity for a moment, clear green eyes staring daggers at the vixen who had filled her head with madness.

"Then... we all fall," she hissed, quickly scratching out one more sign with bloody fingernails before Sharilar could step forward to stop her. As it flared up in a color-that-was-not-a-color, the woman collapsed, eyes rolling back as inhuman noises continued to burble from bleeding lips.

“Morgan, we gotta move! Now!” Sharilar called, turning her attention back to the holy warrior's fight as the room shook around them.

“I’m a bit busy,” he called back from the far side of the room as he parried another bite with the flat of his golden blade. “I don’t know what she did but this thing is tougher than it should be!”

“Leave it!” she shouted back as the room shook again, dust falling from the ceiling.

“Can’t!” he shouted back as he took a swipe that the beast sidestepped with ease. “If I let up this thing’ll rip my throat out!”

Cursing, Sharilar closed her eyes, and opened her mind’s eye wide, trying not to flinch at the cacophony of magic that assaulted it. The chain reaction had already started, and she could see/feel the threads of reality beginning to fray as eldritch energies poured into it. Turning her attention back to the altar, she examined the shaman’s handiwork again. There was something nagging at a corner of her mind.... There!

The last rune was nearly complete, but the shaman had not managed the final line before slipping back into madness. It wasn’t much of a flaw, but if Sharilar could trap the eldritch magic and send it back somehow, they might be able to survive this.

But how? It would take hours to draw the proper channeling runes on the ground, and changing the existing ones might just make things worse! All she needed was an outlet for the massive power welling from the stone altar, a conduit straight to the darkness between stars...

All at once it hit her, and Sharilar couldn’t help but give a short, sharp laugh at the irony of it all. There was one way to do this, but if she slipped even the slightest bit, she’d face the same fate she had almost experienced at the heart of that ritual years ago.

Stepping over the madly giggling cultist, the kitsune placed both hands on the altar, feeling the unnatural energy flowing through it make her fur stand on end. Drawing on every bit of discipline and willpower she had, she grasped at the energies flooding into it, letting them flow into and through her, into the deepest reaches of her soul.

She thought she might have heard a word spoken, but she could not let herself be distracted. As she felt her very being begin to twist and fray, she reached out again, across time and space itself for the Darkness Between, grasping at the essence of nothingness and the untapped potential therein.

It was like being stretched nearly to the point of snapping, yet at the same time she felt like she was going to explode from the power filling her. Using every bit of willpower at her disposal, she guided the river of eldritch energy, letting it flow into the vast emptiness between the stars as each moment seemed to stretch into eternity.

Then, just as suddenly as it began, the flow of the chaotic energies halted. Sharilar could feel the void trying to pour back into her, and drawing on every bit of her mental strength and will, she forced the connection closed. Slowly, ever so slowly, the pathway within her soul closed, leaving her trembling as it finally snapped shut, sealing her off from the terrible emptiness before it could swallow her as well.

“Shar!” With what felt like titanic effort, she raised her head to see Morgan running towards her, the hellhound’s remains turning to ash behind him. Giving him a weak smile, she felt a familiar darkness gently enfolding her, her eyes slipping closed as she fell into a dreamless sleep.

“Uuurrrgghh...” Slowly, Sharilar opened her eyes, her head throbbing like she’d used it to break down a stone wall as she tried to remember where she was and why she was here. A bright light shone in from somewhere, making a bright stripe across the blanket covering her, but it felt like she was laying on something too firm to be a inn bed.

“Thank Prima,” came a muttered response to her left. Carefully turning her head, a blonde-haired paladin in scratched-up and gouged silver armor came into view, and the memories of the last few days came flooding back.

“Where’s that cultist?” Sharilar asked, a moment before spotting the tied and gagged figure against the far wall. “Nevermind, how long was I out?”

“It’s been nearly two days! I-” He paused as she winced and held up a hand.

“Quieter, please. My head feels like I’ve been on a week-long tour of Freeport’s taverns. Two days?”

Morgan nodded, continuing in a softer voice. “After you passed out, I checked for wounds but couldn’t find any, so I figured it was best to let you sleep. There hasn’t been any visitors, so the remaining cultists are either all transformed, dead, or gone.”

After the mention of checking for wounds, Sharilar gradually realized she was feeling the scratchy blanket directly on her body. Lifting it up a bit, she took a peek under, then turned her head back to the paladin as she let it fall again, perking an ear. “Checked me for wounds, eh?”

To his credit, a small blush appeared on Morgan’s cheeks. “I have had medical training you know, and I needed to make sure you were alright.”

Sharilar managed a weak grin at the paladin’s response. “So, liked what you saw?”

Her question only deepened the blonde human's blush. "My order does not take advantage of unconscious women."

Sharilar's grin grew a bit bigger. "That doesn't answer the question..." As Morgan's entire face seemed to turn bright red, Sharilar couldn't hold it in any longer, breaking into a nice long laugh, which got her a confused look from the abashed warrior. "I'm just teasing," she finally was able to say once she got her amusement back under control, though giggles kept trying to slip out. "So, apart from this thrice-damned headache, how do I rate?"

"Perfectly, ah, healthy," he responded, a hint of a blush still sticking around. "I couldn't tell why you passed out. What happened with Miss Crazy over there while I was dealing with her demon?"

"Well, to put it simply, she was flooding the tower with magic to make it blow up, and I used myself to send the magic.. Uh.. elsewhere," she finished lamely, with a wave of her hand, before holding it to her head again, rubbing at a temple near the base of one ear. "Gives you one hell of a hangover."

"And..uh... something else too. You... mightwanttolookatyourbutt," he finally got out all in one rush, his blush threatening to return again.

"What about it? Sharilar asked curiously as she rolled onto her side, reaching down to lift the blanket. "I know it's nice, but I don't need you to tell me that."

While her words were light, putting the headache mostly aside, she had realized there was something that felt off about her lower body. Looking under the blanket, she now realized why: where one tail had been, she was now sporting two black fluffy foxtails. Concentrating, she tried moving one, then the other, and each moved just as she directed. On top of that, controlling the tails felt perfectly natural, like she had been born with them.

"Well, huh," She finally commented, before rolling back onto her back, letting the tails splay out on either side under her wool cover. "That's unexpected."

Morgan's brow furrowed, his embarrassment forgotten. "You make it sound like finding a copper on the ground."

Sharilar gave a small shrug as she laid her head back on the pack that had served as a makeshift pillow. "It's not unknown among my kind, but I never expected it to happen to me." Noting the even more confused look on his face, she continued. "You see, our tails are not just a part of us, but are also a representation of our innate magical potential. The more powerful a kitsune is, the more tails they have. Our greatest heroes, at the height of their power, had nine of their own. Or so the tales say," she added at the disbelieving look she received.

"The stories I heard said nothing of that... though the stories said nothing of multiple tails at all," Morgan admitted.

"It's... not something we often speak of," Sharilar replied. "Having even two tails is an achievement I had never expected to ever reach, after I nearly lost myself. Most of my folk, even wizards with five times the magic I have, never even accomplish that much."

The two sat(or laid) in silence for several minutes as they pondered this new development. "So, what now?" Morgan finally asked.

Sharilar fought the urge to wince at the sudden sound, the throbbing in her head renewing itself after the silence. "Well, you've got a prisoner to take back to your order, and I've got a nice soft feather bed waiting with my name on it. Give me a few hours to sleep off this headache, then we can get moving."

Nodding, Morgan levered himself back up on his feet. "I'll go feed the prisoner then and keep watch while you rest."

"You do that," Sharilar replied as she closed her eyes. Gingerly, she reached within herself to touch her magic, and clenched her teeth as a dull pain ran through her core. Carefully, she reached out again with even more gentleness, and found herself marveling at the increase in strength and flow that she could already sense. Still, there was also a soreness that she could only compare to an overworked muscle.

Steeling herself, she drew on a small bit of that magic and whispered a healing spell. As the headache finally began to fade, so did her consciousness; sleep taking her in its arms like a gentle lover and leading her back into nothingness.

The noonday sun shone down on the crossroads, with no clouds to dim its glare. A small bird sat on the signpost, cocking its head at the discussion below.

"You sure you don't want to come with?" Morgan asked from atop his horse as Sharilar handed him the second horse's reigns. The animal was bare of all now but their prisoner, who was slung across its back like a sack of potatoes. "We may be a holy order, but there are still plenty who aid us without being of us."

Sharilar, once more in human guise, shook her head as she stepped back. "Thanks, but no. I prefer my freedom to go where and when I want." After a moment's pause, she added "For now, at least. I also need to explore just what this second tail actually means for my magical ability, and I don't want to risk anyone getting hurt if a test goes wrong."

"I suppose that's fair," Morgan replied, with perhaps a slight hint of wistfulness in his voice. "Well, I hope you find the answers you seek, then. May Prima's Shield guard and protect you."

"And Luna's grace go with you as well," Sharilar replied with a small smile. "And who knows, we may meet again one day."

The paladin nodded as he turned the two horses to face westward. "Until then!" he replied.

Sharilar waited a few moments, watching the warrior ride off into the distance, before regarding the signpost curiously. "Now where to go," she murmured to herself. "There's got to be someplace around here where a gal can make a little money..."