

From a young age, Taks had fantasies of sneaking into the city of Carsath. Yes, he'd seen paintings of it before, but he never thought he would ever actually *visit* it; the foremost reason being that, among humans and other "more civilized" races, his kind is generally frowned upon, in a way that generally ends in an arrow through the skull of the offending kobold. For that reason, even when he was young, he realized that he was unlikely to ever truly see the city up close.

Yet, in defiance of the odds, here he was, living his dream, even if he was reasonably certain that none of his childhood fantasies particularly involved being enclosed in a barrel half-filled with fish, staring out through a hole in the side.

He looked back down at the note he was carrying. His eyes being so attuned to the dark, he could easily make out the writing. Written upon the note were a variety of appearance traits. Having never met an adventurer in person (outside of troops among his own kind, of course), he asked around for various common elements of appearance among adventurers. A few had some helpful tips, but many of them instead had far less useful things to say, such as "You'll know one when you see one." Taks was reasonably certain he wouldn't, given that he'd never seen one before to compare to.

That said, the more concrete tips he'd received were not at the pinnacle of helpfulness, either. For example, a number of not-exactly-adventurous-looking folks had cloaks on, the city guards had shiny armor on, and the only one he saw with long, flowing golden hair was a little girl who he doubted had any form of adventuring experience.

Overall, this was not looking to be a very productive venture. As time went on, the joy of being in a human city, already tempered by the knowledge that he could be discovered at any time, was fading, for with each minute that passed, his odds of successfully finding an adventurer in a timely manner were dwindling, as were the odds of his clan's survival.

Then, as the sun was getting low in the sky, he heard a female's voice, at a higher pitch than he would expect from a human. "Y'know, I just don't understand why we're involving ourselves with *kobolds*, of all things."

Well, *that* was certainly significant! Instinctively, Taks tried to locate the source of this voice, but alas, with only a small hole offering a view of the outside world, there was not much he could do without peeking his head out of the top and risking getting caught.

"It's what they feel is best, and while it is definitely unusual, desperate times do call for desperate measures," spoke a male voice.

This piqued his curiosity even more. Desperate measures? Involving the kobolds? He could only think of one thing that could mean and it most definitely wasn't good.

"I think the word you're looking for is 'insane', Mark," the woman said. It was at this point that the two came into view and Taks was finally able to get a good look at them.

The man, apparently known as "Mark," was a tall fellow, even by the standards of a human. He had long, dark brown hair in a ponytail – an unusual style of hair, from what Taks has seen, at least for a male. He wore a suit of leather armor, reinforced with metal studs along the surface. He wore a leather backpack, quite sturdy and worn from the looks of it. On his belt were a nuber of things, including a full pouch, a water-skin, a wooden key with an ornate design carved at the top and what looked like a gilded flask of some sort. Most notable among the various objects adorning his belt, though, were a small crossbow and a dagger. This man definitely seemed ready for battle and certainly seemed to carry himself like a warrior. A ranger, perhaps?

The woman, meanwhile, was a gnome. With the brisk pace that Mark was walking at, Taks would have expected a gnome to be struggling to keep pace, but rather than the hasty jog that Taks expected, her

movement resembled the sort of prancing motion that he would far sooner have expected from an elf than from a gnome. She had bluish-purple hair, spiked in a way that reminded Taks of the quills of a porcupine. She was wearing dark blue, flowing robes, with the shade growing darker toward the bottom, with white spots decorating the lower half, becoming more frequent and prominent as the cloth grew darker. It reminded him of a starry night sky. This woman did not seem to have any tools for battle on her person, so Taks felt it was likely that she was a wizard... most likely specializing in illusion, if what he'd heard about gnomes was correct. She also had a backpack, though hers, while also made of leather, was dyed a dark purple, with the symbol of a butterfly on the back, with symbols of shooting stars, the sun, and the moon adorning its wings.

Taks took another glance at the list of traits he'd brought with him, then tore it up into shreds, realizing how unnecessary it truly was.

"Under normal circumstances, perhaps, but we're running out of options," Mark said.

The woman sighed. "Yeah, I know. Still, I'm not getting my hopes up about this working," she said.

Despite the terrible news of the potential attack on his clan, Taks felt himself welling a bit with pride, at the notion that these big, supposedly-superior creatures were so readily admitting that the kobolds were such a threat and would likely come out on top in a battle between them, even if this human and gnome, along with whoever else would join them on this quest, had some sort of secret plan apparently waiting to be unleashed.

"On the bright side, though, if this works, you may be able to explore their caverns," Mark said.

"As long as it isn't in chains," the woman said. Taks gave a shudder at the idea of a *gnome*, of all people, treating herself to a tour of his clan's newly-abandoned lair. He would not stand for it!¹

"Well, all we can do is our best, in the end. What happens shall happen, but for now, we should see about getting some dinner before we head out," Mark said, as the two of them left Taks's field of view.

"Yeah, and pray it isn't our last," the woman said.

"Such is the life of an adventurer, sadly," Mark said.

Their conversation ended there, leave Taks to contemplate the current situation. Much as he felt a bit disgusted by the notion, he could actually empathize a bit with how these two adventurers were feeling – he, too, was about to do something very risky, but very rewarding if it succeeds. That said, he felt a sense of malevolent glee at the prospect of unleashing his plan on two individuals who think they're about to wipe his clan out. Oh, the delicious irony...

He opened the lid up to get out of the barrel and poked his head out, only to find a guard staring directly at him. The hole providing such a limited view, he had not seen the guard coming. The guard was drawing his weapon. Taks had to figure out a plan, and fast!

Taks hopped out of the barrel, holding two fish out in front of him, one in each hand, holding them by the tail-fins. The guard seemed slightly amused, but this did not stop him from raising his sword and closing in.

Then, Taks did a twirl.

The guard stopped in place, lowering his weapon in surprise, as he watched this intruding robed kobold break into a dance with the two fish, seeming to ignore the armed guard entirely. After about

¹ To quote the Pathfinder SRD: "When the gnomes first arrived in the mortal realm, kobolds saw them as perfect victims. This sparked waves of retaliation and reprisal that have echoed on down through the centuries and earned the kobolds' permanent enmity."

twenty seconds of stunned silence, the guard sheathed his sword and walked off, deciding that perhaps it would be best to call it a day early and sleep off whatever illness he had evidently come down with.

Taks gave a sigh of relief, dropped the fish, and began sneaking after the two. He did not really have a plan. Sure, he had a long-term end goal, but as far as managing to remain hidden in nearly plain sight, while still keeping up with the two adventurers, while it was still light out (though not for long), he didn't really have a plan, other than a couple smoke bombs he'd brought with him. Even those would not help very much, for if he used them, the guards would still be looking for him, making his mission that much harder.

Taks was in luck, however. The only ones he could see in the area were the departing guard and the adventurers, none of whom were looking in his direction. Given that he heard no cries of "Eek! A kobold!" or the like, it seemed unlikely that anyone indoors had glanced out the window at him, either. Very soon after he began sneaking, the adventurers entered into a nearby tavern.

Taks snuck up to one of the open windows and peeked inside. The tavern was apparently quite popular, given how packed it was with people. There were barely any tables for the two adventurers to choose from! This was both a blessing and a curse, for Taks. On one hand, there were plenty more eyes in the building to potentially glance over and notice Taks. On the other, however, there were also many more things drawing each person's attention, making each individual person much less likely to notice the kobold peering inside. Additionally, a few of the patrons were clearly too inebriated to know the difference between a kobold and a bar stool at this point, so that was also helpful.

Taks ducked back down below the window, to consider his next move. There was a barrel on one side of him and a crate on another, keeping him outside of easy view of passersby.

"Well, Mab, does this place suit your fancy?" Mark asked the gnome standing next to him.

"You know I don't require much," Mab said, sitting down at a table next to the window, liking the idea of having some fresh air as she dined.

Mark sat down opposite her. "Sounds like a good policy for a traveler to have."

Taks's eyes widened. He didn't feel he could safely check yet, but it sounded a lot like Mark's voice had come from right next to the window he was at. A tremendous stroke of luck indeed, if he was right!

A waiter walked up to the two, dressed in a semi-formal outfit. "Good evening. What might I interest you in today?"

"I've heard this place makes a nice lamb stew," Mark said, "And as for my drink, some fine wine."

"Salad and wine for me, though I don't need a fancy one," Mab said.

The waiter nodded then walked off to the kitchen, to have the meal set in motion.

Once he heard the waiter walk off, Taks decided he would risk a peek. Indeed, the two adventurers from earlier were right next to the window he was hiding outside. Fortunately, the two, along with many others in the tavern, were looking toward a particularly loud and disruptive drunkard, rather than toward the window. Though, quite quickly after confirming what the situation was, Taks ducked back down, not wishing to press his luck.

At about the time the drunkard was calming down, the waiter arrived back with a glass of wine each for the two adventurers and set them down on the table, before walking off again to tend to other tables.

"Oh, the characters you find while traveling, hm?" Mark commented.

“Yeah, one of the best parts, really,” Mab said, leaning back in her chair.

“Yes, I can imagine so. After all, y-“

“OH YOU MAH BAAAYBEEEE, SO PRRRTTY AN’ BRAAA...” The drunkard’s impromptu musical number was cut off by the bartender snatching away his mug, setting five copper coins down on the counter as a refund. “You’ve had quite enough to drink today, good sir.”

Taks popped his head up and looked inside. Sure enough, almost everyone’s eyes were on this disruptive drunkard, including those of the two adventurers, whose drinks were now completely unguarded. Now was the perfect chance to act!

“Y’SHAY IT NOW, BUDDO, BUT YOU AIN’T SEEN NUTT’N YET,” the drunkard shouted, swaying side to side a bit before placing his arms on the counter to stabilize himself, as Taks pulled out a vial of clear liquid.

“Nor do I intend to, good sir,” the bartender said, glaring at the drunkard, as Taks placed the vial temporarily in his mouth, being very careful not to crush it with his teeth as he pulled himself up onto the windowsill.

“I GOT MONEY. YOU WANNA MONEY. AND I WANT MONEY... I mean drink... I mean, I guess I wants the money too, but I WANT MY DRINK!”

Taks removed the stopper from the vial, placing a few drops each in the two wine glasses.

“If you don’t want to be made to leave, you’ll take your money and stop trying to get me to serve you another drink,” the bartender said calmly.

Taks stoppered the vial, then began climbing down from the windowsill. “YOU!” Suddenly, the drunkard pointed toward him, just as he was almost out of sight. At least, Taks was *pretty* sure he was the intended recipient. Given the unfocused gaze and the wavering arm, it was actually fairly difficult to tell. Taks quickly got down out of view, hoping that nobody else saw him and that the word of this drunkard would be dismissed.

“...SHEXY THING!”

Taks blinked twice. Was this human going to try to *romance* him? Being at risk of being discovered and slain was one thing, but now this man had added a layer of awkwardness to the mix. He was a married kobold, dagnabbit!

Taks heard the heavy, erratic footsteps of the man approaching, but instead of the drunkard being next to speak, it was Mab, who uttered a stern “No.”

“Oh c’MOOOON! You know you wa...” It was at this point, though, that Mab, not particularly wanting this to go on any further, pulled out a starknife² and held it such that one of the blades pointed toward the man’s throat, then gave another stern “No.”

“OKAY, okay, SHEESH!” the man said, walking off, as Mab took a sip of her drink.

After a few seconds, Mark took a sip of wine and said, “Much as I do agree with you asserting that no means no, I do think that pulling a blade on him was a bit... excessive.”

“Agreed!” called out the bartender, “I would rather you refrain from such things in my tavern!”

“Well, if *someone* had hired a bouncer or two, I wouldn’t have had to do that, now would I?” Mab said with a huff, before drinking some more of her wine.

The bartender grumbled something too quiet for Mark, Mab, or Taks to hear, then continued with his work.

² Think of a ring with a handle in the middle of it, with four dagger blades pointing outward from the ring in different directions. [For those who desire visual aid...](#)

Mark and Mab continued for a few minutes, idly speaking about no topics that particularly caught Taks's attention, sipping their wine along the way. This continued until Mark noticed a rather curious thing.

Mab's fingernails, with the exception of the ones on her pinky fingers, were reshaping themselves into claws.

Mark took a moment to think about why this would be. Was she a werewolf or some other lycanthrope³? No, likely not. Were that the case, she'd likely only unintentionally change during the full moon, from what he has heard, and it was not even night yet. He was at a loss for any other ideas, however, so he decided he may as well go ahead and ask.

He pointed toward one of her hands. "Excuse me, but..." It was at this point that, looking down at his own pointing hand, he noticed that it, too, was forming claws.

Mab was perplexed, both at the sudden stop to the question and at Mark's sudden look of confused shock, an unusual departure from his general stoic demeanor. "Mark, what's with the p-WAAAH!" She pushed off the floor with her legs in shock, causing her and her chair to nearly fall backward, though she saved herself by quickly grabbing the edge of the table and pulling herself forward.

This outburst drew the attention of a fair number of those in the tavern, and the resulting discussion, some whispered and some loud, began to draw the rest to look as well.

"Uh, Mark? Why do we have claws now?" Mab asked, her voice quivering a bit.

Mark crossed his arms, trying to think through the possible explanations for this. However, he was drawing a complete blank. His realization that a big part of this was due to emotion getting in the way was almost as upsetting to him as the claws situation itself. "I don't particularly know."

Mab sighed. "I was afraid of that..."

Were he not trying to remain as still as he could, Taks would be wagging his tail. From the sound of it, his concoction actually worked! Or at least, somewhat. He still couldn't be fully certain until the transformation was complete. Still, he couldn't help but preemptively congratulate himself on a job well done.

The drunkard stumbled over. "DON'-SHA WORREEE! I STILL LOVE YA, DAAAARLIN'!"

Mab grabbed the man by the collar and pulled him close, holding the claws of her other hand in front of his face. "These claws. Your face. Got it?" She let go.

"SHEEESH! YOU GOTTA MEAN STREAK, AIN'-SHA? I kinda really like the ladieeesh who..." It was at this point that Mab raised her clawed hand again, causing the drunkard to rush back to the stool where he had been sitting. "KAY, OKAY, SHEEEESH!"

Mab took a deep breath, trying to collect herself. It was at this point that she noticed a pressure near her toes. Already having a fair idea what this meant, she took off one of her boots, revealing that her toenails, now, were shaping themselves into claws, as well, with the exception of the nails on her pinky toes.

Looking at her exposed foot, Mark said, "Yes, I feel it too. Much as I hope it stops at the claws, I do not think we'll be let off quite so lightly."

Mab looked back toward Mark. "Yeah, I'll say. Look at your hands!"

Mark looked down at his hands. The palms, thus far, still looked normal, but the tips of his fingers (except his pinkies) and thumbs were starting to become covered in blue scales, along with the backs of his hands. Mab looked down at her own hands and, sure enough, they were in a similar state.

³ I am aware that a were-anything other than a werewolf should be called a therianthrope, not a lycanthrope. The staff of Paizo, however, is evidently not. Since I am using their setting, I shall use their terminology here.

The waiter, at that time, stepped out of the kitchen with a bowl of lamb stew and a bowl of salad. “Your or-DER!?” He stumbled over his own feet in surprise, causing the two bowls to fall and break on the floor, spilling their contents.

“Just because two of our customers are transforming into monsters before our eyes does not mean that isn’t coming out of your pay, Derrin,” the bartender said grumpily.

“Eesh, remind me to never work for this place,” Mab said, taking off her other boot. It was at this point that she noticed that her pinky fingers were somewhat shorter than she remembered them. Was this why they hadn’t formed claws? Were they destined to disappear?

“I somehow doubt you were planning to work here, anyway. That would involve staying in one place for an extended period of time,” Mark said.

“Yeah, I know. Still, though,” Mab said. She wiggled her pinky fingers a bit, after finishing taking off the boot. This was incredibly surreal! Mark did his best not to show it, but he found this sight quite unnerving and was definitely feeling significantly less hungry than he was before.

“I can hear you, you know,” the bartender chimed in.

“Does nobody care about the whole turning-into-monsters thing!?” Derrin shouted.

Mark closed his eyes, as the scales began to spread to cover the rest of their fingers and backs of hands, starting to also show up on the tops and toes of their feet. He was calmer, now, and could think through things more rationally. He doubted this was a spell. Even among this crowd of people, someone casting a spell probably would have been noticed, and there aren’t many places here where a person could have hid, well-lit as the interior was.

He also felt it was unlikely that an enchantment was placed in this area. It would have had to be set up at some point between after the last person to sit here left and before the two of them had sat down. He felt it was unlikely that someone could have set up an enchantment here during business hours, without anyone noticing. Logically, then, it was likely an enchantment on something more portable. Something like...

“Derrin,” Mark said, opening his eyes and gazing toward Derrin.

Derrin jumped back in fear and surprise, the intensity of Mark’s gaze not particularly helping matters. “Please don’t eat me!”

Mark sighed. “No, I do not intend to eat you. I do, however, have a few questions for you. For example, did you retrieve our drinks yourself, or did someone give it to you to give to us?”

“Um... I always go and get them myself,” Derrin answered, looking quite confused.

“I see. And did you open new bottles for the wine you brought us?”

“No, I didn’t,” Derrin said.

“I see. And was there anyone else present in the room when you retrieved the wine?”

Derrin’s face adopted a look of realization, followed closely by horror, as he started backing away. “W-Wait! I didn’t do it! This wasn’t me!”

“I am willing to accept that possibility. However, you must admit, at the very least, that the circumstances do paint you as a strong suspect, agreed?”

“Y... Yes... But it wasn’t me! Please don’t eat meeee!”

Taks briefly had the urge to correct the man, stating that his kind generally consider humans and the like to be a rather poor dining experience, but quickly reminded himself that he needed to remain hidden.

Mark sighed. “No, I’m not going to eat you, Derrin. Just relax,” he said as he started taking off his boots. The claws had been making the boots a bit uncomfortable to wear.

“Relax!? I’m being accused of... transforming people? I’m not sure what you’d call the crime, but whatever it is, I’m pretty sure I’ll get locked up for it, and I’m still not entirely convinced you aren’t gonna eat me!”

“For crying out loud, I’m not going to eat you!”

“Ya gotta admit, you *do* have the teeth for it,” Mab commented.

Mark felt his own teeth with an index finger, noticing that they were now considerably sharpened. “So it seems.” In this motion, he also touched his other fingers to his palm, noticing that much of his palm was now covered in scales. Come to think of it, he also didn’t actually feel the presence of a pinky finger there. He glanced over at his hand and, indeed, there was no pinky finger there anymore, nor was there any trace that there ever was one there at all. He also noticed that, as if to compensate, his remaining fingers were somewhat thicker than they used to be.

Taks had heard that adventurers can be a hardy sort, both physically and emotionally, but he was still quite surprised at the incredibly casual tone with which Mark said that. Is being transformed a common occurrence for adventurers and he just never heard about it?

Mark cleared his throat, trying to clear his head of the whole pinky finger thing. “Trust me. I’m not going to eat you. I’m a paladin.”

Taks felt like snickering, but he didn’t want to give himself away. A paladin, eh? Oh, the irony grows more delicious by the moment! Though, a paladin with a crossbow, a dagger, and studded leather armor? Quite peculiar.

At this point, a guard walked into the bar, currently on his break. Though, he stopped soon after entering, blocking the doorway, as he looked around at the interior of the tavern, particularly at the broken dishes and the two partially-monstrous-looking individuals. “... What.”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Mark said.

The guard drew his sword and approached Mark. “Don’t try to toy with me! I wanna know *exactly* what’s going on! Now!”

Mab stood up and pulled out a starknife. “He said he doesn’t know, and I don’t know either, but if you’re planning on making this a matter of self-defense, I think you’ll find us more than capable!”

Taks was becoming quite excited. Oh, now it was starting! From the sound of it, those two would now have to fight their way out of town! His kobold clan would be the only place they would have left to turn to and his clan would have two new powerful allies!

“Enough!” Mark bellowed. Mab and the guard turned toward Mark. Mab did, indeed, lower her weapon, only to raise it again as the guard turned his weapon toward Mark. “Who are you to tell me how to do my job, huh? You think you can intimidate me? Huh?”

“I was once a guard captain myself, and last I checked, a guard’s job is to protect the people and uphold the law. Now, tell me: How does attacking a citizen who is neither threatening anyone nor breaking any laws further either of those goals?”

“Don’t play mind games with me!” the guard shouted. Mark suppressed the urge to comment on how this guard apparently did not know the difference between mind games and basic logic. He felt such would only escalate the situation.

“While we’re at it, weren’t you and the rest of the guards told about us, while we were present for you to see?” Mab asked.

“Yeah, I remember that! And I shoulda known you were hiding some dark secret from the moment I laid eyes on you!”

“And the moment you heard he was a paladin?”

“Paladins can go bad! Maybe this is some form of divine punishment!”

Mab sighed. “Okay, look, we clearly need a practical demonstration. Mark, heal me!”

“Mab, you aren’t...” At this point, Mab created a gash in her own palm with her starknife, though the tough scales covering her hand made it a lighter wound than she’d intended. Mark sighed. “Very well.” He touched one of his hands to her wounded hand, then his hand began to glow with a holy white light, as the wound quickly sealed itself back closed.

“I... well...” He sighed. “Alright, fine. I’ll accept that you *might* not be evil,” the guard said, sheathing his sword.

“Just give it a rest, already, wouldja?” Mab said, noticing that the scales had begun covering her wrists, now, as well.

Taks felt like stomping. Stupid paladin! Why did he have to ruin everything by... being a paladin!?

“Now that we’ve cleared that up, there are a couple of important matters to discuss. First, the waiter, here, is suspected of having slipped us something in our drinks that is the cause of our present transformations.”

The guard pulled out his sword and pointed it at Derrin. “I’ll make sure he gets what’s coming to him!”

Derrin stood still, able to give nothing more than a terrified squeak.

“To reiterate, he is only *suspected*,” Mark said, trying to hide his annoyance at the situation.

“Uh, right,” the guard said, sheathing his sword..

“After you take him to the proper authorities for questioning, please return here. We will need an escort out of the city. We are far less likely to be attacked on the way out if there is a guard with us,” Mark said.

The guard nodded. “Right!” He grabbed Derrin by the arm. “You’re comin’ with me!”

“Y... Yes, sir,” Derrin said.

“We sure we don’t want to ask for a different guard to come pick us up? This guy seems kinda... unstable,” Mab said.

“I’m right here, you know!” the guard called out. He gave a huff. “Whatever. Let’s go.” He left the tavern at a brisk pace, practically dragging the waiter along with him.

“So... What do we do now?” Mab asked.

“What else can we do but wait?” Mark said.

“Yeah... Guess you’re right,” Mab said. She lifted one of her legs, out of curiosity, and saw that her toes and the tops of her feet were now fully covered in blue scales. She moved her right foot a bit, to watch the sole be overtaken by the scales. “I gotta admit, this is kinda weirdly fascinating.” She then noticed that her big toe had drifted from its normal position, moving toward the heel a bit, and that all that remained of her pinky toe was a pink nub. “...But also kinda freaky.”

Mark looked at his arm, now halfway covered in scales. “Yes, I would say this experience is... unique, to say the least.”

“Yeah, that’s one way to put it,” Mab said, punctuating the statement with a half-chuckle.

At this point, conversation was starting to pick up in the tavern again, and though people were still looking over at the two adventurers periodically, out of curiosity as to how their strange transformation was advancing, but for the most part, things in the tavern were returning to relative normality, though the bartender found himself having to alternate between working his normal job as a bartender and working to make up for the absence of a waiter.

"I do wonder, though, what we're transforming into. It's clearly reptilian, whatever it is," Mark said.

"I'd say probably kobolds or dragons. Those are the only two clawed, sharp-toothed reptiles with blue scales that come to mind," Mab said.

"Hm... perhaps. I suppose we'll find out soon enough, though."

"Yeah. Y'know, it *would* be pretty awesome to be able to fly and breathe lightning and stuff."

Mark chuckled. "Yes, good to look on the bright side, I suppose."

Taks made a mental note to try to look into a blue dragon transformation potion at some point. That *would* be pretty awesome! And he'd love to see the humans try to look down on him *then*! Ha! Though, realistically, Taks knew that it would likely remain just a fantasy. Such a potion would likely require such powerful reagents that, realistically, he'd have a hard time gaining the necessary ingredients. If but only...

Mark looked toward Mab. "You have something on your nose, and no prizes for guessing what."

Mab had a fairly confident guess what Mark meant, but felt her nose anyway. Sure enough, she could feel scales at the tip. Though, she needn't have even checked in that way – Mark's nose, too, was starting to change and their transformations had been progressing fairly evenly.

"Well, I guess this'll..." Mab began.

"HEEEEEEY!" the drunkard called out, approaching the two.

Mab facepalmed. "Oh no..."

The drunkard leaned in close, causing Mab to lean back away from him. "HEY, IF YA... IF YA GOT THOSE NEW HANDSH AND THE FEET ON YA... SO, YER GONNA BE WERE-GATORS?"

Mab was a bit curious about how this man knew what alligators looked like, given that alligators did not live anywhere even close to here. Another Desnan⁴, perhaps? Or maybe he'd seen art of one somewhere? Regardless, she did not particularly feel like asking him about that. Then again, perhaps he *didn't* know what an alligator looks like, considering... "No, most alligators aren't blue," she said, gently pushing him back away.

The man stumbled back, nearly falling on his rear, though using a nearby table to stabilize himself. "THEN GET SOME AIR IN YA, SHEESH!" He then stumbled back to the bar. "MORE ALE!"

"Get your own, I'm not giving you any more!" the bartender called out from across the tavern. He turned back toward the couple he'd just been talking to. "Now, as I was saying, what flavor of pie would y..."

"Sir, you may wish to rephrase your request," Mark called out.

The bartender turned back around, to see the drunkard behind the bar. "Not from my bar, for cryin' out loud!"

"SHEESH, ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT!"

The bartender briefly paused, before he realized that he'd have to spell things out further. "That means get out from behind the..."

The door to the tavern suddenly swung open as the guard from earlier arrived. "Alright! I got it all taken care of! Now, let's get going!" He paused in thought for a moment. "First, though, some ale! Worked up a mighty good thirst!" He walked up to the bar. "A mug of ale, barkeep!"

"I'm over here!" the bartender yelled.

⁴ Worshipper of Desna, whose areas of focus include travel.

“COMIN’ UP, MISTER! A MUG OF ALE FOR YOU, AND ONE FOR ME, AND ONE FOR ME, AND ONE FOR...” the drunkard began.

“Shut up!” the barkeeper interrupted.

Mark cleared his throat. “I sympathize. I know that keeping patrol in heavy armor is no easy task. However, as you can see, our... condition is advancing. I would prefer to exit the town while we still look relatively less monstrous.”

Taks had been feeling a bit pessimistic about the odds of his plan’s success, after the paladin had proven he was a paladin, a rather undeniable proof of one’s morality. However, apparently Mark felt that he still may be attacked on sight if he remained in town! So, maybe he might come to live at and protect Taks’s clan, instead? Maybe?

“Well, guess ya got a point, there. Alright! Let’s get going!” the guard shouted.

Mark nodded, then got up from his chair, only to immediately lose his balance and fall on his front as soon as he tried to walk.

“HA! AND YOU THINK *I’M* THE DRUNK!” the drunkard called out.

“You are! Now get out from behind the counter before I have this guard kick you out!” the bartender shouted.

“You alright?” Mab asked Mark.

“SHEESH, FINE, FINE!” he said, stumbling out from behind the counter.

Mark pushed himself up, getting himself into a sitting position. “Yeah, I’m fine. One nice thing about having hardened scales on your hands is you’re not as likely to get splinters on them.”

He started looking over his own feet. By this point, his big toes were now very near his heels, though the use of the term “big” was perhaps no longer so appropriate as it used to be, since said toe was actually somewhat smaller than it used to be, while his other toes, aside from his now-missing pinky toe, had thickened up somewhat; at this point, his big toe was barely bigger at all. He slowly stood up. It definitely felt strange, standing with three toes in front instead of five.

Mab, by contrast, hopped out of her chair, landing on her feet and walking toward the guard with her usual springy stride, as if these were the feet she were born with. “Alright! Let’s get going! Time’s a-wastin’!”

Mark nodded, taking a few hesitant, wobbly steps, before slowly picking up the pace.

Mab giggled. “That’s strangely adorable!”

Mark chose not to respond, instead walking toward the door. Though, he decided to address one last thing before leaving. He turned to the bartender and said, “By the way, though it probably goes without saying, we shall not be paying for our drinks.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the bartender said while wiping down a table.

“I know you’re an Abadaran⁵, but how can you have money on the mind at a time like this?” Mab asked.

“I don’t want to be misinterpreted as attempting to dine and dash. I simply have no intention of paying for defective merchandise,” Mark said.

The guard stared at Mark for a bit, before saying, “You must be riot at parties, sir.”

“I do not attend that sort of party,” Mark said.

“Blue blood, y’know,” Mab said.

⁵ Worshipper of Abadar, whose areas of focus include law and wealth.

“Wait, he has blue blood?” the guard asked, quite surprised. Mab started giggling. “What? What’d I say?” the guard asked.

Mark gave a heavy sigh. This was going to be a long trip to the edge of town, he could already tell. He looked at one of his elbows, which was currently in the process of being slowly covered in scales. “I’ll remind you both that we should try to make haste.”

“Uh, *right!*” the guard said, heading out the door, “Follow me, citizens!”

Mab could not help but giggle again, unable to take the guard seriously at this point. “Whatever you say, sir!”

“H...Hey! What’s so funny?” the guard yelled.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mark said, glancing toward Mab, hoping that she would get the subtle cue to try not to agitate this guard. In doing so, he noticed that Mab’s nose was now entirely covered in scales. As well, the tip of the nose had raised up a bit from its normal position.

The guard shrugged and headed onward, Mab jauntily following close behind. Mark began slowly following behind, looking at his feet at first to make sure he did not fall again, before picking up the pace. He noticed that his big toes, now ironically his smallest toes, were now at his heels.

Taks decided to risk a peek around the corner of building, to see how the transformation was coming along, and was pleased with the results. Even if the transformation stopped here, it would likely be enough for his purposes, but he felt quite confident that it would finish and fully transform the two.

He did not dare, however, to follow too closely to the trio. The risk that one of them would spot him and suspect he was the one responsible for this mess was too great. He would wait until nightfall before sneaking out of town. With the sun already setting, it wouldn’t be too long now.

The trio of Mark, Mab, and the guard proceeded toward the gate on the southern side of the city.

The trip, at first, was rather uneventful. The townsfolk who saw them had reactions ranging from staring in awe and confusion, leaving the area, or shuttering their windows, but nobody attacked them and nobody spoke to them, aside from brief statements such as “Stay away from me!” Even those were rare, however. All three in the trio felt it was likely that the presence of a guard was part of the reason why. Though the townsfolk did not know what was going on, they at least saw a protector of the law who seemed to be in control of the situation, which seemed to be sufficient to prevent a panic.

Along the way, the transformation was slowly advancing. The scales continued up their arms, past where their sleeves cut off their view. The scales crept down from their noses, to their mouths and chins, as their nostrils and the tips of their noses continued to rise. While the scales above their mouths were dark blue, the scales below were a substantially lighter hue. Soon, they noticed that their noses, mouths, and chins were starting to push forward from the rest of their faces, and it was clear to both of them at this point that, to the surprise of neither, they were starting to form muzzles on their faces. Indeed, at that point, their nostrils were nearly at the top of this muzzle that was starting to form on each of them.

A short while after, Mab became curious and pulled up a sleeve, revealing that even her shoulder had been fully transformed. She then pulled up her robe and saw that the scales had advanced up her legs quite a fair bit as well, now significantly past her knees. When she did so, Mark looked as well, noticing also that Mab was walking only on the fronts of her feet, rather than using the entire bottoms of her feet like most people would do, previously including her. He then looked down and realized that he was doing so, as well. How long had he been doing that and not realizing it? He tried going back to the normal human-like way of walking for a bit, and while he could do it without falling over, it felt awkward and unnatural to him now. He finally decided that, indeed, it would be best to switch back walking only on the fronts of his feet.

It was not long afterward that Mark said, "I feel a pressure forming near my rear, pressing against my leggings. I have a fair suspicion what this means."

"Ew. Okay, look, I think there's a clothing shop nearby. You can buy some new pants there, but next time nature calls..." the guard began.

"Incorrect," Mark said. He felt the area with a hand. "Yes, I do believe that lump means I'm developing a tail."

"...Oh. Well, okay, then," the guard said, realizing how absurd it was for him to feel relieved that it was *only* Mark growing a tail.

Mab reached inside her robe, grabbing a starknife, and brought it to the area near her developing tail. The robe obscured Mark's view so that he could not directly see what was going on, but it was clear to him what she was doing.

It was not, however, clear to the guard. "Hey, hold on, lady! You sure you should be just cutting off your tail like that? If you bleed out, I'm not gonna be responsible!"

"One, I'm near a paladin, I'd be fine. Two, no, I'm cutting a hole so the tail can fit through it. Y'know, avoiding a wardrobe malfunction and all."

"Oh, uh... heh... Anyway, I think he'll need a trim, too," the guard said, pointing toward Mark.

"That is correct," he said, taking off his backpack and pulling out a brown traveler's cloak, putting it on. He normally wouldn't wear it in warm weather like this, but he didn't particularly wish to have a hole in the back of his leggings plainly visible for the town to see. The tail wasn't anywhere near fully-grown yet, after all.

"Aaaand done!" Mab said, "Ready?"

Mark put his backpack back on. "Yes. I will let you handle it," he said. He didn't have nearly the skill with a starknife that she did, after all.

"Will do!" she said, springing over and cutting a hole for the tail to fit through, with a speed that would be alarming to him if it were anyone but Mab doing the cutting.

"Thank you," he said, "I believe we're ready to continue on."

"Right," Mab said, starting to lead the way onward.

"Wh... Hey! I'm the one who's out front!" he called out, dashing forward to get ahead of Mab.

The trio continued onward toward the south gate, as the sun fully departed from the horizon, street lamps taking over as the primary light source, though they became a bit more scarce as they traveled farther from the center of town.

Taks started on his way out of town. Yes, the street lamps would be bothersome, but there were still far more shadows to hide in amidst the street lamps than in broad daylight. Even so, he had to be very careful. Yet, he admitted to himself, he was not being as careful as he normally would, mainly because he wanted to get back to his clan before the adventurers did, to see how things go once the two arrive and maybe even taunt them over it a bit, just to bring them down a peg.

As the trio continued onward, they could see their own muzzles becoming longer, their mouths widening along with them. After a bit, Mark could feel his tail brushing against his cloak, an indication of its current size. Mab noticed hers touching the back of her robe as well and tried swishing it, but it was not long or developed enough to do anything more than a bit of wiggling.

At about this time, Mark noticed that the lamps lighting the streets seemed unusually bright. Actually, in general, the area as a whole seemed unusually bright for nighttime.

"Hey Mark, can I see your eyes?" Mab asked.

“Hm?” Mark asked, turning toward her. It was at this point that he immediately noticed something that he felt explained that phenomenon quite nicely. Instead of her usual green eyes with round pupils, Mab’s eyes were yellow, with slit pupils akin to those of a cat.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Our eyes have changed,” Mab said.

“So it seems,” Mark said.

After a while further of traveling, the gate was within sight. “Well, here we are! Just a bit farther soon, then you can head on and have fun doing... whatever it is you’re gonna do!” the guard said, before walking away.

“Well, I dunno about *fun*, but whatever happens, it’ll be interesting, at least,” Mab said.

“Yes, that’s one way to put it,” Mark said, continuing toward the gate, Mab following beside him and the guard positioning himself in front again.

Mab decided to try again to swish her tail, and though it was not yet fully grown, it was definitely long enough to notably move her robe around.

“Having fun with your new tail, are you?” Mark asked.

Mab giggled. “Well, hey, as long as I’m getting a new body, may as well test it out.”

“Fair enough,” Mark said.

The guard laughed at that. “Well, I can’t say I ever had a tail, myself. Sounds like fun!”

Mark looked up at the guard. “I don’t know about fun, but interesting, at least.”

It was then that Mark realized something was off. Hadn’t he been about the same height as the guard, before? “Hm... I do believe we’re shrinking.”

“You are?” The guard looked back again. “Whoa, you are! If you get really small, I’ll try not to step on you, alright?”

Mab giggled. “Thanks, but you don’t need to worry. I’m pretty sure we won’t be getting much smaller than I am now.”

“How can you be so certain?” the guard asked.

“Well, I figured we were turning into either kobolds or dragons. If we were becoming dragons, we’d probably be getting bigger, so kobolds it is, and there’s no such thing as a five-foot-something kobold, so that’s why he’s shrinking,” Mab said.

“Five feet, eight inches,” Mark said.

The guard thought for a moment. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

The trio walked the rest of the way to the gate. The guard crossed to the other side of the gate and looked around. “Wh... Hey, where are they? There’s supposed to be at least one guard here at all times!”

As if on cue, a guard emerged from the trees nearby, talking to herself. “Fast little bugger... Whoever was on the shift before has some *serious* explaining to do.” She then noticed the guard that had been accompanying Mark and Mab walking up to her. “Oh, hello, Den. Are you the replacement?”

“Nah, I’m not replacing anyone. So, what were you doing over in the woods?” the guard, apparently named Den, said.

“A kobold came running out of town. I have no idea how it got *in* to begin with, but whatever it is, I’m guessing it was nothing good,” the female guard said, “So, what brings you out here?”

“Just bringing a couple of people out to the gate! Nothing major for an expert like myself!” Den said.

“Ah yes, a veteran of three whole days,” the female guard said.

“Uh, eheh... *cough* Anyway, I...”

“Wait what? What is going on here!?” the female guard shouted, finally noticing Mark and Mab.

“Oh, uh, these two are changing into kobolds,” Den said.

“You... You say that as if it’s the most normal thing in the world!”

“Well, you get used to it, I guess.”

“If you think it’s a strange sight to see, just imagine what it’s like to be on the receiving end of it,” Mark said.

The woman sighed. “Well... I guess this probably explains what that kobold did while it was in the town.”

“Yeah, I’d say it’s safe to guess the kobold was the one responsible,” Mab said.

“Or perhaps an earlier victim,” Mark said.

“Yeah, true, could be,” Mab said.

“Either way, I do hope to find and speak with that kobold. However, we don’t have time to go searching for them,” Mark said.

“Well, if it was indeed that kobold responsible, I may not be able to get you a cure, but I can at least strive to get its head,” the woman said.

“I appreciate the gesture, but that will not be necessary, and besides, you are needed here,” Mark said.

The woman sighed. “Yeah... Yeah... Still, though, I feel really bad for you.”

“Don’t worry. It’s all part of life’s rich tapestry,” Mab said.

“More like a stain,” the woman said.

“Regardless, it’s what we have to work with, and much as it may be worth seeking out a solution someday, we are far too busy right now,” Mark said.

“Man, I wish half my colleagues had that sort of work ethic,” the woman said.

“He’s a work-a-holic. It’s a paladin thing,” Mab said.

“A paladin, you say! I am indeed quite honored,” the woman said, “That makes it all the more tragic, though, what happened to you, forced into the form of a creature of such evil.”

“Indeed, it will perhaps make things... tricky, in the future, but we will manage,” Mark said.

“I should hope so, indeed. A slain paladin would be a terrible tragedy, indeed,” the woman said.

“It is an occupational hazard, unfortunately,” Mark said, “Perhaps later we can speak more, if our paths cross again, but for now, we must tend to our business and you have your own work to focus on. Farewell.”

“Farewell,” the woman said, giving a wave. Mab waved in return, then she and Mark headed off. Soon after they started moving on, the two heard Den and the other guard discussing something, though they were far enough away that they could not hear what.

“I foresee a problem arising from my size loss,” Mark said, noticing upon looking at Mab that the scales on her face were starting to spread from her muzzle, to cover the rest of her face.

“Your clothes, you mean?” Mab asked.

Mark nodded. “I’d rather not go naked, but at the same time, it seems like an inevitability.”

“Not entirely. I mean, you’ll still have to go shirtless, but with your belt, you should still be able to have pants on, at least,” Mab said.

“Pants that drag along the ground, yes,” Mark said.

“Not with a little makeshift tailoring,” Mab said, pulling out a starknife.

Mark sighed. “I suppose I don’t really have much of an option, here.”

“Yeah, gotta work with what you’ve got,” Mab said, starting to cut the leggings short with her starknife, though it was a difficult effort, given that she was working with a rather tough material. While she was at it, she also cut the pants underneath in the same way.

“First I lose my armor to rust monster, now I lose its replacement to a transformation. This has not been my week for armor,” Mark said as he took off his leather cap.

“Actually, the rust monster was a couple weeks ago.”

“My two weeks, then. My point is, it’s quite a run of misfortune.”

“And the transformation itself isn’t?”

“True, you have a point there.”

Mab finished with one of the legs of the leather leggings. “One down!”

Mark took off his backpack and set it down, followed by his cloak, then pulled his leather top, along with the shirt underneath, above his head and threw them both on the ground. It was at this point that Mark and Mab both got a good look at the state of Mark’s torso. His waist was just starting to be taken over by the scales, though the scales were a bit higher up on his back. The scales were also spreading from his fully-covered shoulders toward his chest and upper back, as well as the sides of his neck. The scales on the front of his neck, on his chest, and on his belly were all the same light shade of blue as the bottom of his tail and muzzle, while the rest were the darker shade of blue that most of his body was covered in.

Mark crossed his arms. “I suppose, at the very least, this whole thing could be worse. As monsters go, there are far less pleasant things we could be turned into.”

“Yeah. Like goblins or giant bugs, or something,” Mab said.

“Yes, nothing like thinking about being turned into a goblin to make one grateful for their current situation,” Mark said.

“I mention giant bugs, and *goblins* are the ones you focus on?” Mab asked.

“Yes. Say what you will about insects, but at least they look more dignified,” Mark said.

“Sounds like you’ve never seen an acorn weevil before,” Mab said.

“I admit I haven’t, but then again... goblins,” Mark said.

“Yeah, good point,” Mab said, finishing with the second leg of the leggings. “Alright, done!” She put the starknife away.

“Thank you.” He looked down. The leggings looked more like tattered shorts, now, not even reaching his knees. With the shorts, lack of shirt, and lack of footwear, his attire seemed more appropriate for a day at the beach than for any sort of adventure. However, he could not be picky. He put his backpack back on, then he and Mab continued onward at a brisk pace, already having been delayed further than they would have liked. As they walked, Mark undid his ponytail, realizing that it was very likely that hair would start falling out when the scales got to it. Who ever heard of a kobold with hair, after all?

Man, that was *close*! Taks knew he’d have a hard time exiting through the main gate, but that guard was quite persistent. Had the guard not been wearing heavy armor that weighed her down, he had his doubts that he would have survived that encounter.

He could no longer hear the guard, so he felt it would be safe to stop and catch his breath. He did not consider himself particularly out of shape, but that was definitely quite the workout. Nothing like running for your life from an angry human with a sword to get one’s heart rate up.

After taking a moment to rest, Taks brushed off his robe, then started heading back toward his clan, taking a detour for a while to make sure he avoided the guard's sight. After he felt he was a safe distance away, he started picking up the pace, still wanting to arrive ahead of the two adventurers.

After a bit of travel, he emerged from the forest. He traveled on for a while further, before he suddenly heard a noise. Before he could try to process what the noise was, he felt a sharp pain in his left shoulder and cried out in anguish. Sticking out of his shoulder was a steel crossbow bolt, embedded deep into his shoulder. He looked toward his left, where the bolt seemed to have come from, and saw a group of five orcs, the biggest and meanest-looking one carrying a large crossbow.

Well, crap.

"Wouldja look at what we have here, boys!" the lead orc said, "Looks like someone made the wrongest turn of their life."

Taks had to act fast. He didn't have time to think. He just had to do something. Anything! There was no running away from this one! There's no way he could outrun them. There was only one thing he could think of on such short notice.

Taks reached into his robe, grabbed a pinch of alchemical reagents, quickly put it into a flask of clear alchemical liquid, stoppered and grabbed the flask, and lobbed it at the group of orcs, all in one fluid motion. He'd been practicing that for quite some time and now it paid off.

The orc laughed. "If you think you can bribe me with a little dri..." BOOM!

The orcs were engulfed in a cloud of sparks and smoke, as the five of them screamed in pain and rage. Taks was amazed that he managed to hit all five of them with the same alchemical bomb. He defeated an entire group of orcs all by himself!

"You... will regret that!" the voice of the lead orc called out.

Taks froze up. That wasn't how that was supposed to go! When he throws a bomb, the things caught in it are supposed to die! That's how it works!

As the smoke cleared, Taks could see the group of five orcs, badly singed and enraged. The lead orc no longer had his crossbow out. Instead, he had a cleaver held in his hand, large enough that Taks doubted that it was ever intended for culinary applications. The rest of the orcs, meanwhile, were holding large clubs.

Taks, in his panic, dashed behind a rock and huddled up. He couldn't run. He couldn't even pull out another bomb before they got to him. He didn't have a plan. He didn't have a single idea what to do next...

The five orcs surrounded him. "That was a nice little trick you did. I have a trick, too... It's called cutting off your head and turning your remains into jelly!" the leader shouted, before raising his cleaver. Taks curled up into a ball, closing his eyes.

He heard a slicing sound, followed by a gurgling noise, as the orcs cried out in surprise and confusion.

Taks opened his eyes, seeing the cleaver laying on the ground and a starknife embedded in a nearby tree, as the orc leader stumbled backward, a deep gash across his throat, the other orcs around him looking quite alarmed and shouting in orcish to each-other. Soon after, Taks saw a brightly-lit object in the shape of a bolt, which pierced the orc leader in the side of the head, causing him to fall onto his back, dead. The light faded, revealing that it was otherwise an ordinary crossbow bolt.

Taks looked toward where the bolt came from, seeing two individuals, one short one in a familiar robe, one taller one, though shorter than Taks remembered, in a pair of tattered leather shorts that just barely concealed his knees. Their faces were mostly covered in blue scales, though the rest of their heads

were yet uncovered. Their arms and legs were entirely covered in scales. The male's lower neck, upper chest, and waist were covered in scales. Indeed, it was the two adventurers from earlier, and it seemed the transformation was coming along nicely.

"I do believe that trick they had planned went a bit different from expected," Mark said.

"Yeah. Now it's our turn!" Mab said, pulling out another starknife.

The orcs proceeded to charge at the two adventurers, seeking to avenge their fallen leader.

Mark started backing away, shooting another bolt at the group of orcs. This one, however, one of the orcs blocked with its large club. The next bolt, however, that same orc received in the leg, and while the orc was still able to stand and approach, he was certainly moving with a serious limp. Mab stood her ground, waiting for the group of orcs to reach her. Meanwhile, Taks unstopped a vial of clear cyan liquid and drank it down. He plucked out the bolt from his shoulder, wincing from the pain as he did so. The hole began to close itself soon after the bolt was removed, as the extract he drank took effect.

Three of the orcs converged upon Mab, who abruptly pulled out a small marble-sized object and threw it to the ground, engulfing the area in smoke. Mab took advantage and maneuvered herself behind an orc, skewering him fatally in the back with her starknife.

Mark shot a crossbow bolt at the orc that was chasing after him, which hit the orc in the gut. This was not enough to defeat the orc, however, who bashed Mark directly in the chest with his club. Mark was sent stumbling back from the attack. He still had plenty of fight left in him, but even despite the natural armor that was developing on his chest, a direct hit from someone so strong as an orc was quite a painful thing to have to endure, and he was reasonably certain a rib or two had been broken from that attack.

Taks pulled out a vial of red liquid and downed its contents. He, along with his possessions, started growing to about double their normal size.

Mark's right hand glowed, before he placed it upon his own chest, healing his broken ribs. The orc swung again at him, but he was able to dodge out of the way.

Mab leapt up and slashed at another of the orcs as the smoke cleared. The attack created a deep gash right below the eyes, but the orc was left standing. While that orc was reeling, the other orc swung at her and bashed her in the upper right arm with his club, causing her to cry out in pain, which drowned out the sound of bone snapping.

Taks pulled out a flask from within his robe and drank down the contents. He immediately began to feel nauseous, as he fell onto his knees and clutched his stomach. He saw gray hairs quickly sprouting from between the scales on his muzzle, as the tip of his muzzle formed into a black, wet nose. He felt wolf-like ears forming atop his head and looked down to see that his arms, as well, were forming the same gray fur that his muzzle was, as the muscles on his arms and legs started to bulge somewhat.

Taks's eyes widened briefly, then narrowed as the fear he'd felt earlier began to be replaced with rage. How *dare* they attack him!? They could have left him to his own devices, but now, they've made it personal! Taks let out a wolf-like howl, drawing the eyes of the orcs who were still alive.

<What? What is going on? How did that little kobold become that!?!> one of the orcs yelled in orcish, which only the other two orcs and Mark were able to understand.

Taks stood up, grabbing the abandoned cleaver and placing the handle in his mouth, as he ran toward the group of orcs on all fours. While the orcs were distracted, Mab grabbed a starknife with her left hand and plunged it into the back of the orc who she had slashed earlier. Taks leapt up, grabbed the cleaver in his right hand, and fatally plunged the blade into the same orc's chest, leaving two orcs left standing.

Mark shot at the orc who had been bashed him in the chest earlier, hitting the orc in the right shoulder and causing the orc to drop the club he was carrying. Taks howled again, glaring at the orc who had been shot in the leg earlier. The orc turned and fled, sensing a losing battle and terrified of this bestial kobold. Taks gave chase after the limping orc and plunged the cleaver into his back, striking him dead. Normally, Taks would have let the orc flee, focusing on the remaining one instead, but under the effects of the mutagen he drank, he was not quite in his right mind.

The last remaining orc, however, did not wish to go down without a fight. He picked up his club off the ground and raised it over his head, giving a loud war cry. The unnecessary pause for a war cry turned out to be a mistake, however, as Mark took this chance to shoot a bolt onto the orc's head, causing the orc to fall to the ground with a thud, dead.

Taks looked around, seeing that all the foes were dead, and allowed the transformation and growth to fade, as the fur and ears receded and his nose returned to normal⁶. Mark walked over to Mab and placed a hand gently on her broken arm as his hand began to glow. Mab felt the pain of the broken arm fade, then moved her arm around a bit as a test. "Thanks," she said.

Now that Taks was back to his normal mindset, he realized that now was an easy opportunity to start gloating over what he had done to the two adventurers. However, oddly enough, he didn't particularly feel like it. It did not take a lot of thought for him to figure out a couple reasons why. The first reason was that there were two of them and one of him and they had just proven themselves quite capable fighters. If nothing else, he felt it would be wise to wait until he had numerical superiority on his side. The other reason, though, was that, much as he hated to admit it, the two of them had just saved his life and he could not help but feel grateful for that.

Mark had his doubts about this being the same kobold, but he figured it may be worth asking nonetheless. "You wouldn't happen to have paid a visit to Carsath earlier today, would you?"

Taks's eyes widened. How did Mark know that!? Taks sighed and decided that it was no use trying to hide it. "Yes..."

"And it is safe to assume that you are the one responsible for our... current state?"

Taks looked down, uncertain what would happen to him now. He knew better than to try to run. While he would fight if he needed to, he definitely didn't want to have to, feeling he would very likely lose. "Yes..."

"Y'know, sneaking into Carsath is an awfully big risk for a kobold. And if I were a kobold and got into the city, I'd do something big like assassinate the mayor or something, not turn a couple small-time adventurers into kobolds. So, what's in all this for you?" Mab asked.

"Wait... Small time?" Taks asks, his voice quivering a bit.

"Well, that's understating our abilities, to be fair, but at the very least, we're not exactly legendary," Mark said.

"Gaaaah! All that effort, wasted!" Taks shouted.

"Well, now it's clear that your target was someone particularly noteworthy. Was your intention to send a message of some sort? Perhaps to reduce the threat to your clan?" Mark asked.

"No! Well, yes! Sort of! To the last one, I mean! I just... I mean..." Taks began.

"Relax. Take a deep breath, and calmly explain," Mark said.

"Relax!? You're probably gonna kill me when I'm done explaining!" Taks shouted.

⁶ This, like the existence of the kobold transformation potion, is a departure from how things normally work in Pathfinder. While Enlarge Person can be dismissed at any time by the caster (or, in Taks's case, the drinker), there is nothing in the rules that allows ending the effects of a mutagen early.

Mab put her arm around Taks's shoulders, causing him to tense up in fear despite the friendliness the gesture normally implies. "Nah, don't worry. You've actually got some pretty darn good luck on your side. We're not planning on killing kobolds, today," she said.

"Wait... Huh?" Taks asked, "Not that I'm complaining, but... why?"

"We have a message for your leader which will make it all clear," Mark said.

"Huh? What is it?" Taks asked.

"We have a message *for your leader* which will make it all clear," Mark reiterated.

"How do I know you aren't just using this as a ruse to get close to him, huh?" Taks asked.

"You see that wooden key on his belt?" Mab asked.

"Uh... yes," Taks asked, perplexed.

"That's a holy symbol. You know why he's carrying that?" Mab said.

"Oh, uh, that'd be because he's a paladin!" Taks said.

"Right you are! Though, I thought you were gonna say cleric, to be honest," Mab said.

"But what does this have to do with whether I can tru...?" Taks paused for a moment, then facepalmed. "That was a stupid question..."

"Yeah, it was," Mab said, patting him on the head. Suddenly, Mark sneezed.

"Bless you," Mab said.

"Bah! Blessing a paladin's redundant!" Taks said.

Mark chuckled. "He's got you there, Mab."

"So, uh, Mark... your hair's starting to fall out," Mab said.

Mark held up a hand to catch some of the falling hair. It was hard for him to miss, considering it was passing by his face on the way down. "Indeed, that was why I sneezed." Thus far, only the hair in the very front was falling out, as the scales pushed further up above his forehead and slowly started taking over the skin where his hair was. Mab's hair was not falling out yet, since her hairline was higher up, but the scales were coming quite close.

Mark looked back toward Taks, letting the hair he'd caught fall gently to the ground. "In any case, now, might I ask you why, exactly, you took such a risk to transform us into kobolds?"

"Hm... I think it's better our lord tells you," Taks said.

"Lord? Interesting," Mark said.

Taks puffed up his chest. "Yeah! Our clan's got a proper lord to rule over it, and it's awesome!"

Mab giggled. "This, I really wanna see!"

"You should! It'll be a great honor, trust me!" Taks said, now starting to wag his tail, "Follow me! My name's Taks, by the way!"

"A pleasure," Mark said, following. They had a map, sure, but he wasn't going to complain. What better guide than a kobold of the clan?

The three continued onward across the hilly fields. Mark, continuing to shrink over time, frequently had to adjust his backpack straps and belt. Mab got off much lighter in that area, being so short /already, though after a while, she found it a bit tricky to avoid stepping on her own robe, it coming so close to the ground. Mab's hair also started to fall out as the traveled, while Mark's continued to. Mab looked over after a while of travel and giggled. "Mark, you look absolutely ridiculous, with your hair half-gone like that!"

"The same could be said of you," Mark said in response.

"Yeah, I'll bet! I wish I had a mirror with me right now," Mab said.

As Mark was looking at Mab, he noticed that the tips of her ears had turned blue and were starting to somewhat resemble fins⁷. Given the vertical fins on the sides of Taks's head, it was clear to him exactly what was happening to their ears.

After a while of traveling further, Mab sighed and brushed off the bluish-purple hair that was gathering on her robe, for the seventh time this trip. She was glad, in a small way, that she had scales, because if her bare skin were rubbing up against all this hairy fabric, it would likely make her fairly itchy. Mark, meanwhile, did not get much hair on his shorts. Leather did not attract hair like cloth did, after all, and since he was moving forward, much of the hair landed behind him without going near his shorts.

Mark looked over at Mab. By now, the robe was dragging along the ground a bit. "Are you sure you don't want to trim your robe?" Mark asked. The pitch of his voice was somewhat lighter, which both Mark and Mab deduced was a result of the shrinking process.

"Nah, it's fine," Mab said.

Taks looked back at Mab. "How *are* you not tripping over that thing?"

"It's a ninja thing," Mab said.

"Ah. Well, I guess that makes se..." Taks froze up at the spot, as he finally realized the full meaning of that statement. "Y... You're a ninja."

"Eeeyup," Mab said.

"A shadowy assassin of the night."

"Pretty much, though not strictly the night."

"So, uh..." He gave a nervous laugh. "You're not going to kill me in my sleep for what I did to you, right?"

"Weeeell~..."

Taks gave a high-pitched whimper.

"Mab..." Mark said sternly.

Mab walked over and patted Taks playfully on the head. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna kill you over it."

Taks gave a sigh of relief. "Thanks," he said, before continuing to lead the way.

Mab looked over toward Mark as she followed. By now, much of Mark's torso was covered in blue scales, only his midsection left uncovered. Most of Mark's neck was covered in scales, except for a bit of the upper back of it. The fins on the sides of his head were almost fully-formed, with only a bit of pink left near the base, now, to hint that there had ever been human ears there at all. Only the back third of his hair was left on his head, the rest of the top of his head now covered in scales. Mab felt the top of her own head and, sure enough, it was the same way. She would quite miss having hair. Sure, this meant no more having to maintain it, but at the same time, she did like experimenting with new styles. Though she felt he may ever bring it up, she suspected that Mark would miss his ponytail, as well.

As she was thinking about this, she realized that Mark's head looked shorter than normal... at least, for a human. It was actually looking closer to normal for a kobold, though, a fact that she was able

⁷ If I may go on a tangent, you may be wondering why I am going with the fins for a blue kobold. First off, more than one [official pieces of artwork](#) for kobolds has it and I think it looks nice. For another thing, the first thing I get when searching for "blue kobold pathfinder" is [this](#). I defy you to try to coherently describe in words exactly what is going on at the sides of that kobold's head. Third, well... In general, the artwork for kobolds seems rather inconsistent. Do kobolds have the toe near the heel or not? What do their heads look like at the top, sides, and back? Do they have three toes in front or four? What about fingers? Even between images of the same kobold coloration, I'm finding a lot of contradictory information, so I really just had to pick some things to go with and stick with them.

to confirm easily due to Taks serving as a handy reference on what a kobold looks like. Mab also could not help but notice how much smaller Mark was in general, now. It was a gradual process, so it hadn't really hit her before now, but at this point, it was too dramatic to ignore. At the start of the day, she had to look up at him like a child to a parent. Now, he was only about a head taller than her and those leather shorts were now looking more like pants with really overly-wide legs, along with a really bunched-up top due to the belt.

The trio travelled on further, until they reached the top of a hill and a cave opening came into view, about a mile away, with two kobolds standing near it. "There it is! Your new home!"

Mab rolled her eyes and exchanged glances with Mark. This kobold really didn't know her very well, did he? Had Taks really not noticed the holy symbol of Desna on the back of her backpack? And considering that she and Mark were a team, who traveled and adventured together, when she left, so too would Mark.

By looking at each-other, they each saw, at this point, that the other no longer had any hair left to lose, though Mark noticed that a fair bit of Mab's hair had decided to stay around, albeit on her robe instead of on her head. They both had some pink remaining at the backs of their heads, but not much, and their heads were now fully the proper shape for a kobold. Mab could see that there were a few splotches of pink on Mark's midsection, but not very many at all. They were almost fully transformed, now...

Taks continued leading the way, Mab and Mark behind. As they started drawing closer, the trio could see one of the entrance guards say something to the other, then point at the trio. The other guard, in turn, stepped closer, wagging its tail. The first guard waved toward the three.

"I see they have some appreciation for a job well done!" Taks said. He turned around. "And it looks like you two are all ready!"

Mark and Mab looked toward each-other. Indeed, at this point, there was not a trace of their former species to be seen. They were completely transformed into kobolds, now.

He looked back toward the cave, wagging his tail. "I can't believe it! Everything is so perfect! I got to be in Carsath, I got to test out my new formula and it works absolutely *perfectly*!" He began to break into a happy dance. "I helped save my clan and I get to come home to a hero's welcome!"

"Helped save your clan?" Mark asked, his voice having become higher in pitch since last he spoke, now sounding about the same pitch as Taks's voice.

"Ooh, things sound pretty interesting, now," Mab said.

"And they weren't before?"

"Yeah, good point." Mab looked toward Taks. "So, how does this help save your clan, exactly?"

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough. Now, come on! Let's get going!" he said, before dashing toward the cave, the other two following close behind.

<Hail!> the first guard, the one who had waved, called out. Mark found it somewhat strange, though convenient, that he found himself able to understand the draconic that the kobolds were speaking. A side benefit of the potion, he could easily discern. Mab, however, noticed nothing unusual, for she had already known draconic.

Taks dashed over and hugged the first guard, followed shortly by the second. <You did it! You really did it! I can't believe it actually worked!> the second guard said.

<These two *are* your catch, right?> the first guard said.

"I can't say I've heard myself spoken of as if I were a fish before," Mark said. Mab giggled a bit at that.

<They sure are!> Taks said, <They want to meet Lord Volkarus!>

<Well, I suppose it's only fitting for them to meet their new master!> the first guard said, following that up with a hearty laugh.

"Well, that isn't ominous at all..." Mark muttered.

<Alright, you two! Follow me!> Taks said, heading inside. Mark nodded and followed, Mab shortly behind.

As the three walked through the labyrinthine tunnels of the cave, some natural and some artificial, a fair number of kobolds approached to see the two newly-made kobolds. Many offered comment, some compliments toward Taks, some were expressions of disbelief that the potion actually worked, and some were teasing and jeering toward the two new kobolds. One kobold along the way called out, <How do you like being one of *us* now, heroes?>

<Well, scaly, and I miss my hair, but not all that different otherwise, really. Having a tail's nice,> Mab responded.

<I... You...> The kobold stood in disbelief. That was supposed to be a taunt to knock them down a peg or two, and this adventurer responded as if he were just making small talk! The nerve!

Soon after, Mark spoke up, addressing Taks. <I must admit, the layout of this place is... complex,> Mark said.

<Eh, don't worry about it. I'm sure you'll get a feel for the layout soon enough,> Taks said.

<I should certainly hope so,> Mark said.

Soon, they came upon a tunnel with a fancy red curtain at the end of it, with gold trim, hiding from view what was on the other end of it. <Well, beyond that curtain lies Lord Volkarus! Now, remember to pay your proper respects!> he said, opening up the curtain, motioning for them to enter.

<Of course,> Mark said, entering, Mab closely behind. Taks entered last, closing the curtain behind himself.

Beyond the curtain was a large natural cavern, with a pool of water at the far end of it. Most of the cavern was visible from where the three were standing, but some of it was hidden from their view, around a rounded corner. Inside the cavern was a small pile, containing a fair amount of money, mostly copper, but with a fair bit of silver, some gold, and even a few platinum pieces among them. There were also a few gems among them, but most of the pile consisted, instead, of less valuable things, such as shiny rocks, a silver spoon, and various other shiny items. Whoever owned this pile clearly liked shiny things quite a lot.

<Who disturbs my lair!?!> a voice called out. It was clearly meant to be threatening, but, though it was deeper than the voice of a normal kobold, it was too high-pitched to be particularly intimidating to Mark or Mab. Taks, however, jumped a bit and gave a squeaking sound. <Sir, these are the new kobolds I brought you,> he said.

Lord Volkarus gave a laugh. <So it *did* work, eh? Count me surprised! So, now for them to see their new master...> Out from around the corner came a red dragon, walking on its hind legs, carrying a steel scepter with a ruby at the end in his right forepaw and wearing a red cape with golden trim and a steel crown with a few rubies adorning it. The dragon was of a rather underwhelming size, barely taller than the kobolds he ruled over when standing upright. This dragon was clearly a mere wyrmling.

Lord Volkarus held up his scepter high, giving it a fancy twirl. <My new humble subjects! Welcome, to...> It was at this at this point that the twirling scepter slipped out of his grasp. <Ack!> Volkarus leaned down to pick up his fallen scepter, only to have the crown slip off his head and clatter onto the cave floor. He gave an annoyed huff and picked up the crown, placing it back on his head, then

picking up the scepter and looking back toward Mark and Mab. <Welcome, to the domain of Lord Volkarus!> he said, twirling his scepter again.

<A pleasure to meet you, Lord Volkarus,> Mark said, giving a bow.

Mab, meanwhile, was trying and failing to stifle a giggle. Mark turned toward her. <Could you please not?>

Mab couldn't help but continue giggling. <That was adorable, though!>

<Lord Volkarus is a mighty red dragon, a true paragon of power! You should treat him with respect!> Taks said.

Volkarus pointed his scepter toward Mab. <That's right! Lord Volkarus is a mighty dragon, a force of nature, and demands your worship!>

Mab's giggling started winding down. <I'm sorry, I'm sorry, carry on!>

<That's better! You do what I say now, got it?> Volkarus said. He stepped forward and pressed his scepter into Mab's muzzle, though not painfully so. <You are one of my subjects! Remember that!>

She giggled a bit. <Yeah, sure thing.>

Volkarus gave a huff and stepped back, accidentally stepping on his own cape. <Ack!> He fell onto his back, dropping his scepter and causing the crown to fall onto the floor with a clatter.

Taks gave a sigh. This was not a good first impression for Lord Volkarus...

Mab giggled further and walked over to Volkarus, offering a hand. Volkarus sat up without grabbing the offered hand, quite agitated. <Lord Volkarus is not funny! Stop laughing!>

Mab managed to slow and stop her giggling, though she was still smiling. <You're just so cute, though!>

<Lord Volkarus is not cute!> He picked up his scepter and crown, then put the crown on, giving another agitated huff.

<Mab...> Mark said.

<Yeah, I'll try and stop,> she said, walking over and standing next to Mark. Taks gave a sigh of relief.

<Now, Lord Volkarus, if I may, I've actually come to bring you a message,> Mark said.

<Your oath of undying loyalty?> Volkarus asked, quite clearly expecting the answer to be yes.

<No. This is actually a message from someone else, who instructed us to bring this to you. It is from a human commander named Tarcus Krun,> Mark said, rummaging through his backpack and pulling out a letter sealed with wax. The emblem pressed into the wax was the symbol of a shield with an owl resting on it.

Volkarus opened the letter, which was written in draconic, and started reading it aloud. <To the leader of the kobold clan southeast of Carsath,

<We have heard that you are having growing difficulties with the orcs in the area. You are far from the only ones. As you may already know, there are two main factions of orcs in the area, which were once warring with each-other, but have now joined forces.> The surprised look on Volkarus's face made it clear that he did not, in fact, know that. <This is the reason for their increased strength as of late, and if we are too busy fighting each-other, the army of orcs may ultimately crush us. However, if we work together, we may be able to prevail.

<I am aware of the mutual disagreements and hostilities between our kinds, and I am not so naïve as to think that our sides can ever become friendly. However, this alliance is necessary for our mutual survival, a fact that you yourself must surely realize.

<Commander Tarcus Krun>

<Wh...Wh...WHAAAAT!?!> Taks let out a scream of frustration.

<I take it you disagree with this proposal,> Mark said.

<Apparently,> Mab said.

<Th...The potion... and the... IT WAS ALL A COMPLETE WASTE OF TIME!> Taks shouted.

<If you could please slow down and explain...> Mark said.

<Taks made the kobold transformation potion thingy to turn some adventurers into kobolds so they'd be forced to help us fend off the orcs,> Volkarus explained.

<Ah,> Mark said.

<So much time... So much effort... So much nearly getting impaled with a sword... So much... Wait! I've got it! It wasn't so worthless after all! Even after the orcs are finished off, you'll still be forced to work for us, because you'll be cast out from human society! They'd kill you on sight!> Taks said.

<I imagine most of the city will have heard about our transformation by the end of the week. I somehow doubt we'd be attacked on sight, at least without a chance to prove our identity. I do believe that proving I am a paladin should be quite sufficient,> Mark said.

<And besides, Mark and I wouldn't be the first kobolds to ever go against the trend and become heroes. I mean, it's incredibly rare, but it's happened before,> Mab said.

<And I shall also note that you are trying to get a paladin to fight for evil and a devout desnan to stay in one place for the rest of her life. Trying to get us to do so because of something so small as this is akin to trying to fell a tree by throwing a pebble at it,> Mark said.

<Something so... small? A... A pebble? A PEBBLE!?!> Taks cried out in rage again, stomping around the cavern. <That... That "pebble" was an absolute masterpiece of ingenuity and alchemy! Do you realize how long it took to brew that pebble!? Do you!?!>

<I think you may've let the metaphor get away from you, there,> Mab said.

<I put in all that time and effort, risking my neck and nearly getting killed by orcs, and you have the gall to be planning on working with us anyway! GAAAAH!> Taks kicked the wall of the cavern in frustration, crying out in pain and clutching his foot immediately afterward and sitting down, starting to tear up from both frustration and physical pain. Mark walked over and placed a hand on Taks's shoulder. Taks leaned into Mark, crying for a while, as Mark pulled him into a hug, to the mild surprise of Mab, who had never seen Mark do anything quite like that before. Volkarus started tapping his hindpaw impatiently as he waited, arms crossed, though he did not say anything.

Finally, Taks spoke up. <I wanted... *sniff* I wanted to be a hero to my clan. I wanted to save us all. I wanted to rise up and be someone special. But now... *sniff* Now I'm just gonna be a side note, a funny story to tell.> Taks broke the hug and stood up. <All that time I spent learning alchemy, studying for hours every day, it... It was all for nothing!>

Mab walked over and placed a hand on Taks's shoulder. <You know, back when we had that tangle with the orcs, you sure didn't *fight* like a side note.>

Taks sniffled again. <What are you getting at?>

<I mean you can still be a war hero, you goof!> Mab said.

<I... *sniff* Yeah, I guess that's right. Though, that means I could get killed...> Taks said.

<Ha! Not with the mighty Lord Volkarus on your side!> He held his scepter up again, not spinning it this time.

<And even if you do get hurt, I have the ability to heal you,> Mark said.

<And if someone's focusing on attacking you, well... Let's just say I'll make them regret ignoring a ninja,> Mab said.

<Wait, you're a ninja!?!> Volkarus shouted.

<Yup!> Mab said.

<That's... That's so *cool*! I heard ninjas can do all sorta crazy things, like run on water and stab people in the back and kill them *super hard* and they can also disappear into shadow and all sorta crazy stuff!> During his statement, Volkarus was miming the various actions for emphasis, running in place really fast to signify running on water, stabbing the air with his scepter to signify killing things, and holding his forepaws together in a "ninja pose," with the middle and index fingers of his forepaws facing upward, to signify disappearing into shadow.

Mab giggled and hugged Volkarus. <Oh, that was absolutely *adorable*!>

<Lord Volkarus is not adorable!> Volkarus shouted.

<Whatever you say,> Mab said, letting go.

Volkarus gave a huff, then turned toward Mark. <Well, anyway, I suppose I could do your kind a favor and lend our services to their cause for a bit. But only a bit!>

<Naturally,> Mark said.

<Sounds great! And hey, we've got a pretty good team ready to go! A ninja, an alchemist, a paladin, and a dragon,> Mab said.

Mark chuckled. <Sounds like an interesting combination, to me.> He turned to Volkarus. <But before I enter battle, if you would, I need some new armor and a more appropriately-sized crossbow.>

<And some new robes for me, please,> Mab said.

<You got it! I think we already have the weapons ready, and as for the armor and robe, we've got a couple blacksmiths and a tailor all ready to go! And once that's done...> Volkarus raised his scepter into the air again. <It'll be time to show those orcs who's *really* the dominant species around here!>

Mark rolled his eyes a bit, but did not say anything, smiling a bit. Today had been an interesting day, full of confusion and chaos, but at its conclusion, he could see that the future was looking bright, at least relatively speaking.