

<Seize the heat right from the sun, the castle's treasure is ours today!> Lord Volkarus shouted. Mark and Mab woke with a start, and by the time they looked toward the entrance of the sleeping area they were in, he was already walking away.

Mab rubbed her eyes. <What's this about castles, now?>

One of the other kobolds stood up and stretched. <That's what he says every morning. Something his parents taught him, he said.>

Mark stood up. <I do not claim to have met any red dragons in person before Lord Volkarus, but that sounds about right.>

The room they were in was one of the sleeping areas, this one called the "Warriors' Rest Room". Though most of the kobolds in the clan who'd reached physical maturity had at least some basic combat training, this room was intended for the ones who'd dedicated themselves to the art of combat in some form or another. Despite the fancy name, its main difference from the common sleeping area was the inclusion of weapon racks, so those within could quickly arm themselves in the event of an invasion. There were also some armor stands holding various types of armor, as well as hooks on the walls upon which shields were hung. None of these pieces of equipment were designated to any particular kobold. Even the armor to be made for Mark would not be an exception – among the kobolds, all the various tools of war belonged to the clan as a whole, though the kobolds were considerate about which equipment they took into battle, such as ensuring that they did not take the last axe when they knew the best axe-fighter in the clan had yet to arm themselves.

As with every morning they could, Mark and Mab started their morning out with a small session of stretches. After that, a group of kobolds accompanied the two of them to the mess hall. Along the way, one of them explained that what at first had appeared to be crude cave paintings on the walls of the tunnels was actually directions in disguise. The kobolds wanted to make sure that anyone who was unwelcome there would become lost and disoriented. Even writing the directions in Draconic would not do, as some humans and demi-humans knew that language, as would any rival kobold clan that might decide to direct their ire toward them. But an entirely made-up group of symbols disguised as cave paintings would help to ensure that attackers would be left without directions. Making the symbols and their disguise more important was that they also warned of the various traps set up in the tunnels. Indeed, the symbols noting traps were among the more common symbols in the caves, the clan having built entire corridors and rooms solely intended to trap, wound, or kill trespassers.

The mess hall was far larger than Mark and Mab had expected and, even though the kobolds kept their chatter to a respectable volume, the combined effect was a rather noisy, bustling room. There were many tables, far longer than they were wide, arranged in an orderly manner with stools serving as seats at each table. The tables and stools were all rather simplistic in design, except for one at the far end of the room, which was smaller and more elaborately-built, topped with a deep red tablecloth. On the walls were tapestries of various sorts, which had no real theme to them. Mark suspected that most, if not all, of these tapestries were the result of robbing one or more traveling merchants, though he could not be sure. Whatever the case, touches to the room such as the tapestries on the walls and the remarkably well-made

marble dragon statue at the center of the room did help add some color and visual appeal to the room as a whole.

Following the lead of the other kobolds, Mark and Mab each grabbed a plate from a pile on one of the tables, then sat next to each other at a table. Soon, most of the seats in the mess hall were filled, including many of the seats at their table. Despite how recently the two of them had arrived and how they had yet to prove themselves to the clan, it seemed the other kobolds were already starting to accept the new kobolds as part of their clan.

Lord Volkarus sat alone at the fancy table, then waited in silence for a bit, before loudly clearing his throat, causing the rest of the room to fall silent. Then, he stood back up. <As most of you already probably know, we have two new kobolds in our clan today.> He paused. <...Well, okay, technically four. Two hatched last night. But my point is, yesterday, the head alchemist Taks snuck into the human city of Carsath. There, he transformed two adventurers into kobolds, a ninja and a paladin. So, yeah, that was pretty amazing.>

Mark and Mab previously hadn't noticed Taks in the room, but after that announcement, his bashful expression helped give his position away, as well as the glances toward him. A kobold could not visibly blush due to their scales, but Mark and Mab both suspected he would have been if able.

Lord Volkarus held up a letter. <However, what you likely haven't learned is that the humans were actually already planning an alliance with us, and here's the letter. Given it was those two new kobolds who delivered it to us, we can be pretty sure it's not a trap, paladins being honorable as they are. And yes, he is a paladin; Taks confirmed it. So tomorrow, Nezula, Taks, and I are going with those two new kobolds, Mark and Mab, to meet someone called 'Commander Tarcus Krun'.>

<...Um, with all due respect, my lord... I must ask, why Nezula?> one of the kobolds asked.

Lord Volkarus looked a bit flustered, clearly caught off-guard by the question. <I... have my reasons. I think she'll be very helpful.>

The kobold did not follow up with another question, nor did anyone else. They did not wish to upset their lord, after all.

<Now, if there are no other questions...> Lord Volkarus paused, giving the kobolds a chance to speak. <...Let's eat!>

Right on cue, a small group of kobolds came out from the kitchen, holding large bowls of some unidentifiable lumps covered in a green sauce, along with bowls of fresh mushrooms. They set the plates down on the tables, enough of them for each kobold to be able to reach the bowls and a serving spoon. At this time, the conversation resumed, as kobolds started dishing themselves up.

<So, who's Nezula?> Mab asked the other kobolds nearby.

<Nezula?> one of the kobolds said as he dished himself up some mushrooms. <She's the head cleric of Pharama here. Very well-respected among the clan, but I'm not exactly sure why she's being brought along, either.>

<Maybe it's because of her magic. It's especially dangerous out there, after all,> another kobold said.

<But what if *she* gets knocked out? Age hasn't been the kindest to her, you know,> a third said.

<Well, presumably that's where a certain paladin comes in,> the second said, looking toward Mark.

Mark nodded. <Yes, that is a fair point.>

<It might also be because she's so wise. Lord Volkarus definitely has charisma and power, but a down-to-earth perspective like Nezula's could help a lot,> a fourth kobold said.

Then, a voice from behind Mark and Mab spoke up. <That, too, is a fair point.>

The group turned to face the new speaker. It was an elderly kobold wearing a white cloak, the holy symbol of Pharama on the top of its hood. At first glance, the cloak looked tattered at the bottom, but a closer glance quickly revealed that it was far more deliberate than mere tattering with age. The pattern was too uniform and wavy, resulting in a robe that looked not frayed, but almost ethereal. In one of her hands was a staff made of aged wood and reinforced by steel, on top of which was a sapphire orb, complementing the blue color of her holy symbol.

The elderly kobold turned her gaze toward Mab. <You are Mab, yes?>

<Yeah, that's me. Did you need something?> Mab said.

The elder cleared her throat, then nodded. <As you may have guessed by now, my name is Nezula. I am in need of herbs, but as you are well-aware, the wilderness is an especially dangerous place at this time. My usual escorts are otherwise occupied and Lord Volkarus has recommended you as a suitable substitute.>

<Sure, I can help out. But shouldn't we bring Mark too? I mean, his healing could help in a pinch,> Mab said.

Nezula gazed at Mark. <Ah yes, that reminds me... You are Mark, correct? Lord Volkarus would like you to report to the mines after you're finished eating.>

<Very well,> Mark said.

<Wait... the mines? Why the mines?> Mab asked.

Nezula gave a shrug. <For all the time I've known him, sometimes he is beyond even my capability to read. But regardless of my thoughts or yours, the order has been given.> She cleared her throat. <When you are finished, retrieve what tools you need, then meet me at the temple of Pharasma.> With that, she walked away.

<Well, I guess that answers the question of what we're doing today, huh?> Mab said.

<In an unusual manner, but yes,> Mark said.

The mealtime was otherwise uneventful. Despite its unappealing look, the green dish was surprisingly palatable, despite including bugs as a core ingredient. Mab, in particular, was pleased with this development, as she had ultimately discovered a dish that few other travelers would have the privilege of trying, unappealing as the dish may sound. After breakfast was done, Mark and Mab were guided to their respective destinations and instructed on which symbols represented the directions to them for future reference.

Mab opened the curtained entrance to the temple, beholding a large, yet humble-looking room within. It contained decorations relating to the faith, but also a fair amount of more practical contents. At the back of the large temple room, of course, was a shrine to Pharasma, made of stone and carved to look like a particularly ornate grave marker, on the top of which was the Pharasman spiral. On either side of the altar was a stone wing, presumably intended to be a wing of a whippoorwill, the favored bird of the goddess. At the base of the altar was a carving in draconic: <ALL THINGS BORN ARE BLESSED BY THE MOTHER OF SOULS, AND ALL THOSE BLESSED SHALL BE BORN AGAIN INTO THEIR FATED ETERNITY.>

There were three kobolds in the temple, aside from her. At one of the two tables was a male kobold, reading from a rather large scroll. At the other table, a female kobold furiously scribbling on a piece of parchment. Neither of them looked in her direction when she entered. Both of them were wearing robes much like Nezula's, except they were not "tattered" like hers were. Perhaps that was a special status symbol for her, as a more experienced member of the clergy?

Nezula herself was standing in front of the altar, seemingly deep in thought. Nonetheless, when Mab approached, Nezula quickly turned to face her. <Good. You are prompt, it seems.>

<Yeah, I've had plenty of practice on that. So, anything else I should know before we head out?> Mab said.

Nezula nodded, more in approval than in direct response. <And quick to the point, as well. That is good to see.> She cleared her throat. <I am sure that, on your way here, you either saw or passed through a forest?>

<Yeah, that's where we met up with Taks,> Mab said.

Nezula nodded. <That is our destination. As a ninja, you will be scouting ahead as we go. I trust you have means of getting back to us if you are seen.>

<Yeah, plenty,> Mab said. That was one of the most key lessons one learns when training as a ninja, after all. Having a single means of escape was not sufficient. A single means of escape could fail. To truly be prepared, a ninja needed many plans for escape. Sometimes, a few of those plans would even be combined, just to be sure.

<Very well then.> Nezula looked toward the male kobold. <Ketel, you're coming with us.>

The male kobold set down the scroll. <Huh? Me? But isn't Zita usually the one who helps you with that?>

Nezula nodded. <Exactly. She's had plenty of practice at this. You have not, and it's time for you to start. Come.>

The other kobold, Zita, spoke up. <Relax, Ketel, it's all part of the learning process. Besides, you've got a ninja with you.>

<Well, yeah, I suppose...> Ketel said, clearly quite nervous.

Mab looked at Ketel. <That's strange. I thought the clergy of Pharasma didn't fear death.>

<Well, not death itself, no...> Ketel said, <But being killed by an orc is another matter.>

Mab winced. She didn't need to ask for clarification on the matter. Orcs were known for being not only brutish and violent, but also cruel and sadistic. In a frantic combat, an orc may settle for merely beheading their opponent for a quick kill. But an orc faced with a helpless opponent, with no need for urgency, may instead decide to have "fun" killing their victim, especially if the victim had gotten on the wrong side of their short temper.

<There's no use in dwelling on it. What must be done must be done. Grab what you need for the journey and we will be off,> Nezula said

Ketel nodded and grabbed his belt, fastened to which was a sheathed dagger and a closed pouch, as well as a simple wooden holy symbol. With that, the three of them departed, Nezula leading the way.

Once they reached the exit to the cave, a new problem became apparent to Mab, one which she had not encountered before. She held up her arm in front of herself and squinted her eyes as they were greeted by the bright morning sunlight. The other two stepped forward, though Mab did not, waiting for her eyes to better adjust.

Nezula looked back at Mab. <Ah yes, this is your first time in the sun since your change, is it not?>

<Yeah... I heard kobolds have a hard time with bright light, but experiencing it is something else,> Mab said.

<It is something you will have to endure. Take comfort in the fact that the orcs will fare no better,> Nezula said.

<Why not wait until sundown? I think I'd be a better scout for you then,> Mab said.

<Even assuming there are no complications, it will take many hours to finish this and I'd rather not face tomorrow's journey sleep-deprived. And as I said, the orcs will be just as disadvantaged as us,> Nezula said.

<Also, they're way bigger than us and not quite as observant, so scout or not, we'd probably see them before they see us anyway,> Ketel said.

Nezula nodded. <But do not let that tempt you to lower your guard.>

<Yeah...> Ketel said.

The journey to the forest was mostly uneventful. Occasionally, the three of them would step into the tree's shade for a bit of respite from the sun shining in their eyes. During these times, the three of them would chat. Through these discussions, Mab learned that Ketel had been training as a cleric for four months, while Zita had been doing so for nearly a year. The herbs they were to gather grew in various places throughout the forest, hence why it would take so long to gather all that was needed. And as she suspected, the 'tattered' robe was a symbol of status, though one unique to that particular temple rather than universal to the faith as a whole.

Mark was no stranger to physical labor. As part of his training, he would frequently have to engage in it in some form or another, in addition to how the lifestyle of a traveling adventure had physical demands of its own. However, he had never been a miner before, nor had he ever thought he would be. He still did not know why he had been assigned to this duty. Fortunately, the other miners explained to him what he needed to know for the job and there was a kobold who regularly came by and gave him updated instructions on exactly where to focus on next, in order to best avoid a cave-in or other mishap.

After a while of this, the familiar voice of Lord Volkarus called out to him. <Hey, Mark!>

Mark turned around, seeing Lord Volkarus dashing excitedly toward him through the stone corridor. <Hm?>

Lord Volkarus stopped right in front of Mark, not even pausing to catch his breath before asking, <So, how much gold have you found yet?>

Mark tilted his head. <Gold?>

<Or silver, or platinum, or gems, or copper, or anything else shiny and valuable!> Lord Volkarus said, practically shouting his words from excitement.

Mark paused for a bit, unsure of what to say at first. <I'm sorry, but I appear to have been given the wrong information. I was told that we were mining to make new rooms, not to search for ore or gems.>

<Well, yeah, yeah, that's the reason for most of them, but that's not why *you're* here!>

<Pardon?>

<You're here because you're a paladin of the god of wealth and so that means you'll find all sorts of goodies!> Lord Volkarus stared at Mark, both eagerly and expectantly.

Mark, in turn, took a moment to assess the best way for him to respond. <...My apologies, but I'm afraid that's not the Abadaran way of accumulating wealth. Abadar does not simply hand out wealth by putting it into cave walls.>

Lord Volkarus frowned. <Okay then, so what is this 'Abadaran way of accumulating wealth', huh?>

<Well, if you make intelligent financial decisions, investing your money into ventures that will...> Mark began.

<I command you to come into my chamber so you can tell me *exactly* how this works! I simply must know everything there is to know about this, so I can get do what's necessary to appease your god and get rich!> Lord Volkarus, before turning around and leading the way back to his chamber.

Mark rolled his eyes and followed, smiling a bit. He could easily tell that Lord Volkarus had fundamentally misunderstood what he was getting at, but he wasn't going to turn down the opportunity to instruct the leader of a civilization about Abadar's teachings.

Even despite her fondness for natural areas of various sorts, Mab wasn't sure whether she'd ever been quite so happy to be in a forest as she was now. Of course, being a ninja, she preferred traveling through a dangerous forest than a dangerous field in any case, as a forest offered far more opportunity for concealment and escape. But aside from that, simply not having to worry quite so much about the glaring light of the sun was a relief, after having to endure it for a fair while.

Even so, she also knew this was where her work really began. Fortunately, Nezula knew the area quite well and could very accurately describe where to scout ahead to. Combined with Mab's experience with

traversing the wilderness in general, she was able to reach scout ahead and return to report her findings without issue.

However, it wasn't entirely easy-going, as Mab's talents proved quite necessary. Several times during the trip, Mab discovered a hunting group of orcs in the way, necessitating a change in route. Fortunately, this was sufficient and they didn't have to fight off any orcs. However, they did have a quite unexpected encounter of an entirely different sort, in the form of another kobold.

It was a blue kobold like the three of them, and one who looked a mix of irritable and weary. He carried – or more accurately, dragged – a significantly oversized battleaxe, looking more appropriate for a human than for a kobold. His eyes narrowed when he gazed upon the three kobolds.

Ketel gave a yelp. <What's up with *him*?>

Mab looked toward Nezula. <You recognize him at all?>

Nezula shook her head. <I do not.>

The kobold lifted up the battleaxe in his hands, glaring at the three other kobolds. <Explain!>

Nezula drew a fancy dagger, but even so, she did not stray from her calm tone. <There are well over two hundred kobolds in the clan, perhaps even over three hundred. Surely you do not expect me to remember the name, face, and function of every single one.>

<That's not what I mean and you know it!> the kobold said.

<Humor me,> Nezula said, <What is it that you mean?>

<Why am I a kobold now? What did you lot do!?!> the kobold shouted.

<A strange case, indeed,> Nezula said, <I was told there were only two transformed last night, and both are already accounted for.>

<Think Taks went out for more?> Mab asked.

Nezula shook her head. <No. He would have mentioned if he transformed more last night, and today he's busy with alchemy.>

The new kobold pressed the head of his axe to the ground, leaning against the wooden handle grumpily. <I don't have the patience for this right now. I woke up as a kobold and I want answers, now!>

<Well, what happened the night before you went to sleep?> Ketel asked, rubbing the back of his own head, <Maybe that'll help us figure it out.>



The new kobold gave a heavy sigh. <Hell if I know.> He held a hand up to the side of his head. <Getting hammered, apparently.>

<Getting... Wait...> Mab paused for a moment.

<What?> the new kobold asked.

Mab snapped her fingers. <Okay, yeah, now I know what happened! You were that drunk in the tavern last night. And after we left, you drank the wine.>

The new kobold blinked twice, then facepalmed. <Okay, there are so many things wrong with that statement, I don't even know where to begin.> He took a deep breath. <Okay, first off, how did you even get into the town, let alone the tavern? Second, I'm an ale type, not a wine type. Third, *how* exactly is that supposed to answer the question of why I'm a kobold now!?!>

<I admit, I'm a bit unclear on that last one, too,> Ketel said.

<I can explain that.> Mab turned back to the new kobold. <So, we weren't kobolds at the time. A kobold snuck into town and spiked our drinks with something that changed us into kobolds. And you too, apparently. Probably because the bartender wasn't serving you drinks anymore, so you stole our wine and drank that when our drinks were unguarded.>

The new kobold blinked twice, pausing to process this new information. <...Okay, I'll admit the wine thing sounds like me. But seriously? Drinks that turn you into kobolds? You expect me to believe *that*?>

<As much as we expect you to believe you've been turned into a kobold, yes,> Nezula said.

The new kobold paused again, then sighed. <...Okay, point taken. Nothing about this situation is normal.>

<We are currently gathering herbs. If you would like to accompany us, we can explain more along the way,> Nezula said.

<What, so you can lure me into a deathtrap or something because I know too much? I'll pass, thank you,> the kobold said.

Nezula shook her head. <I can respect such a practical consideration, but there is something you have failed to take into account.> She cleared her throat. <There are three of us here, all of us armed. Yes, even this one.> She pointed toward Mab, whose weapons were currently tucked in her robe, then looked back toward the new kobold. <And yes, I do understand you are armed with a battleaxe. You may even think it intimidating. But I see how you carry it. It is far too big for you. You're having trouble even carrying it properly as a weapon. I should think it would go without saying that it would hardly be of any use to you in a fight. If we wanted your corpse, we would have it.>

The new kobold gave a huff. Much as he didn't wish to admit it, either to himself or to the others, he could not deny that the elderly kobold was right. Perhaps he could easily take them on as a human, but as a kobold, he was at their mercy. The hangover didn't particularly help, either. <...Very well. I will follow. But I will be watching you, so no funny business.>

<I do not deal in 'funny business',> Nezula said simply.

Lord Volkarus gave a sigh. What had he gotten himself into? What Mark was talking about, for about three hours now, has been regarding gaining vast amounts of wealth. It even outright included a term called 'interest'! How in the world could it still manage to be so torturously uninteresting? Mark, for whatever reason, seemed to find this near-incomprehensible mess of financial terminology absolutely fascinating. It made Lord Volkarus wonder if he was missing something; some key element to all this which somehow turned it into something exciting. As it stood, even the promise of vast wealth couldn't get him to be excited. It was a notion he found quite absurd, but somehow Mark had done it.

The new kobold, now revealed to be named Brett, gave a heavy sigh, having now received the story of what happened. <So basically, not only did I get turned into a kobold by accident, but it was a *pointless* accident.>

<By appearances, yes.> Nezula packed the last of the herbs into her bag before closing it up. <But while it was a misunderstanding, I do not feel it was pointless. I do believe there was a measure of fate involved in the three of you being transformed.>

<Fate... right... I don't put much stock in that. The age we're in is called the Age of Lost Omens for a reason, you know. As far as I'm concerned, my future is up to me,> Brett said.

<Fate has far more sway than you may think, but I can at least respect a healthy sense of personal responsibility,> Nezula said, <Speaking of your future, you have a significant choice ahead of you. What will you do from here?>

Brett gave a soft chuckle. <Do I really, though? I mean, human society isn't going to take too kindly to me anymore, you know that. There's only one place left to go. And once I'm there, I already know I'm gonna be conscripted due to my fighting skills.>

<And yet you say your future is up to you,> Nezula said.

Brett crossed his arms. <...Smartass.>

By the time the four of them had left the forest, the sun had mostly set, which made the journey back to the clan much more pleasant than it had been to get to the forest. Such was particularly true for Brett, who earlier not only had to travel the daylight with the light-sensitive eyes of a kobold, but he had to do so with a hangover.

The guards at the entrance noticed that, whereas only three had departed, now four were returning. Nezula calmly explained that this fourth kobold had also been transformed, though declined to specify how it had happened, for which Brett was internally thankful.

Finally, after Ketel returned to the temple, the remaining three arrived at the entrance to Lord Volkarus's chamber. Nezula was the first to speak. <Lord Volkarus. We...>

<OH THANK HEAV... I mean, yes?> Lord Volkarus said from the other side of the curtain.

<We have finished our work, and it turns out there was an unintended third individual who had been transformed by Taks. He is here with us now,> Nezula said.

<Really? Well then, send him in!> Lord Volkarus said.

Brett stepped through the curtain, shortly followed by Mab and Nezula. His gaze settled on the draconic lord he'd been told about, causing him to arch what would have been an eyebrow were he still human. <I... was expecting someone a bit larger.>

Lord Volkarus gave a huff. <I'm still a mighty dragon, I will have you know!>

Mark stood up, looking toward Brett. <Perhaps best not to antagonize him, hm?>

Brett sighed. <Yeah, yeah... Anyway, the name's Brett.>

<Address me with respect, peasant!> Lord Volkarus shouted, waving his scepter at Brett.

Brett paused. <Alright, so... *Lord* Volkarus, right?>

Lord Volkarus gave a proud nod. <Yup!>

<Alright, so... I'm here. I've been told you need help against the orcs. I know my way around an axe. So, what now?>

Lord Volkarus twirled his scepter. <Much better!> He pointed the scepter at Brett. <Now, tomorrow you're gonna join us to meet the human commander! Nezula told you about that, right?>

Nezula nodded. <He has been informed. >

<I'm gonna need a new axe and some armor,> Brett said, <Metal, preferably.>

<You will have to content yourself with leather for now. New armor will take time to make,> Nezula said.

<Yeah, that figures. It'll do for now, though,> Brett said, <So, where's the food?>

<I believe this was about the time you said dinner would be?> Mark said to Lord Volkarus.

<Oh, yeah, that's right! Follow me!> Lord Volkarus looked toward Brett. <Trust me, you're gonna love it!> Lord Volkarus said, before starting to lead the way.

<Just give it a fair shot, alright?> Mab whispered to Brett, before following as well.