

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric scene of a ruined city. In the foreground, a large, dark silhouette of a creature's head, possibly a dragon or a giant, looms on the left. In the mid-ground, the skeletal remains of a city are visible, including a prominent tower with a spire and several smaller structures. The sky is a hazy, dark brown color. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

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Novella

# Dreaming in Shadow

Maxwell Alexander Drake

# Dreaming in Shadow

An



Novella

**Maxwell Alexander Drake**

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## OUR STORY SO FAR



After achieving victory in the War of Plagues, the people of Norrath enjoyed an Age of Allies. Though there were struggles to be overcome, the great kingdoms of the world enjoyed a time of peace.

It was not to last.

The Koda'Dal—a highborn sect of elves who believed themselves superior to the other races—jealously guarded knowledge imparted to them by their gods, the Seraphs. The elves used this knowledge to uncover the secrets of High Magic, a vast power which allowed them to awaken ancient spires and travel to distant realms.

No longer satisfied to share power with the other kingdoms, the Koda'Dal played upon fear and distrust sown by a shissar invasion to establish the Takish Empire. Though at first the protection afforded by the elves was welcomed, the Empire's power grew until all non-dal were subjugated. After decades spent building up his arsenal, Emperor Miragul Tah'Re began a campaign to conquer his most powerful rivals: the dragons.

Even as the Emperor's plans began to take root, they were foiled by the Ashfall, a magical cataclysm that broke a continent in half and buried the elves' capital of Takish'Hiz. High Magic was lost and the mortals were left vulnerable. The retribution of the dragons came swiftly as a tide of destruction washed across the lands of Norrath.

From the ashes of the Takish Empire arose the Combine, an alliance of equals who stood together in the Dragon War. Though they rallied for a time, the forces of Veeshan's children proved unstoppable. Facing imminent defeat, Arch Mage Coralen Larkos led the Combine forces in a final stand at the

fortress of Bastion, where he held off the dragon armies so his people could flee to the distant shores of Kunark. Meanwhile, Prince Keramore Thex and his band of black-garbed elite soldiers, the Teir'Dal, attempted to draw the dragons away. Keramore was pursued by Ithiosar the Black, a fearsome dragon whose hatred for the mortals burned brighter than any other of his kind.

Pursued by the dragon into the tunnels hidden beneath the ruined city of Quin'Sari, the Teir'Dal found themselves trapped. More devastating were the lies Ithiosar told them about the total destruction of their remaining forces at Bastion.

Desperate and distraught, they found a long-forgotten chamber where Keramore's amulet unexpectedly awakened a dormant spire. The prince ordered his soldiers to flee through the portal, soon followed by Keramore himself. Ithiosar the Black, unwilling to let his most hated rival escape, launched himself through the portal as well, losing one leg and most of his tail as the gateway between worlds closed behind him.

Now these bitter enemies find themselves stranded on the same empty, shadowy world, far from the stars of home...

Steve Danuser



# DESPAIR



**B**rittle shards of jet-black stone crunched under taloned feet like broken glass, the sounds loud and painful to sharp ears as it reverberated over the vast emptiness. Thick air hung heavy across a desolate landscape, leaving a vile, musty taste on the tongue. A chill gripped the darkness of a world that may never have felt the warmth of a sun.

Ithiosar the Black bore it all with disdain as he limped along on three legs.

When he lost his appendages to the closing portal, he had felt little more than a pinch. Now his leg and missing tail throbbed relentlessly. Never before had he known such pain, so agonizing it threatened to overwhelm his mind with each laborious step.

During the frantic flight from Keramore and his vermin elves, he had no time to ponder where the portal had taken them. While the concept of time had evaporated in this pitiless expanse of perpetual darkness, at least he now knew where he was.

*Mortals frighten one another with tales of fallen gods who dwell in vast planes of decay and torment. Legends woven by childlike minds that know so few truths of this universe. Yet here I am, alone in this Void, my mind decaying and rotting in torment. And this is where I shall perish.*

He shifted his wide, flat head, peering out to the edge of his vision. Though no sun ever rose and never did a single star float in the pitch-black sky above, a strange, faint glow lit this world. It was constant in all directions, but illuminated little, creating a dim bubble of visibility around him. It was as if all of reality had been reduced to a small island that moved

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with him, floating across an endless ocean of nonexistence. Beyond the reach of the light lay only blackness. Nothing changed as he spent his days searching for the portal spire that had brought him here. For all the months he had roamed, despair was all he found.

*With no landmarks to guide me, I know not which direction I travel, nor from where I have come. The spires might be a thousand leagues away, or but a single step beyond the shadow's damnable edge!*

A sliver of rock slipped between Ithiosar's toes, piercing the tender skin between them. He shifted his weight to his back left foot before remembering it no longer existed. Falling hard on his side, he crushed more of the sharp stones beneath his bulk. Blood trickled from several new wounds as he lay prone, arduously sucking in the stale air.

He no longer cared.

*My lust for vengeance has betrayed me, and this place shall become my tomb.*

The only satisfaction he could cling to was that this land would also hold the graves of Keramore and his wretched kin.

As he lay upon the hard stone ground, an unnatural heaviness pulled at his eyelids. His mind fluttered. He struggled to retain consciousness even as the world spun. He shook his head, attempting to drive away the feeling, but an unseen force gripped his mind like a vice and dragged him into oblivion.



# DESPERATION



Searing pain shot up Keramore Thex's arm as he danced away from the felfang. He lashed out, his sword ricocheting off the reptilian monster's thick, bony armor. His blow struck between the beast's two sets of eyes, forcing it to recoil. The attack did no real damage, but it at least bought him time. Spinning, he dashed toward a hill of jagged black stone, making for a small natural fissure cut into its side. The sounds of the creature's knife-like claws scrambling over onyx pursued him.

*Too far!*

He cursed himself for the fool while pushing his legs to carry him faster. Unlike the coldblooded monstrosity in his wake, his kind was not built to traverse the large, sharp rocks that seemed to be this world's sole defining feature.

Keramore's foot slipped when a stone shifted under his weight. He stumbled, windmilling to keep his feet under him as the razor-edged ground whipped by below. He launched himself forward and landed with a grunt on the soft black sand covering the floor of the crevice.

Keramore flipped over just in time to see the creature leap. Though it meant his death if the thing landed on him, he could not help but stare. Even to one who had fought and slain dragons, the beast was a sight to behold. The size of a full-grown plains lion, it was the perfect killing machine. Its hairless body was thin and muscular, with scaly skin the same dark-black color as the terrain it hunted. Each leg ended in long-fingered paws, complete with knife-like talons, perfectly designed for both navigating the rocky landscape and eviscerating its victims. With twin rows of serrated teeth

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dripping saliva so toxic he'd seen the hardiest soldier succumb to it within moments, the felfang was a thing of nightmares.

Even as the monster hurtled toward him, four spears thrust up from either side. The razor-sharp weapons pierced through the fleshy underside of the animal, pinning it between them. The felfang hung a few feet above Keramore, twitching and hissing. Several more spears joined the initial four and within moments, the creature's legs hung limp as death gripped it with icy, norite-tipped fingers.

Hands seized Keramore's shoulders and pulled him out from under the dangling corpse. Lanys T'Vyl and Ailen Rashard stared down at him like disapproving mothers. Ailen held out a hand to help Keramore rise even as Lanys harrumphed. Before he could utter a sound, she turned and stormed away.

"She's going to give you an earful later." A wide grin split Ailen's lips.

Keramore could only shake his head. "That seems to be the way all our conversations have gone of late." He smiled. Slapping the assassin on the back, they turned as one to look upon the felled beast. "At least tonight there will be meat for the stew."

Looking up through the thin crack that split across the ceiling of the cave mouth, Ailen stared into the vacant, starless sky and gave a mirthless chortle. "Is it night? Or early morning? Or..." He shrugged. "Time has little meaning here. Without so much as a glimmer of light, we cannot even mark its passing. Sometimes it feels as if days are slipping through our fingers like sand."

The smile left Keramore as fast as it had appeared and he clenched his jaw. This world was strange, and whatever lit it stranger still. Even his sharp elven eyes could not see more than a thousand paces in any direction—a fact that had taken a few scouts from their dwindling group before anyone realized they needed to stay in sight of one another. "Whatever the hour, our people need food." He let his gaze rove over the felfang's carcass. It was amazing he had made

it back to the safety of the cave before the thing struck him down. He pushed the thought from his mind. "Though, if the other hunting parties don't return with more game, most of us will be settling for fungus again."

Several Teir'Dal warriors had pulled the creature deeper into the cave and begun carving up its tough, sinewy meat. Soon after arriving upon this forsaken world, they had learned that if left intact, the dead spoiled at an alarming rate. After the first of his warriors died, it took less than five days for the flesh to slough off his body, leaving behind only bones.

But if removed from the carcass, meat would cure in the dry air and keep pretty much as long as it did back on Norrath.

*Everything about this mysterious place challenges our perceptions and assumptions.*

"She's not wrong, you know."

Keramore gave Ailen an inquisitive glance.

Concern filled the assassin's features. "You put yourself at risk too often. Anyone could have lured that thing in here. It didn't have to be you."

While Keramore appreciated the elf's concern, it was his second-in-command who was mistaken—it could *not* have been anyone else. It *had* to be Keramore. It was *his fault* that so many of his Teir'Dal had died during the doomed attempt to defend Bastion. *His fault* they became trapped under the ruins of Quin'Sari. And it was *his fault* that the last surviving members of his race were here, suffering in a land of perpetual darkness. He shrugged it all away and tried to grin, though even he felt the insincerity in the expression. "What? Have you heard jealous grumblings that I'm hoarding all the fun?" He started to walk away but stopped when Ailen snagged his elbow.

"I'm serious." A dangerous glint flashed in the assassin's eye, a look Keramore had not seen directed at him since the day he killed the green dragon. At least Ailen had the decency to keep his voice to a hushed whisper. "Whatever is going on in that thick head of yours—whatever remorse you still feel over Neria's death—your people need you now more

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than ever. We are the last!" He jabbed a finger at the elves bent to their task of collecting meat. "Six-hundred and fifty-nine survivors of a race that once spanned worlds. We need a leader who is strong and focused. We need *you* focused. You are the last of the Thex line. Like it or not, you need heirs, and not just from one woman."

Throughout Ailen's rant, all Keramore did was stare back at the elf, clenching and unclenching his jaws. But the last insult was more than he could bear.

*How dare he suggest I debase myself so, as if my honor means nothing!*

Keramore shifted his gaze to the hand holding his elbow. "You forget your station, *Lieutenant.*"

Ailen kept his grip firm for a moment longer before letting go with a sigh.

As the elf opened his mouth to speak, Keramore turned on his heel and stalked deeper into the cave.

*He doesn't understand. None of them do!*



# MEMORIES



Ithiosar the Black awoke brimming with anticipation. Today was the day, and all her fears, be they reality or fancy, would be put to rest. She left her lair and started down the long hall toward the council chamber.

Rounding a bend in the corridor, she frowned at Sayvikon blocking her path. The thin green dragon bowed his head. "Vyskudra."

*Of course! I am Vyskudra Stormrider, not Ithiosar. Though... I have never heard of a dragon by that name before. Nor this green, Sayvikon.*

She did not fault the green his resolve—it was one of the traits she admired about him. Still, she would not be swayed. "It is too fine a day to haunt the halls of Skyshrine, Sayvikon. The winter air is bracing. You should be out enjoying the bounties Veeshan's grace affords us." She tried to step around the green but he shifted to block her path.

"Come with me, Vyskudra. It's not too late. We could leave together, this very moment. You have long expressed your desire to explore the southern lands. Perhaps we will find—"

She let out a frustrated snort. "Why do you seek to sway me from my chosen path?"

Sayvikon's serpentine tongue slid out and ran across his lips as he nervously flexed his wings. "I merely... wonder if this is right for you." He averted his gaze. "I know you feel you are following Veeshan's decree, but I doubt our Mother meant for any of us to give part of ourselves to a—" His eyes locked with hers. "To a mortal."

He spat the word out like a curse, and she knew he meant it as one. Sayvikon was uncertain of the mortal races, and

his voice was not alone. Whispers of distrust had sprouted among other dragons as well. She hoped they would grow to understand. "When Veeshan found she was unable to commune with the Nor'I directly, she placed her seed upon this world and bade us find a way. As one of her children, do you not feel that desire pressing upon your heart?"

"Every day." A far-off look fell over his sharp features. "I believe all dragons do."

"It is that desire which has led me to this place. To this moment." Extending her neck, she nuzzled his scale-covered cheek with hers. "My bond-mate is a Keldarain of the purest heart. Even as young as he is, he has proven himself time and again. His people already sing of his dee—"

"The Keldarain are *MORTALS!*" Even as the echoes of his growled shout evaporated from the hallway, a look of shame fell over the green dragon's features.

A patient smile came to Vyskudra. "I think *that* is the point, old friend. Veeshan bade us to commune with the Nor'I, and I agree with Vulak Aerr that melding with a child of the world spirit is a path that may one day lead to that end."

"You say that as if you know." With lips pulled back over fangs, Sayvikon let out a low growl. "My master believes the Bonding infects the dragon with the impure influences of the lesser races. We are beings of Order, born from the essence of the Skymother herself. Mortals are mongrel things, a mix of ambitions and fears that knows no structure, no pattern. To consort with them can only dilute our purity."

She nuzzled him once more. "So you fear the Bonding will damage my essence?"

"I..." The thin green dragon shifted back against the wall, giving Vyskudra room to pass. "Better to say I hate seeing you lower yourself to their station."

A purring laughter spilled from Vyskudra's long throat. "It is not as if I am the first dragon to undertake the ritual. I will be fine. Your mentor, Trakanon, voiced his concerns in council, but failed to sway Harla Dar from attempting the first Bonding. Her union proved fruitful to mortal and

dragon alike, and the others who followed have brought our races closer together. I am honored to be chosen to follow their path.”

Sayvikon did not answer, instead keeping his gaze locked on the floor.

Gliding past the green, Vyskudra let her wing slide out and caress the underside of his neck. “It pains me that your last words before I take this final step are born of anger. Please, wish me well, old friend.”

The green lifted his head ever so slightly and stared into her eyes. “I *always* wish you well.” Breaking their gaze, he turned and headed down the way Vyskudra had come.

Vyskudra stood for a time, first watching the green dragon slink down the hall, then listening to his retreating footsteps. When she could no longer hear his clawed feet upon the polished stone floor, she took a deep breath.

*I thought I had banished all doubts, but his words hold truth in them. Will I lose myself in this? Is the Bonding truly the path Veeshan wishes me to tread?*

Shaking her head, she continued on her journey, the faintest of shadows darkening her mood.

The council chamber sat at the center of the dormant volcano that gave this city its name—Skyshrine. An enormous, roughly circular room, its ceiling funneling up to form the massive open caldera some four hundred feet above Vyskudra’s head. The basalt floor had been worn smooth over the centuries from the dragons that had walked its surface. Still, the volcano was far from dead—white smoke seeped up from a myriad of cracks littering the room, the vapors pouring out in streams and winding their way out into the bright blue sky draped across the Velious Mountains. Ledges carved at regular intervals rounded the walls, each one some fifty feet above the one below. This is where her people stood when the Claws of Veeshan was in session.

Today was not such a day, and the room held but a fraction of what it could.

When she entered, she realized she was the last to arrive.

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The Great Father, Vulak Aerr, stood near the center of the chamber speaking to the silver, Yelinak. A dozen other dragons of various colors were perched around the lowest ledge, each with one of the mortal races standing beside them. The four member races of the Keldarain Alliance were represented—elddar, akhevan, vorah, and pridak.

One and all, they faded from her view when her eyes lit upon the akhevan standing just to the Great Father's side.

Innoruuk Tha En looked tiny next to the two dragons, even outfitted in his new Dragon Knight armor. Form-fitting black leather covered him from thick boots to high-collared neck. The emblem of their order shown bright on the polished steel of his breastplate, and a thick blood-red cape flowed down his back. The akhevan's right arm held a lance that towered some twenty-feet above the floor, while his other rested its ease cradling the pommel of his sword on that side. Letting out a laugh, he threaded his fingers through his long, dark hair as he spoke with the dragons.

When Innoruuk spotted her, a broad smile filled his face. She had heard other mortals refer to him as handsome, though to her his features appeared much the same as others of his kind. It was the good deeds he had done which fueled her affection for him.

He bowed his head to her, though he did not approach.

Seeing him standing there next to the leader of the dragons, as well as the score or more Dragon Knights looking down from above, quickened her pulse.

*What if Sayvikon is correct? What if I am allowing my essence to become corrupted?*

She pushed the thought away. Now was no time for doubt. All her life, Veeshan had guided her. And it was Veeshan who had led her to this room. To this moment.

*To this mortal.*

With head held high, she strode to the center of the chamber. Vulak and Yelinak fell silent at her approach and the Great Father bent his neck to her. "May the Skymother guide your wings."

"And yours." She returned his greeting and his bow.

"Lady Vyskudra." Innoruuk's strong voice reverberated through the room. "Your presence honors me."

She nodded to him, but did not trust herself to speak.

Her mind was a whirlwind of emotions. While she believed that this was her calling, facing the reality of evoking the final rite had her insides churning into knots.

If Innoruuk felt the same, he showed no sign of it. The akhevan stood, back straight and eyes attentive, as if he were guarding his king.

The Great Father loosed a low, rumbling growl and those gathered above fell silent. He then leaned back, rising up on his hind legs so he could look those on the ledge in the eye. "We gather together this morning to welcome a new pair into the ranks of the Dragon Knights. I present Vyskudra Stormrider and Innoruuk Tha En. Are they both known to you all?"

A chorus of assents rained down from the gathering.

"Who among you bears witness to their worth?"

A brown-skinned elddar woman stepped to the edge, her long white hair ruffled by the rising steam. The purple dragon by her side brought its head even with hers as the woman slammed the butt of her lance against the stone. "I, Druzzil Ro, the Star Rider, do vouch for Innoruuk Tha En. He has exceeded his obligations as my squire, and will be a worthy addition to the Dragon Knights."

The dragon crooned, extending her neck well over the ledge. "And I, Harla Dar, vouch for Vyskudra Stormrider. Her bravery and wisdom know no bounds, and we shall forever be blessed by her admittance into our ranks."

"Very well." The Great Father fell back to all fours and shifted his head, addressing the mentioned pair. "You have labored long for the privilege of standing before this assembly today, but do not take this next final ritual lightly." Though Vulak was speaking to them both, Vyskudra felt his words weigh upon her. "For this Bonding can only be undone through death."

It was Innoruuk who broke the silence that had fallen over

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the chamber. "My en'zari and I understand the gravity of what we are about to share."

The Great Father let out a derisive sniff, leaning his head nearly to the ground so he could look the akhevan in the eye. "She is not *soulbound* to you yet! Do not overstep yourself by calling her so, mortal."

Innoruuk dropped to one knee, bowing his head and resting his left hand upon his chest. "My apologies, Great Father. It was not my intent to offend." He looked up at the ancient dragon, his face a visage of confidence. "But even without the Bonding, I can't imagine life without Lady Vyskudra by my side. If ever a mortal was meant to share his soul with a dragon, these past years have shown me that she and I *are* that pair."

Vulak studied Innoruuk for several moments before he spoke again. "Rise. I sometimes forget the impatience of your kind."

The akhevan stood, resuming his noble pose.

The ancient dragon shifted his gaze to Vyskudra. "Do you hold the same for this mortal?"

"I do." Though she did not break from Vulak's piercing stare, she could feel Innoruuk's presence beside her. As she had found during their years of training, just being near the akhevan brought her comfort. "Innoruuk is pure of heart, and has fought tirelessly for the good of Norrath. I will be proud to call him en'zari."

"Very well, then." Along with Yelinak, the Great Father lumbered back, leaving Vyskudra alone with the mortal who would soon share her soul. "You each know what needs to be done. Begin the Rite of Bonding with this gathering's blessing, and may the will of Veeshan forever guide you both."

Innoruuk stepped in front of Vyskudra, his warm smile returned to his lips. He had that mischievous glint in his eye she had grown to admire over their years together, though she doubted anyone else noticed. "I know we have passed all trials, but I must ask again before we proceed." He kept his voice low, his words meant for her alone. "Are you sure?"

He did not have to explain what he meant. Besides, she *was* certain. Both about the Bonding, and the man.

Instead of answering, she closed her eyes and reached deep within herself, concentrating on the inner core of pure magic that was her spirit. While a living dragon's mithyr was not a physical thing, it was as tangible to her as the heart made of flesh pulsating in her chest.

The more she focused, the greater her essence filled her senses, until there was nothing left of the world, nothing left of her body, just the glow of the magic within her. She saw the reflection of Veeshan's design, the Primarch of Order's perfect pattern that guided her fate. Vyskudra gave herself over, allowing her magical heart to consume her whole. It surrounded her, penetrated her. She was the embodiment of Order, unable to imagine any other form of existence. She floated in its structured tranquility, peace washing through her in waves.

She sensed another presence as well. Dim, like the light of a far-off star. Had she not expected it to be there, she doubted she would have noticed its presence at all. It was so tiny compared to her own, yet she knew it was the very thing she sought.

Willing herself to move, she glided across the vast emptiness that separated her from the essence of Innoruuk. The closer she came, the smaller the akhevan's glow seemed. By the time her spirit reached his, it was as if she had swollen to the size of an entire world, while he had shrunk to nothing more than a tiny gnat.

She paused.

Though his light was but a flicker compared to her own, Vyskudra could feel Innoruuk before her. She sensed everything about him. His strength was palpable, as was his anxiety.

*So, his outward appearance of calm is just a façade.*

This realization comforted her. It made her understand the truth of him, that while he always seemed in control, he was as vulnerable as every other living thing.

The insight also brought with it concern. Did he sense her the way she did him? Did the truth he saw in her essence frighten him?

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No. There was no fear. Just... longing. A desire to connect with her in the most intimate way. Something deeper than any physical act could attain. A merging of two souls.

It was at that instant that Vyskudra found she truly held the same desire for him. Gone was the churning in her belly, the lingering apprehension. All that remained was the need to bond with this mortal—to become one with a child of the Nor'I and take a step closer to communion with the world spirit.

She could feel Innoruuk's essence calling out to her, and she welcomed it.

Vyskudra opened herself, pushed aside every natural defense that protected her, and reached out for him. In so doing, she felt a piece of herself rip free. It didn't hurt so much as it sent shockwaves racing through her. It was as if someone had sliced off one of her limbs so fast her mind did not have time to register the pain. The sense of Order that defined her began to evaporate, dread filling the void left behind. So much of her had torn away, she felt hollow. Like her entire center was missing... empty.

Harla Dar had warned her of this. The purple dragon told her that she would be trading some of her soul for that of Innoruuk's.

*But I never expected this! How can this absence be filled?*

The emptiness inside her heart had to be larger than the mortal's entire being! Even if she swallowed him completely, she could never hope to be made whole.

A small piece of Innoruuk's essence pulled free—a speck so tiny she more felt it than saw it. It floated into her, like a single drop of water falling onto a vast, dry ocean bed. It could never replace that which was taken from her. Never restore what she had lost!

Yet somehow... it did.

It swelled, expanding and filling the missing space with a warmth that quickly rose to a scalding torrent. Clawing at the Order that defined her, Innoruuk's spirit clashed with everything it touched, even as it grew by multitudes. It rushed into her with such force, she feared it would wash her away, and panic gripped her.

Vyskudra willed herself to escape, to flee from the disorder filling her. But something held her fast, catching her in a vise-like grip that refused to let go. If she had lungs, she would have screamed. Wave after exhausting wave slammed into her. Through her. Scouring every fiber that was her.

And then... she felt... at peace.

Complete.

Innoruuk was there. Inside her. And she inside him.

But it was more than just sensing his presence. She *was* him. And she knew he was her. Their souls had joined, to be reborn as something new.

She realized she had been wrong. Innoruuk's flame was neither small nor dim. Though it flickered for only a brief moment compared to the untold millennia hers would endure, his glow was bright and wild and free in a way hers could never be. She found that she craved that fragility, the delicious thrill which could only come from a life filled with potential and possibilities, and the undeniable inevitability that it would end all too soon.

When Vyskudra opened her eyes, Innoruuk still stood before her. But in a way, she also stood before herself. For a brief moment, she saw the room through Innoruuk's gaze.

The chamber began to spin and she quickly shut her eyes once more.

**"Do not fear."** Innoruuk's voice filled her mind. **"I am here. I will always be here."**

Taking a deep breath, Vyskudra forced herself to look again. Her soul mate filled her vision, as if she was seeing the akhevan for the first time. Where in the past she had felt he looked small and weak... she now saw strength and resolve. But it was more than just his physical appearance. His entire mind lay open to her. His hopes and dreams, his fears and secrets—everything that made him the man he was lay bare before her. Every thought. Every memory. Every desire.

What she found pleased her more than she had ever dreamed.

The lance of sorrow that sliced through her caught her

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off guard. For the first time, Vyskudra understood what it meant to live a life that would one day end. Death came for all mortals, and Innoruuk not only knew this, he accepted it. But she could not. How could anything feel joy knowing that its time was so limited? To have one's life measured by just a few short centuries?

With a strength she did not know she possessed, she pushed the pain away and forced a smile to her lips. **"And I will always be here for you."** She thought back to him. **"En'zari."**

*And long after you are gone, I will mourn your passing.*

The last thought she hoped remained private to her... though by the injured look that flashed across Innoruuk's features, she was not so certain.



# COMPLICATIONS



Keramore Thex glared at the bend in the tunnel for long moments. There was no escaping what lay ahead, though he would sooner face a pack of the armored felfangs roaming the land above.

He stood in the subterranean complex his Teir'Dal had called home for the past months. For as trying as life had been since the portal brought them to this world, finding these caves was a rare blessing, and probably the only reason the last surviving members of the elven race were not yet piles of dust-covered bones.

He had no idea what had created these underground formations, but they suited his purpose. Each tunnel was cylindrical and just tall enough that none of his warriors was forced to stoop. Hundreds of small, roundish chambers branched off at irregular intervals, perfectly sized to accommodate a pair of elves. The same strange illumination that lit the world above did so down here, and a comfortable layer of soft black sand dusted the floors. They had even found a shallow stream at the deepest level. Though the water tasted vile, and some who drank it suffered stomach cramps, the stream served its purpose and, along with the shelter provided by these caves, had kept most of them alive. As an added boon, when the hunting shifted from poor to none, the dense, flavorless fungus that grew along the water's edge filled hungry bellies well enough.

Letting out a sigh, Keramore strode forward.

"I was wondering how long you were going to stand out in the corridor." Lanys sat in her small alcove, mending a stocking. She did not look up as he entered.

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When Keramore did not respond, she huffed, tossing her threadwork onto the sandy floor next to her. "What were you thinking?"

Anger swelled inside Keramore hotter than her comment warranted. "I was thinking of my people's need for food!"

Climbing to her feet, she poked a finger into his chest. "Not at the cost of losing their leader! Their king!"

*King...*

He cringed at the word. "I wasn't in any danger. I had plenty of—"

"No! You didn't!" Lanys lowered her voice, though it still held an edge. "Ailen and I were watching. You barely made it to the mouth of the cave. You've seen as well as I what those things can do to..." Tears welled up in her jade-green eyes and she shied away.

He hated when she cried. It always made him feel so... vulnerable. Stepping closer, he placed his hands on her shoulders. "Lanys, I'm fine."

In an instant, she was pressed hard against his chest, enveloping him in her arms and forcing her lips to his. He returned her kiss with abandoned passion. Too soon, she broke from him. Wiping the tears staining her cheeks, she sat down and picked up her stocking.

Keramore looked down upon her for what seemed like an eternity, his mind racing to recall some duty that demanded his attention. He found none. "We can't continue. Not like this. We—"

"It was *you* who came to *my* bed, Keramore Thex!" She glared up at him from the floor. "If you want to treat me as one of your officers, then direct me as you see fit. But don't think you can use me like some common whore for a few weeks and then throw me aside!"

Letting his features soften, he knelt next to her. "That's not what I meant." He reached out and brushed a thumb across her forehead, driving away an unruly strand of her blonde hair. "I am happy about our... about us."

Lanys reached up and took his hand, pressing her lips to his palm. "Then what did you mean, My King?"

"Your constant fretting over my welfare." He paused. "The way we seem to argue about everything." Shifting, he laid down in front of her crossed legs. "Being with you has filled an emptiness in me I thought would never be sated." Rolling to his back, he interlocked his fingers behind his head and stared at the ceiling. "You are the one thing keeping me sane in this bleak world."

"I'm glad for that." She leaned over and kissed his lips. "Though you can't have one without the other."

"The arguments?" He cocked his eye at her and smiled.

Her grin was all the answer he needed. With one hand, he pulled her face to his and kissed her deeply.

The sound of a throat being cleared broke them apart. Thelios Graythal stood at attention in the opening leading to the hall. Though he was as unwashed as any Teir'Dal, he still looked ready for inspection.

With cheeks flush, the young lieutenant averted his gaze. "Apologies for the intrusion, Sire, but you are needed above. There is..." He glanced at Lanys. "...an issue."



# RESIGNATION



The unpleasant sensation of something crawling across his back woke Ithiosar the Black from unconsciousness. He lay motionless, fearing that his mind had abandoned him to more self-created manifestations.

*Vyskudra—a dragon whose name I’ve never heard spoken—allying with Innoruuk! Never was that black-hearted demon-god just and pure! Nothing more than a pain-driven fantasy created by this strange world.*

Whatever scurried across his thick scales, however, was not his imagination. Cracking open an eye, he craned his neck around.

Some...*thing*...sat perched between his leathery wings. About the size of an orc, the creature had a deformed and misshapen body. With a hunched back, it crawled around on six limbs like some oversized, repugnant insect. The fact that its head reminded him of an elf’s only added to the grotesquerie of its visage. This was compounded by the set of large, elven-looking eyes sitting above a mouth filled with dingy teeth, and the stringy brown hair that ran between two bony horns protruding from either side of its skull.

Worse, the creature stared back at Ithiosar without fear. On the contrary, it gazed at him with keen interest.

The thing scuttled forward, coming right up to Ithiosar’s nose. “Why do you hunt the Sea of Glass?” Its voice rasped from between dry lips. “Nothing lives here. Nothing!”

“Begone, bug!” Ithiosar spit out a puff of acidic smoke.

If the gas bothered the creature, it made no sign of it. Scurrying to his shoulder, it leapt onto the side of Ithiosar’s neck and began sniffing at his scales. So stunned was the dragon, he froze.

The creature shifted around to the other side, smelling the whole way, before it climbed up to perch on the broad, flat space between Ithiosar's horns. Anger swelled within the dragon and he flicked his head.

The motion did not dislodge the squalid creature. Instead, it spun around so it was once again looking Ithiosar in the eye. "His scent lingers within you. He smells... divine."

"What do you want of me, vile little pest?" Ithiosar laid his head back onto the sharp stones, shifting until he found a relatively comfortable position. "Let me die in peace."

The strange being did not respond. It moved down the dragon's back, pausing every so often to sniff. It stopped when it came to Ithiosar's missing leg. "You are injured! That will never do. No! The Prince will be most displeased." It scurried back up to his shoulder. "Can you walk?" Its middle-right appendage reached out and caressed the ridgeline of Ithiosar's wing. "Or... fly?" It sounded almost wistful.

A grunt of a laugh shook Ithiosar's massive frame. "Why should I bother? There is nowhere to go on this wasteland of a world."

"Not true." Hopping off, the creature took a few steps away and pointed into the distance. "Aten shall lead you, yes she will, to the City of Shadows." The creature spun back. "There you can beg the Prince, and if he hears you, and deems you worthy, he may make you whole." The creature turned away and began mumbling. "Though, he rarely answers anymore." She cocked her head to the side, as if in answer. "Still, he did send me to find the flying beast, so it must hold value to him."

Ithiosar peered off into the direction the creature—Aten—had pointed, but all he saw was more of the same—a bleak landscape stretching off into a dark shroud. The thought of a city, however, and a chance for healing, sparked a flicker of hope inside him he had not felt since arriving in this strange place.

Forcing his muscles to comply, he pushed his bulk off the ground.

*If nothing else, perhaps I can glean some information that might lead me home.*



# RETALIATION



Even after months on this foreign world, Keramore Thex could not escape the sensation that he should need a moment for his eyes to adjust as he stepped from the depths of the tunnels. The fact that the caves held the same level of illumination as the rest of this Seraphs-damned world was disorienting.

Letting out a long, slow breath, he followed Thelios Graythal toward a small group of Teir'Dal standing some hundred paces to the right of the cave entrance. As they approached, Ailen Rashard broke from the gathering and headed their way, his face grim.

When they came together, neither of his two officers met his gaze. Thelios kept his almond-shaped eyes directed at the ground just in front of his feet, while Ailen fidgeted with his sword belt, studying the distant veil of darkness.

The awkward stillness between them stoked Keramore's ire. When neither dal moved to speak, he broke the silence. "Am I expected to guess what this *issue* of yours is?"

Thelios snapped to attention and opened his mouth, but Ailen waved him off. The second-in-command glanced back at the group of Teir'Dal as if searching for an escape route. Finally, he shook his head and looked Keramore in the eye. "Before you react, I need you to keep mindful of our situation. If that black worm of a dragon spoke true, we are the last of our race, and every dal counts. I'm not sure you can—"

"Stop." Keramore clenched his jaws. "Tell me what happened. Now."

When Ailen failed to answer, Keramore turned to his Master of Scouts. "Thelios?"

The lieutenants engaged in a wordless conversation before

Thelios' shoulders slumped. "Two soldiers got into a brawl. One of them is dead."

As the statement hit home, Keramore could not imagine a harder blow. Life had been unbearable since coming to this place, and tensions were high. Everyone was bending under the strain of life on this desolate world.

*But... murder?*

It took Keramore a moment to find his voice. "How...? Who?"

"Galoren and Darmil." Ailen's words were ice cold. "Best we can surmise, they argued over a bowl of stew. The fight finished when Galoren took a knife in the eye."

Keramore stood there, his mind racing. Death and killing cloaked his Teir'Dal like a shroud—yet they wore it with pride. It was the life they had chosen, and their sole purpose. Each was hard, tempered through a life of training and war. Physical altercations were not unheard of in their ranks, though never had one taken another's life.

*We watch each other's backs. If not, we die!*

"Witnesses?"

Running his hands through his black hair, Ailen snorted. "At least a dozen." His face softened, and he waved a hand indicating the barren land that surrounded them. "Look, this place... it presses down on us all. There's something... evil... about it."

"That's no excuse." Keramore squared on his second-in-command.

"I'm not claiming it is." Ailen took a step back. "But everyone is acting strange, doing things that are unlike them."

Keramore did not miss the pained look Ailen directed at him, and knew it was well deserved. He shook away the accusation. "Still no excuse."

"Tensions are building like I've never seen." A pleading tone laced the lieutenant's words. "I have even heard grumblings from a few about splitting off and trying to make it on their own."

"If it's a choice between that and lawlessness, they may go with my blessing!"

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Placing a hand on Keramore's chest, Ailen tried to push him in the direction of the cave. "We *can't* let them go! We're all that's left. We need every last dal if we hope to survive. And we need you, our king." When Keramore didn't move, Ailen dropped his hand. "Just like we need Darmil. He made a mistake, but he's one of our best."

Anger boiled in Keramore's veins.

*How dare he suggest I overlook this transgression as if numbers meant more than honor!*

As he pushed between the two lieutenants, Ailen reached out for him. Keramore jerked away and stormed toward the group of Teir'Dal, the two officers trailing in his wake.

All eyes were on him, and his people parted before he needed to bid them move. Galoren lay sprawled on his back, the hilt of a dagger protruding from one eye, the other was glassy, staring blankly at the starless sky.

Darmil sat on his knees, hands bound behind his back. He looked up when Keramore stopped in front of him. His ice-blue gaze held no remorse. "Tell your dogs to release me."

It was not the greeting Keramore expected, and it took him aback. Ailen stepped past and slammed the heel of his boot into the bound elf's side. "You will not speak to your king in that tone!"

Darmil accepted the kick with a grunt and fell over on the sharp black stones. Blood trickled from a fresh cut on his cheek when he glared up at his assailant. "King?" He let out a laugh and rolled over onto his back. "Don't you need a kingdom to rule over to be called king?"

Keramore knelt down next to him. "I'm not here to debate my lineage. You murdered a fellow Teir'Dal." He reached out and pulled Darmil back into a sitting position. "What do you have to say in your defense?"

The elven warrior leaned forward and spat on Keramore's boot before glaring at him. "My defense is that there is one less mouth to feed. You should thank me. Now you have more time to play king before we all starve to death."

Standing, Keramore turned in a slow circle. Some twoscore

of his Teir'Dal had gathered—enough for him to judge the sentiments running through the hearts of his people.

He locked eyes with each in turn.

Many averted their gaze. Some nodded their support. A few held his stare. And it was in their eyes that Keramore saw what he had never witnessed from a Teir'Dal: defiance toward their commander.

Pointing down at Darmil, he let his voice rise. "I know this man is not alone in his feelings, and there are fractures forming within our ranks. Though this saddens and disappoints me, I understand." He glanced over his shoulder at Ailen. "This land... it is changing us. I don't know if it is the perpetual darkness, the harshness of our surroundings, or a more tangible force at work." He let his arm drop to his side. "What I do know is that so long as we are here, we only have each other. And if we can't count on the dal standing to our side, we may as well lie down and die."

If his words swayed any of those whose eyes showed opposition, they made no sign of it. Turning, he nodded to Thelios and then Ailen before motioning at Darmil. The three leaders stared at each other for long moments. When it became apparent that Keramore stood alone in this decision, he took a deep breath and dropped his gaze to the hard black ground.

*There is something about this place. And it is evil.*

"Darmil, you are charged with murder. What is your plea?"

"I plead for nothing! I don't answer to you, Thex. Not anymore." Venom dripped from the dal's words. "You have led us to ruin, and only the foolish will ever—"

Keramore closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. He had no desire to watch Darmil's head roll about the ground. When he opened them, the circled Teir'Dal stared at him as one. Most wore expressions of understanding, even if some were laced with sadness. A few glared with an open contempt that Keramore could not begrudge them.

*What have I done?*

For a long moment he stood over Darmil's body, as if

through sheer will he could undo the execution. How had he let his emotions get the better of him? Everything he stood against, everything that was so wrong with the Empire he had hoped to change, he became with one, impulsive strike from his sword. He knew the others would blame it on this place. And just as he had felt about Darmil's actions, he also knew it was no excuse.

"Every one of us must remain accountable for our deeds." He said the words without realizing he had spoken aloud. Several of the Teir'Dal surrounding him nodded their agreement, though they knew not the true meaning of his words.

*I must remain accountable for my own deeds!*

Kneeling down, he wiped his blood-smeared blade clean on Darmil's dingy cloak.

When he rose, Thelios stood before him. "I will see them buried before their bodies..." The young lieutenant let his words trail off into an uncomfortable silence.

Keramore could not bring himself to reply. Instead, he sheathed his blade and pushed through those who had crowded in, heading away from the tunnels they called home.

"Where are you going?" Ailen jogged up next to Keramore, falling in stride with his rapid pace.

"For a walk."

Ailen grabbed his shoulder, and this time Keramore let himself be stopped. "Not a good idea. Scouts have reported more and more felfangs around of late. I think they see our campsite as a new hunting ground."

"I can take care of myself." Keramore reached out and placed his hands upon his second-in-command's shoulders. "I know you are not going to like what I am about to do, and I know it's your job to see that I don't do it." He paused to let his words sink in. "But I just took the life of one of my own men." He raised his hand to forestall Ailen's response. "Whatever his crime, he deserved a tribunal—so he could defend himself before his peers. I deprived him of that right. There was no justice in my actions. What I did was brash and... unworthy of a king."

Dropping his hands to his side, Keramore glanced over at the small group of Teir'Dal still hovering around the two bodies. "Our bond frays more and more with each passing day, and I think you are correct—it's this place. Never before have I doubted the loyalty of those under my command." He shook his head. "I need to be alone with my thoughts. I can't do that back there. Not as news of what I have done spreads around me like wildfire."

"I understand. I really do." Ailen shifted back in front of Keramore. "But you are also correct—I can't let you go off on your own. It's just too dangerous."

"I'll keep him company." Lanys strode up, a look of concern upon her face. When she reached his side, she handed Keramore one of the two short spears she carried. She glanced at Ailen. "And ensure no harm comes to him."

Ailen grunted. "And who will protect him from you?" When the compassion in Lanys' eyes morphed into wrath, the assassin threw up his hands and took a step back. "Just don't wander past the marking stones. We can't afford to lose you to the shadows." He turned and headed back to the small group. "Don't be too long, either. Or I'll send a hunting party looking for you."

Keramore remained silent, even long after Ailen had returned to the Teir'Dal gathering. His mind boiled, and having Lanys so close did not help—it merely added to the war raging inside him.

*Am I falling into madness? If I am, how would I even know?*

He closed his eyes when Lanys ran her hand inside his shirt. Chills cut through him as she raked her nails down his spine. "Come. Let's have that walk."

Looking down into her almond-shaped eyes, he knew the answer to his question. Never had he wanted to run away from his responsibilities. Never had he hated the person he was becoming.

*I am going mad, and I have no idea how to save myself.*

Turning, he slipped his arm around Lanys' thin waist and led her toward the furthest marking stones he could see in the

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dim light. The fact that he was walking away from his people, his Teir'Dal, the very last living souls of the entire dal race, was not lost on him.

*I simply lack the desire to care.*



# RUIN



A massive mountain rose from the perpetual shroud of darkness, the first definable feature Ithiosar the Black had seen since his arrival. They had been walking for hours, all the while his despair growing with the thought that nothing lay at the end of the journey. The mountain stood out in such stark contrast to the vast stretches of flat terrain that had surrounded him for so long, excitement got the better of him and he urged Aten to quicken her pace.

The vaunted City of Shadows, however, could not have been a greater disappointment. No doubt, at one time it had been magnificent. But that time was centuries gone. They approached by way of what was once a grand boulevard. Now, broken paving stones crunched under his taloned feet as he lumbered toward an outer wall that was more toppled than standing.

Along the road leading to the city were hundreds of the six-limbed creatures—obviously kin to Aten. They scurried around, digging in the black soil with their front hands like animals. Ithiosar did not want to think about what it was they occasionally put into their mouths as they dug.

Visible over the wall, lines of decaying structures stretched into the distance. In some places, the buildings had fallen completely, hills of uneven rubble the only monument to their past greatness. In others, the buildings had partially collapsed, their missing walls leaving cracked black bricks fanned out over broken paved streets. But these were rare. The vast majority of buildings just seemed... abandoned. A thick layer of black dust covered everything. Even through the damage, Ithiosar could see the craftsmanship in what had

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been a marvelous city. Majestic towers soared into the sky, no two the same height, with many stopping abruptly like a broken twig. Large dwellings sat at irregular intervals, many with beautifully crafted domes still intact. And tarnished bronze statues stood at every intersection, though most were mangled beyond recognition. For a moment, he wondered if he was seeing some dark reflection of Takish'Hisz the instant before the Ashfall consumed the elven city and its prideful people with it.

Between the buildings sat strangely constructed piles of stone. They were stacked in such a way as to create small, cave-like hovels. None of the dwellings stood much taller than an elf. While the ancient buildings of the city were devoid of life, mixed between the hovels, unused buildings, and rubble were more of Aten's kin—tens of thousands at least—all scuttling about like insects.

Ithiosar's gaze shifted from the city to Aten and was appalled by a sudden realization.

*Of the gifted artisans who built this place, there is no sign. Only vermin remain. Shame, I would have liked to meet the race capable of creating such beauty.*

When the dragon and his guide approached, the creatures closest to them stopped and stared. A ripple of voices flowed out, spreading through the city in a wave, and before Ithiosar reached the opening that at one time had been a grand gate, a mass of deformed bodies surrounded him.

At first, they kept their distance, looks of awe on every misshapen face. Their reverence did not last long. Soon they pressed in, reaching out to touch his scales, leaning in to sniff his hide. Before Ithiosar realized it, they were climbing on him—over him. As more of the creatures clambered atop his back, their weight pressed down and panic constricted his throat.

With a mighty roar, he leapt into the air. He unfurled his wings and thrust them downward, launching himself further into the sky. He banked hard, sending those unfortunate enough to have clung to him screaming to the jagged stones below.

With another mighty flap he flew over the decrepit city, intent on looping back and unleashing a torrent of acid upon the vile creatures who had dared defile him with their touch. As he started his turn, his heart froze.

In the midst of a grand, crescent-shaped courtyard, half-hidden behind an outcrop of the mountain, stood a statue of startling beauty. Unlike the ruins around it, this site was lovingly preserved. Cobblestones still covered the area, and a deep pool of crystalline water surrounded the statue, fountains bubbling up in several places across the surface.

Caught by the magnificence of the sight, Ithiosar circled the courtyard. He drank in the splendor and majesty of the statue—a dragon taking wing. So detailed was the figure, he half expected it to finish its leap and soar into the skies beside him.

Perched atop the dragon, in a saddle set high on its shoulders, rode a small, serious looking mortal that until now Ithiosar thought was just a fancy of a fevered hallucination.

*Innoruuk...*

With lance held firmly in his left hand and reins in his right, the akhevan was every bit the image from his dream.

*But Innoruuk as a mortal, not yet a Seraph!*

The more Ithiosar stared at the statue, the more it seemed the effigy of Innoruuk was gazing back. A rasping sound filled his ears, and it took the dragon a moment to realize it was his own labored breath. A sensation akin to the vertigo that gripped him before Aten found him washed over his mind once more. His eyes rolled in their sockets, and the world spun.



# LUST



With a sated moan, Keramore Thex let his full weight collapse onto Lanys. Her naked skin, aglow with the mingling of their sweat, welcomed him into its silky embrace. She purred beneath his body as he lay panting, every breath alive with her scent.

When he had regained himself, he rolled onto the rough-spun blanket she'd carried in her pack. He lay on his back, staring up at the empty, dark sky, surrounded by a vast plane of desolation, with the last of his race falling apart not two leagues away. Yet all his problems seemed distant as Lanys nestled against him, resting her head on his bare chest.

Catlike, she stretched, raking her nails across his stomach and running her smooth leg down his. "Mmm, that was delightful. We should find you a reason to kill more often."

And as quick as that, rage flooded into Keramore like a torrent. He leapt up, flinging Lanys unceremoniously off the blanket and onto the rock-littered black sand. "How dare you!" He stood before her, naked and seething. "What I did is not a thing to jest about!"

Shifting to all fours, she grinned up at him. "Why do you think I was joking?" She crept toward him on hands and knees, a predatory glint in her eye, and the anger drained from Keramore as quickly as it had come, replaced by an ache of desire.

Weaving his fingers into her hair, he wrenched her head back and kissed her hard. Her leg whipped behind his, and in an instant Keramore found himself on his back. Lanys was atop of him before he could react, straddling his body and pinning his wrists to the ground on either side of his head. Instead of fighting, he let his eyes roam across her body.

Lanys had always been fit. But months living on this unforgiving world had toned her, wearing away her soft curves and leaving behind a chiseled, muscular frame that was taugth and strong.

He drank her in with a hunger he had never known before.

Sensing his appetite swell, her grin broadened... and grew vicious. Leaning close, she first kissed his neck, then dug her teeth into his flesh as the urgency of her hips pressed against his.

Closing his eyes, Keramore let desire carry him away.



# SACRIFICE



Ithiosar the Black banked hard to her right as a clump of molten rock streaked past. Innoruuk crouched low on her back, pressing flat to ensure his body added no resistance against her mobility. Ithiosar...

*No. I'm not Ithiosar...*

Vyskudra focused upon a swelling mass of clouds just overhead, gathering their latent power. A bolt of lightning sprang from her talon and traced a path back to her attacker. She was the Stormrider, and the forces of nature's ferocity were hers to command.

The bolt hit a fire giant square in the chest, opening a jagged wound across its torso. The creature's limbs went ridged before it pitched over, careening down the outside of the volcano.

Far below, at the base of the mountain, the forces of the Keldarain clashed against the remnants of the fire titan's army. It had taken them weeks of heavy fighting, but they had finally driven the ancient being back to its volcanic home deep within Mount Cinderdaw.

"WE HAVE TO BUY HER MORE TIME!" The tempest tried its best to drown out Innoruuk's shouted command to the three Dragon Knights flying to either side. "DRUZZIL SHOULD BE NEARING THE HEART OF THE VOLCANO! YOU TWO CIRCLE THE OTHER WAY AND TRY AND TAKE OUT MORE OF THOSE DAMNABLE GIANTS ALONG THE CALDERA!"

Brumlin nodded from his perch atop the white, Lathacene, then he and his wingman banked away, diving down the steep cliffs forming the massive funnel of Cinderdaw.

Innoruuk nodded to his own wingman before lying flat

against Vyskudra's neck. "This is taking too long!" His thoughts, laced with dread, filled her mind. "Druzzil must have placed the depleted mithyr in the main vent by now. Why is she still inside?"

Through their bond, Vyskudra let him feel what she was sensing. "The magma chamber is building in strength. It will not be long before the titan unleashes the entire fury of that mountain upon our forces." She glanced down, horrified by the thought of the tens of thousands who would perish when that happened.

"We have beaten it back to its lair!" Frustration rippled through Innoruuk. "Why can't it just return to its slumber? Why continue to fight?"

Just then, the mountain shook. The near side of the cliff face collapsed, taking a small band of fire giants bellowing into the bowels of the volcano. A low rumbling from below drowned out the raging storm above and Vyskudra cringed as the armies of Keldarain danced along the ground like small pebbles across a drumhead. The shaking grew until it seemed all of Norrath shuddered in pain.

With a mighty thrust of her wings, Vyskudra shot away from Mount Cindermau.

Concern and fear flooded into her from Innoruuk. "Where are you going?"

Though it pained her, she knew she had to act. She could feel the power building inside the mountain, and she refused to allow her en'zari to die in such a needless way. Relief washed over her when she realized their wingman was in pursuit.

Innoruuk's anger assailed her through their bond, and he continued to scream inside her skull, but she did not answer him. Her en'zari slammed his fist against the side of her neck before he reached up and yanked on one of her horns. "WE'RE NOT LEAVING! DRUZZIL IS STILL INSIDE!"

Tears welled up in Vyskudra's eyes knowing the torment she was inflicting upon her mortal companion. But she did not turn from her course. Instead, she screeched out a warning to

her brothers and sisters for them to do the same. Retreat was their only option. When the volcano exploded, it would kill every living thing for leagues around. And if Druzzil Ro failed in her mission, there would be nothing any of them could do but join her in death.

A crack louder than thunder ripped across the land. Chancing a glance back, expecting the worst, Vyskudra watched as the volcano collapsed in upon itself. Massive shards of earth fell into the ancient caldera, smothering the burning lava within. It seemed the tremors might never end as rubble continued to fall for moments that piled upon moments. Thankfully, she could sense the magma chamber below receding, so she banked once more and began her descent toward the command post of the Keldarain army.

"How dare you!" Never before had Innoruuk directed so much anger toward her, and it flooded their bond with rage. "Only a coward would flee a comrade in need!"

Vyskudra craned her neck to look him in the eye. "Just because you believe yourself honor-bound to die a needless death, do not presume the same of me." She turned back and glided for a clear area some hundred paces from the general's collapsed tent. "I sensed the titan's power and knew the mountain was about to explode. Had it, none of us would have survived, and I didn't see any reason for that."

With a final downward thrust, she lighted upon the grass of a small hill. Before she had fully halted, Innoruuk drove his lance into the soft soil and slid from his saddle. He took several stalking steps away and she did not need their bond to know he was seething. He crested the hill and stopped, his hands clasped behind his head.

She left him alone. If the years they had spent together had taught her anything, it was that Innoruuk's anger was short-lived.

True to his nature, before more than a few heartbeats had passed, the akhevan's arms dropped to his sides and he took a deep breath. As he returned, she could feel his remorse over his behavior and she stretched her mind out to his. "Please forgive me, en'zari. I wished only to protect you."

His warm smile appeared as he patted her neck. "I know. Thank you. No doubt you are right. My honor will one day be the death of me."

Vyskudra basked in the warm intimacy of their bond.

Innoruuk turned away and began walking toward where the officers of the army awaited. Pointing up at a purple flash in the sky, he laughed. "You should never have doubted that Druzzil would succeed."

And then, he froze.

Vyskudra felt his terror and pain flood into her even before her eyes told her that the saddle of the approaching purple dragon sat empty. Harla Dar looked the worse for wear. Black soot covered the dragon nearly from head to tail, and the scales from the left side of her head had been burned away. Even without the large rend slicing through the membrane of her right wing, it was obvious she was having difficulty staying level. She more collided with the ground than landed.

Vyskudra lumbered to her as fast as she could, but Innoruuk arrived first. "Where is Druzzil?"

Sobs were the purple dragon's only reply.

The akhevan fell to his knees beside Harla Dar, and the anguish that rushed through their bond nearly overwhelmed Vyskudra.

While she had grown to care for and respect the leader of the Dragon Knights, Druzzil Ro had been a mentor to Innoruuk since he was a young man. He held more love for the elddar woman than he did for his own mother.

She prayed that one day he would find solace in knowing that Druzzil had succeeded in stopping the fire titan, saving tens of thousands of lives. But she knew it would be little comfort to him now.

Her en'zari sat motionless, staring off at Mount Cindermau as it continued to crumble in upon itself. All she could do was stand by helplessly as the pain in his heart echoed through her own.



# DISTRUST



Lanys reacted first, and Keramore Thex cursed his own lethargy.

She tackled the creature that had been hovering over them as they slept, pinning it to the ground and placing her dagger against its throat before Keramore had thrown off the fog of sleep.

"Wait!" The word spilt from the creature wrapped in a hiss. "Kill Shali not!"

Whatever the thing was, it looked hideous. About the size of an orc, its dirt-covered body was malformed. It had six limbs, three on either side of its bent, twisted frame. Its misshapen head seemed too small for its body. The creature's horns and large black eyes that took up most of its face exaggerated this fact.

*And the stench!*

Standing so close made Keramore nearly gag. But it was the first creature they had met on this world that had the gift of language, so he reached out and placed a hand upon Lanys' shoulder to stop her from ending its pathetic life.

Lanys did not look back, though she did not kill it either. "What are you?" She growled the words, pushing the terrified being further into the sandy ground.

"A servant." If the thing was faking its fear, it was doing a worthy job of it. Its eyes were wide and rolling as it lay splayed out under Lanys' nude form. "Shali is a servant sent to deliver a message."

Glancing back, Lanys raised a questioning eyebrow.

Keramore studied their visitor. It was unarmed, apparently in possession of nothing but the strips of filthy rags it wore as clothing. "Let it up," he ordered. As Lanys hopped off,

Keramore bent to one knee and grabbed the thing by its boney throat. "Try anything, or attempt to flee, and she'll gut you like a fish." It was only after he said this that he wondered if the thing even knew what a fish was.

Still, his course was laid. He shoved the creature onto its back and rose to hover over it.

Nodding with fervor, the creature rolled over, cowering on the ground. Propped up on its six limbs, it looked like a giant insect. "Shali is not here to try anything, nor to flee. Shali is sent here to give you a message."

Now that the initial shock of the encounter had ebbed, questions flooded Keramore's mind. The fact that the creature spoke the common tongue told him that Norrathians had encountered them sometime in the past—though he'd never heard of the Takish venturing to a world as desolate as this. But history be damned! Language meant a society, maybe even cities. Cities with food, shelter, and water!

*Perhaps even a way home!*

He bent forward, trying to ignore the being's vile odor. "Who sent you? Where did you come from? How do you know our language?"

"Aten sends Shali. Aten tells Shali her master wants Shali to find the pretty creatures who live on the shores of the Sea of Glass." The creature, Shali, picked up its head to look at Lanys. A grotesque smile broke its thin black lips as its bulbous eyes roved over her bare skin. "Shali is finding you pretty."

Keramore stepped between the two, shielding Lanys from the creature's gaze and taking her dagger in one fluid motion. He jabbed the weapon in Shali's direction. "Put your head down and close your eyes!"

With a yelp, the creature prostrated itself onto the black sandy ground. "Kill Shali not!"

"Do as you're told and I won't have to kill you." Keramore glanced over his shoulder and was irritated to find that Lanys had only moved to retrieve one of the short spears that lay next to where they...

*By the Seraphs! We would have been easy prey to anything that*

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*happened along while we were... sleeping. I truly am losing my mind!*

"Get dressed!" His bark of a command made Lanys jump, and for a moment he regretted snapping at her. That evaporated when, with a coy smile, she slowly bent down and retrieved her leggings. Keramore felt a pang of desire as the armor slid over her skin. He became so entranced he nearly forgot about Shali cowering at his feet.

Wrenching his eyes from her, he returned his attention to strange creature. "You said Aten's master sent you to find us. Who is Aten? And this master?"

Looking up for a moment, Shali glanced between Keramore and a still half-nude Lanys before squeezing its eyes shut and returning its face to the sand. "Aten is she who speaks to the Prince. Shali lives there, in the City of Shadows. Shali is to find the pretty ones and show them the way."

"The City of Shadows? An apt name, if not an enticing one." Lanys stepped next to Keramore, handing him his smallclothes and trousers, which he accepted with a nod.

"Perhaps not, but it's the best news I've heard since we arrived here." Passing her the dagger, he began to dress. "How far is this city?"

When Shali started to rise, Lanys put her bare foot between the horns on its head and smashed its face down. The creature whimpered for a bit before she let it up enough to answer. "Not far. Shali will show you the way."

Keramore pulled on his shirt. "Not before we go back for our people."

"What?" Lanys' head whipped around. "We don't even know if this thing speaks the truth. Don't you think we should at least scout it first?"

Shaking his head, Keramore bent and slipped on his soft leather boots before picking up his own short spear. "And if it's lying, and this is a trap, all the more reason for us to have a division of Teir'Dal at our backs."

Closing on him, Lanys slipped one arm around Keramore's neck. She brushed her mouth next to his ear so as not be

overheard. “Your people are losing faith in you. What better way to shore up their confidence than by being the one to deliver salvation?” She brushed her lips across his cheek. “And if this city turns out to be nothing more than a shadow, you will spare them the pain of disappointment.”

It was a stupid reason, and one in the past Keramore would have dismissed as folly. But as much as he hated to admit it, she was correct—at least about his need to restore faith. It’s what his father would have done. Erador too. Both men better kings than he could ever be.

He glanced between the fervent look in Lanys’ eye and the terrified one in Shali’s. Finally, he sighed. “Very well.” He pointed his spear at the creature. “But know this. If you are leading us into a trap, you will be the first one I kill.”



## YIELDING



Ithiosar the Black woke to an entirely new level of agony. His body lay crumpled against the wall of rock that surrounded the rear half of the courtyard. He was on his back, legs splayed unceremoniously into the air. The statue of Innoruuk riding the dragon towered above him.

He moved to flip over and a jolt of pain ripped through his wing and shoulder. Setting his jaw, he forced himself to his feet. His left wing dangled to the ground, and he was horrified to see bones penetrating the flesh at its base.

“For a creature that can fly, you do not land so well.” Aten slunk from the shadows to stand before him like a giant, six-legged insect. With her so close, he noticed that her four front limbs ended in stubby-fingered hands. “And it seems you have broken yourself again. Perhaps you should walk more and fly less?”

The thought of melting the she-whelp flitted through the dragon’s mind. The fact that the simple act of standing filled him with unbearable torment crushed that notion. “You spoke of healing?”

She scurried over to the edge of the pool. “I spoke of begging the Shadow Prince, but it seems he has already answered by swatting you from the sky.”

While many of his brethren loved plying their minds to riddles, Ithiosar despised mysteries. Though it pained him greatly, he took a lumbering step closer to the dirty little creature. “Do not try my patience. Take me to this prince you speak of.”

Aten scuttled back, though there was no sign of fear on her all too elf-like face. “You are already where you need to

be.” She pointed one gnarled hand up at the statue in the courtyard. “Bow to my master and plead for his aid.”

Ithiosar did not bow. He didn’t take his eyes from the defiant creature standing before him. Instead, he laughed. “You worship a vanquished god. One silent for countless ages. And even if he could, Innoruuk would never answer one of my kind. When last he set foot upon Norrath, it was my kin who drove the Seraph-killer away. Solusek and the other godlings vowed to pursue him to the brink of the Void itself.”

Aten’s bulbous eyes seemed to narrow as she let out a hissing wheeze. She scurried around him and prostrated before the statue. “Master, please, tell me why you bade this petulant creature retrieved.” She pointed one of her bony middle arms accusingly at Ithiosar. “Grant me your leave, and I will enjoin your followers to tear the flesh from his bones!”

Ithiosar grunted a laugh at Aten’s empty threat, and even that simple gesture wracked him with agony. Motion from the distant shadows caught his eye, and he was gripped by the cold realization that thousands of the dingy creatures surrounded him. He tried to wrench his injured wing from the ground, but the pain would not allow it. Taking flight was not possible, so he moved his back against the cliff-like semicircle of the mountain. It was then that he noticed hundreds of the little vermin scurrying above him, covering the coarse rock’s surface like locusts.

From nowhere, a sudden flash of regret filled him. Ithiosar had always imagined a glorious death in battle, one his brothers and sisters would remember in song for millennia to come. If his life ended here, on this distant, desolate world so far from his kin, it would mean his true death. There would be no one to bear his essence to the Temple of Veeshan, no way to one day be reborn in a new brood. Everything he was, everything he might ever be, would be lost, with nothing but bones left to mark his passing.

He swallowed hard and bared his fangs.

*If this is to be how I die, then I shall meet it as I lived.*

“Death holds no fear for me.” Ithiosar stomped a foreleg

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upon the dust-covered cobblestones and let out a roar. "Come, insects, let me show you what it means to face a child of Veeshan!"

The multitude of creatures did not advance. Instead, they hovered around him, as if waiting for some signal.

Aten gestured toward him as she continued to commune with the statue. "And you are certain he is worthy?"

So strange was her demeanor—calm, more inquisitive than hostile—it gave Ithiosar pause.

"If you command." A hungry look fell over her. "His meat would feed us for—" Aten blanched and fell to her knees, prostrating once more. "Yes, Master. It will be as you desire."

Keeping her body pressed to the ground, she scuttled over to stop before Ithiosar. "The Shadow Prince has granted your request." Half-turning, she indicated the pool. "Enter his holy waters and be cleansed."

"Do you take me for a fool?" Ithiosar moved his head down so his fangs were inches from the filthy she-beast. "A moment ago you were speaking of dining on my flesh!"

"Forgive my transgressions. I meant no disrespect." She flattened herself further. "I did not understand your value to my master."

"Value?" Lifting his neck sent a throbbing jolt slicing through Ithiosar's broken body, but he could not help himself. He peered up at the image of the akhevan riding the dragon.

*What value could I possibly hold for you?*

The statue gave no hint of an answer. In fact, an eerie silence now filled the courtyard. All of Aten's people had followed her lead and lay motionless, pressed against the ground. The gentle splashing of the fountains inside the pool was the only sound. The water called out, inviting Ithiosar to step forward and be welcomed into its embrace. Tranquility washed over him, and for the first time in decades, he felt safe.

He knew at once it was a trap.

Turning, he limped away from the statue as fast as his three legs would allow. Dragging his broken wing across the ground did nothing to aid his progress. Even if he failed to

reach the gates, getting away from this pool was enough for him at this moment.

“Stop him!” Aten’s voice cut through the silence like the bolt of a ballista. “Cast him into the Well of Darkness. Our master commands it!”

A horde of the insect-like beings surged forward and Ithiosar bathed them in acid. The filthy creatures screamed as their bodies melted. He took out another score with a swipe of one mighty claw. Lashing out with his tail, he felt those behind him slip under his bulk before he remembered that he had no tail. Still, his stump crushed a few at least.

Yet all of his ferocity was to no avail. Within moments, he was lifted off his feet. Refusing to surrender, he began thrashing his body even as the tide of creatures washed him ever closer to the shimmering pool. Hundreds died under his onslaught, though it did little to diminish their numbers. For each that Ithiosar smashed into the ground, chomped into pieces between his fangs, or melted under a fountain of acid, two more replaced it.

Just as anger gave way to a torrent of panic and hopelessness, he was plunged into the pool’s icy embrace. It had not looked deep from above, yet now that he was in, he could find no bottom. His head broke the surface, and he gulped in air. Lining the edge were Aten’s people. Aten herself stood with arms raised, eyes aglow with the fervor of a zealot.

The fear that had gripped Ithiosar melted from him, rage filling the void left behind. Sucking in a lungful of air, he made to douse as many of the creatures with acid as he could—making sure Aten would be in the center of the carnage.

Something wrapped around Ithiosar’s back leg and froze his attack in the base of his throat. Long, thick tentacles reached up from the dark waters below, slithering their way around his body. He slashed at one, but his claws did nothing to the tough hide covering the appendages.

Letting out a startled gurgle, Ithiosar was pulled into the depths.

He thrashed against the bonds holding him, biting and

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clawing even as the tentacles crushed him. The more he struggled, the tighter they grew until agony wracked his body. He was not sure if his vision dimmed from the pain, or if he had been dragged so deep the faint light that illuminated the world above could no longer reach his eyes.

Either way, he knew it was fruitless to continue his struggles. A great weight tugged at his mind, and he welcomed the release of unconsciousness.



# TRANQUILITY



“We have been over this, en’zari.” Vyskudra could not understand why Innoruuk was being so stubborn. “It must be you.”

“I...” The akhevan ran his hand through his thick black hair. Vyskudra could sense the frustration in her soul mate, and it required concentration to keep his emotions from becoming her own. He looked up, pain lancing through his eyes. “Will it break our bond? Solusek can’t say for certain either way. I don’t believe I could survive if my heart was no longer entwined with yours.”

“And I fear the same. But these sephyras are perhaps the most potent magical relics ever discovered. They must be bestowed upon only the most worthy. Imagine all the good you could achieve as one of the chosen.” She lifted her head from the sun-warmed sand to look him in the eye. “It is a great honor to have one such as Solusek ask you to join him in this.”

Letting out a deep breath, Innoruuk nodded. “I know.” The wind caught his cream-colored shirt, ruffling it along with his hair. With a sideways flick, he launched the flat stone he had been fiddling with out over the water. It skipped across the glass-like surface of the lake, finally diving under the water about halfway across. “But there is more at stake here than honor.”

“Something greater than *your honor*? Is there such a thing?” Vyskudra laughed aloud, and after giving her one of his rare, shy smiles, Innoruuk joined her.

*How long has it been since either of us truly laughed?*

When the mirth died, an uncomfortable silence fell between them, something that had not happened in all the years since

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their joining. Innoruuk began searching for another stone to throw while Vyskudra shifted her tail so it sloshed in the cool waters gently lapping the shore.

Finding a new stone, the akhevan flung it across the water and watched it skip until it joined the last on the bottom of the lake. With a sigh, he turned to face Vyskudra. "As the leader of the Dragon Knights, how can I turn my back on my vow to them? To you?"

She closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sun cascading over her body. "Solusek has been through this. Any mortal who melds with a sephyr will gain untold power. Even now, there are factions among the Keldarain who scheme to acquire one. I shudder to think of the damage that could be wrought." She opened her eyes and smiled. "It is why the son of Druzzil chose you—evil could not be farther from your heart, Innoruuk. There is no mortal more suited."

He crossed to her and rested a palm on the side of her mouth. "I understand. I truly do. But to lose what I am... what we are..." His shoulders slumped, and he broke their gaze to stare at the far bank. "You could undertake the melding with me. I know what happened when Yelinak attempted it, but perhaps it will succeed if we work together and—"

She shook her head slowly. "The norite required for the ritual is anathema to my kind. A dragon cannot join with a sephyr. You must walk this path alone."

He turned and looked out over the water. "You still have not answered my question. What if my melding with the sephyr breaks our bond?"

"Then we will learn to walk different paths."

There was nothing more to be said. They both knew the risks, but they were duty-bound to try.

For now, at least, there was little to do but enjoy this rare moment of peace. All Vyskudra had to do was ignore the tiny voice in the back of her mind screaming out in terror.



# SALVATION



Shali had not lied—at least about the distance. The city was no more than six leagues from the caves his elves now occupied. Or so Keramore Thex reckoned. In this desolate landscape, with nothing to use as a guide marker either on the land or in the sky, it was hard to be certain. Still, it was probably just a league or two further than his scouts had dared explore.

*It's this damnable illumination! We were so close, yet we never knew.*

Keramore realized how unlucky they had been, for the City of Shadows was a sight to behold.

The first thing that came into view through the perpetual shadows was the outline of a massive mountain. It struck a strange contrast to the virtually flat terrain, which was all they had discovered since their arrival.

The city was more than Keramore could have hoped for. He could not begin to comprehend how such a place survived in so inhospitable a land.

They approached by way of a grand boulevard. Painted paving stones, each with a different pattern or design, passed below them as they strode toward a massive wall of polished black stone. To either side of the road, farms covered the land for as far as the dim illumination allowed him to see. The wall looked built to repel even the mightiest of armies. It loomed over the city, and he doubted the great wall of Toskirakk had been as impressive when it stood. On the other side of it, beautiful structures stretched into the distance—their terracotta roofs the first splash of color Keramore had seen in months. In some places, the buildings' roofs came even with the outer wall. In others, the structures rose high into

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the air. And these giant buildings were not rare, with the vast majority of them extravagantly decorated, gilded with gold or colorful plaster to accentuate the black stone from which everything seemed to be made. Though not quite a city built for giants, whoever lived here certainly towered over any dal.

Keramore marveled at the craftsmanship of it all, and felt humbled just to be in the presence of such a stunning city. The closer they drew, the more details appeared through the dim light.

Majestic towers soared into the heavens, no two the same height, connected to one another by thin bridges. Ornate mansions worthy of the grandeur of Takish'Hiz sprawled at irregular intervals, each with beautifully crafted domes that would have glinted in the sunlight, had a sun ever risen in the blank, dark sky. And bronze statues stood at every intersection, masterfully crafted, though Keramore did not recognize any of the figures depicted.

Waiting to welcome them like heroes stood tens of thousands of tall and beautiful four-armed people. They filled the city—lining the outer walls, the high balconies, and narrow bridges between the towers—many waving colorful pennants or flags and cheering their arrival.

Keramore shifted his gaze from the city to their guide and stopped in his tracks.

*By the Seraphs!*

Instead of the bent and twisted form of Shali, a tall, strong man walked beside them. Dressed in flowing white robes, the man had two sets of arms that swung gracefully with each step he took, though this and the bony horns on the side of his head were the only similarity he held to the creature who had been Shali.

The man stopped a few paces after Keramore, turned, and smiled. "I am sorry for the deception, friends. As you have learned, the wilds of Umbra are fraught with peril, and we have found that disguise is our best defense." He bowed. "My name is Senshali, and I have the honor of welcoming you to Vex Thal."



# SORROW



The scream that spilt from Vyskudra tore at her throat with a fury that refused to relent. Yet it paled against the pain that clawed at her heart.

Only when her massive lungs were void of breath did the scream cease, and just long enough for her to suck in air once more. Never before had she felt such agony. Never before had she thought such grief was possible. It was as if she were drowning in a never-ending cycle of deaths, each one more horrendous than the one before.

Her body burned. Her soul ached. Her mind reeled.

She thrashed about, her bulk snapping the surrounding trees into splintered shards of wood. Pain washed over her in waves.

And then, an ice-like vice clamped down upon her mithyr heart, freezing her motionless. Eyes wide, she stared at nothing. She couldn't even breathe.

Slowly, her body began to return to her control. First a shuddered breath. Then the blinking of watery eyes. A single sob shook her frame. As if strings had been severed, she fell limp onto the ground. Lamentations wracked her body with a new level of misery, and she wept uncontrollably.

*Innoruuk has bonded with the sephyr, and we are undone.*

She could no longer sense the mortal she called en'zari.



# HUNGER



Keramore Thex pushed the silver plate away and leaned back into his chair with a satisfied sigh. "That was excellent." He smiled at Lanys still shoveling food into her mouth, caring little if she spilled crumbs upon the green silken dress she'd been given. He admired the fine threadwork of his own new tunic before turning his attention to their hostess.

Aten Ha Ra sat opposite them in the intimate dining chamber. The fact that such a small, cozy room resided in the grandeur of the opulent mansion had surprised Keramore. While the two had eaten voraciously, Aten had only picked sparingly from the plate before her. "It gratifies me that you enjoyed your meal, King Thex." Of the same race as their guide, with horns and an extra set of arms, the woman was as beautiful as Senshali was handsome. Tall and pleasant, her long, silky-black hair flowed over full breasts bare but for the opaque straps of her gown. Her warm smile and eyes shone bright with a mix of intelligence and empathy, which put Keramore instantly at ease.

He leaned forward, attempting to keep his features soft as he did. "But you still have not answered my questions. How does so grand a city thrive in such a desolate place? How is it you speak Norrath's common tongue? Are there other races inhabiting this world?"

As she had done every time he tried to engage her, his host simply smiled and waved a dismissive hand. "Your questions shall all be answered, but it is not my place to do so. That privilege falls upon the Prince."

Keramore nodded pleasantly, though a spark of rage flared inside his chest. "What of my people? If you grant us shelter within your city, there is much we can offer in return."

"Your people are more than welcome in Vex Thal." She let out a reserved laugh. "And there is nothing we require outside of shared friendship. If it will quell your concerns, I will send scouts to collect them once we are finished here."

"I should go as well." Lanys said the words with a spoonful of stew resting before her lips. She glanced at Keramore and shrugged. "So Ailen knows the message is true."

He shook his head. "If anyone goes, it should be me."

"No." Lanys' back stiffened. "You are safe here, and this is where you will—"

"Do not overstep yourself! I'm not some decrepit—" Keramore cut himself off when he noticed Aten Ha Ra shifting in her chair. He took a deep, calming breath. "Forgive me. We have been away from civility too long."

Their host smiled. "Think nothing of it." She slid a large silver platter toward him, steam still rising from the roasted meat it held. "Please have more, if you desire it."

Rubbing his full stomach, Keramore shook his head. "I couldn't, but thank you." He turned to Lanys. "Honestly, I don't know how you are eating so much." He laughed when she paused with her spoon halfway to her mouth just long enough to grin at him before finishing the motion.

"It is understandable." Aten leaned forward and patted Lanys' hand. "The child growing within you requires much nourishment."

The statement struck Keramore like a hammer. "What?" A numbing shock cascaded over him and he stared dumbfounded at Lanys.

She appeared as startled as he. "I don't..." Lanys shook her head, her mouth still full of food. "I'm not *with child*."

A tinkling giggle spilt from Aten as she rose from her seat. "I did not realize you were unaware. Forgive me. The women of my race can sense the moment of conception. It seems your people do not share that ability." She looked down into Lanys' lap. "But I am not wrong, dear. Even now I can see the child's essence growing inside your womb." Her smile widened. When she clapped, a servant appeared and

hurriedly began clearing away plates and utensils. "I should give you privacy. It seems you have yet another matter to discuss." With that, she slipped gracefully from the room, leaving them in stunned silence.

Dropping her fork from numb fingers, Lanys slumped into her chair. For long moments, Keramore stared blankly at the tapestry hanging on the wall opposite him. He had to stop himself from flinching when Lanys reached up and ran her fingers through his blond hair.

"Have you nothing to say?"

A grunt escaped Keramore, but he continued to stare forward. "Do you think she's telling the truth? That she can sense a baby inside you?"

Letting her hand drop to her lap, Lanys rubbed her belly. "I have never heard of a people with such an ability, but then we know so little about this place. As for me, I don't *feel* any different... not that I'd know how I *should* feel." Reaching up, she placed a finger on the side of Keramore's chin and turned his head so he was facing her. She smiled, but hope warred with desperation in her eyes. "Would it be so wrong for me to give you an heir?"

Though her words were meek, Keramore could sense the weight of them. He let his features relax. "It's not that, Lanys. It's the thought of bringing a child into a world like this..." Standing, he paced around the table. "By the Seraphs, woman! We live in a filthy hole in the ground!" He glanced around at the fineries the room held. "Though being in a city such as this does serve to lessen my dread."

Lanys stood and approached him from behind. "And Aten appears compassionate. Surely she will allow us to stay with them in Vex Thal. We may be refugees, but the Teir'Dal bring value—skills they might not possess." Slipping her arms around his waist, she pressed into his back. "You have proven adept at winning others to your cause. I have faith you will see us through this."

Spinning around, Keramore embraced her. "You are the one thing that has sustained me through all this. Why did it

take a world of shadows to bring us together?" He bent and kissed her cheek, then pulled back and let his hand fall to her stomach. "And if it proves true that you carry my child, it will bring even more joy to my heart."

Her face lit up at his words, as he hoped it would. She threaded her fingers through his hair and drew him into a passionate embrace.

He returned her kiss with fervor, though his heart held something back. It was not as if he lied to her. He did love her... after a fashion. And Ailen was correct—if the Teir'Dal were the last of their race, he would require an heir. Yet even in Lanys' arms, his mind could not help but drift back to all he'd lost.

*Oh Neria, my love, I have betrayed you. Faelon, my son, I am so sorry. One day I will beg your forgiveness in the Halls of Anashti.*

Keramore was aware that he no longer controlled his actions. Something about Umbra itself pulled on him with invisible strings, and he had lost the clarity of thought that had always served him. At least, he *felt* that was the case. Sometimes, like now, his thoughts ran pure.

*Though enveloped in the arms of a woman who may be carrying my child, a woman who is one of my subordinates, I know this is all a mistake.*

Yet even as he thought the words, his actions betrayed him. He could do nothing else save hold her, press his skin against hers, and let the heat of her passion radiate over him. He ignored what his mind was telling him. He did not wish to stop. He wanted her.

*Gods save me, I must have her now!*

Keramore shoved her back against the ornate tapestry. As if of its own volition, his hand drifted down beneath the soft silk of her gown.

"Keramore..." Lanys' eyes darted to the door of the small room, and for a moment he feared she might ask him to stop. But her lips and the urgent touch of her fingertips bade him continue.



## REGRET



“I do not think he will leave without seeing you. He seems most persistent.” Sayvikon’s green bulk filled the opening to the chamber. A sadness rested in his eyes that Vyskudra could no longer begrudge him. The anguish that infected her heart had spread, plague-like, into those around her. She just didn’t care.

“Tell him to go away.” She shifted her head so he could not look upon her pain. “Tell him anything you want. I can’t face him again.”

“I will try. But I do not think he will listen. Perhaps you could speak to him one last time before he joins the Seraphs on their sojourn?”

She pitied the hopeful tilt to his voice.

*He will not get what he desires.*

“To what end?” Vyskudra fought back the tears that had been falling nonstop for months now. “We attempted the Bonding again. We failed. He is no longer a simple child of the Nor’I. He is... something else. Something more.” Her body shuddered as she bit back a moan. “Tell him to go.”

The green harrumphed, strolling farther into the chamber. “How long are you going to sulk? We all share in your pain, but you are not the first dragon to lose her en’zari.”

For the first time since Innoruuk melded with the sephyr, Vyskudra something other than grief and misery burned in her veins. Lifting her head, she glared at Sayvikon. “You *feel* my pain?” With effort, she pushed herself up to all fours. “Do *you* know what it’s like to have a piece of your soul die, only to find that it’s not dead, but forever out of reach?” She bared her fangs and snarled. “We both remember how you voiced

your opposition all those years ago." Taking a step closer, she let her anger stoke to a new height. "Is this not the outcome you warned me of? Does it not please you to be proven right?"

Instead of backing away, Sayvikon drew near. In a show of meekness, he closed his eyes and nuzzled her cheek with his. "Never did I wish any of this upon you. And while unable to grasp the depth of your grief, I do feel pain over your loss." He looked up into her eyes. "Please do not shut me out as you are doing to the mortal."

In an instant, her anger melted away and she all but fell to the floor at Sayvikon's clawed feet. "I am lost!" She no longer cared if her friend saw her distress and she let herself cry in full. "I grieve for the death of my en'zari, who is alive and well and pleading for an audience." Her frame shook with sobs. "I cannot take this anymore. I cannot bear this anguish a moment longer."



# EXILE



“If this is truly your desire, I shall grant your request.” Vulak Aerr’s words were comforting.

*A pity his tone is not.*

The ancient gray dragon did not even deign to lift his eyes from the massive tome lying open on the pedestal before him and look upon Vyskudra.

She had noted a similar reaction from many of the dragons. Those never bonded to a mortal were uncomfortable around her, not understanding what she was going through, so unsure whether to treat her with pity over her loss or disdain for sharing her very essence with a lesser creature. She had hoped for better from her kin among the Dragon Knights, but their reaction caused even more pain. They avoided her like a plague bearer, as if merely being in her presence would infect them with the same emptiness and misery that now defined her.

*The terror of what I represent is too much for them to accept.*

Still, the Great Father had granted her the boon she sought. “It is for the best. The tranquility of the Overrealm will help heal my... wound.” She felt so petty calling it that.

She had not taken some grievous injury in battle—she had not even truly lost her en’zari! Innoruuk was alive, learning from Solusek how to master the great power he’d been given. No longer did he burn with the faint, tantalizing flicker of a mortal. Now his essence surged bright, with a power that one day might well grow to eclipse her own. He had found a new destiny, and Vyskudra knew she should be happy for the elation he must be experiencing.

*But his joy has left me broken... hollow.*

How could she rejoice for his success when it meant her despair? A small part of her understood all this. And it was that part that empathized with her kin being uncomfortable around her. Her emotions were so torn, she didn't know how she felt about herself! How could she expect more of others?

*No. I must separate myself from Norrath and all its struggles. It is best for them.*

She recognized the lie in her mind, though that fact would not sway her. She turned to leave.

"Vyskudra...?"

The warmth in Vulak's voice caught her off-guard. She faced him, and the great dragon's eyes locked upon her own.

"Deep within the Temple of Scale lies a chamber as old as the Overrealm itself. Upon its floor is etched the Thariel, a pattern which embodies all the truths that the Skymother inscribed upon our hearts. In times of doubt or uncertainty, I have found that walking the Thariel brings a sense of Order. I do not know if it can mend you, but it might help restore something of what you have lost."

Her eyes welled with tears, not of sorrow, but of relief. Of hope, at least.

"Thank you, Great Father." The words caught in her throat.

"May Veeshan guide your wings, Vyskudra." His eyes returned to the tome before him.

Bending her neck, she withdrew from Vulak's chambers.



## REMORSE



Keramore Thex gripped the thin rail in front of him with knuckles white. He could not disguise the unease pulsing through him, but he feared letting his hostess know the extent of it.

As if she had read his mind, Aten Ha Ra placed one of her soft hands over his. "You worry like an overprotective father, King Thex. Be at ease. My scouts have already reported their approach. Your people come."

A nod was all he gave her as he strained to peer farther than the strange light of this world would allow.

*Something just feels... wrong.*

Though he could not put his finger on what, exactly.

Aten's people had been more than amicable. They had welcomed both Lanys and him as long-absent heroes. Given them food, shelter, clothing—all fit for royalty. Even now, her people lined the streets by the thousands, each waiting patiently for the arrival of an army that had never served them.

And perhaps that was it. The fact that the residents of a foreign city would gather to greet a group of complete strangers—welcoming a band of armed killers into their inner sanctum—felt wrong. His eyes roved over the desolate landscape, and he wondered what his own kin would be like living in such isolation.

*Would we be as welcoming?*

With a mirthless chortle, he shook his head at the thought of how intolerant the dal had become over the centuries. How poorly they had treated the other, *lesser*, races, occupying their homelands and turning many into little more than slaves. It was no wonder the world had rallied against

them after the Ashfall. And now only a handful of his race remained, on a lost and dark world, reduced to begging for their very survival.

*A fitting end for the proud elf race? Long would be the line of those who would say yes.*

Sorrow filled his soul over the insight.

Pressing his mind upon the now, Keramore focused on the crowd below. Four-armed men, women, and children stood as far as he could see, packing both sides of the wide boulevard that was the main entrance to Vex Thal. All walks of life were represented in the crowd, from the wealthy adorned in fine clothes and jewelry down to simply dressed folk who were clearly common laborers.

Yet each class stood mixed with the others as one, chatting with those nearby as if this were a normal occurrence in their city. The view was far from comforting. Instead, it made his anxiety climb to a new height.

*This is not normal for them! Aten even said so.*

Their host had told them it was rare for *anyone* to visit the City of Shadows—she went so far as to say that no outsider had been here in her lifetime, perhaps not even in generations.

His mind strained to remember something that lurked at the edge of recollection. Something he'd learned as a boy in school, buried deep within Norrath's past.

*Something about shadows...*

"There!" Aten Ha Ra's words broke Keramore's contemplation. "Your Teir'Dal have arrived."

His gaze shifted to where she pointed. At first, all he saw was the featureless black landscape that dissolved into nothingness beyond the veil of dim light. Within moments, however, shapes began to materialize from the gloom—like phantoms emerging from a bank of fog.

Lanys' face was the first he recognized. She broke from the darkness, and a tightness released in Keramore's chest he had not noticed was there. Next to her was Senshali, flanked on the other side by Ailen and Thelios. The remaining Teir'Dal trailed out in a loose formation behind. Memories of seeing

## Dreaming in Shadow

his kin huddled behind the walls of Bastion in those last days of the war rushed to the forefront of his mind—scared and dirty, hungry and tired. Yet they had not been half as haggard as his Teir'Dal appeared now.

*A ragged column of refugees with no home to call their own.*

His eyes closed of their own volition and a sigh escaped him. He leaned heavy upon the rail, thankful that the thin structure held his weight.

Cheers rose up from the crowd below, but Keramore could not bring himself to share their joy.

*Even if we find a home here, what kind of life will it be? What sort of kingdom will I leave my heir?*

Had he been alone, he would have fallen upon his knees and wept.

*We are truly lost.*



## PLAGUE



Vyskudra dug her claws into the rocky soil and studied the portal spire resting silent in the center of the valley.

*How dare Yelinak command me to stay with the reserves!*

Sayvikon stood next to her and, begrudgingly, she was glad for his presence. The green shifted. "I am pleased you answered the call to battle."

His words pricked at her pride. "I am no oathbreaker." She shifted her bulk to look upon the smaller dragon. "I vowed to fight for this world, not traipse about in forests or bury myself in studies."

The green almost hid the sneer that danced across his lips as he returned his attention to the spire. "I trust your pilgrimage healed your spirit more than it settled your tongue."

Sayvikon's words shamed her. It was not his fault she was here, instead of on the front lines with the Dragon Knights. And while she suspected that Yelinak had given her oldest friend instructions to watch over her, that was not Sayvikon's doing either.

She sighed, the weight of her long life pressing down upon her. "The Overrealm was... tranquil, yes. The centuries passed quickly, and helped restore the path of Order within me." She forced a smile. "I pray my long absence was tenable."

Grunting, Sayvikon flexed his wings, stretching them out before folding them tight against his back. "My world is never complete when you are gone. Perhaps you will stay once—" He waved a clawed forehand across the valley. "Once this is dealt with."

Realizing the truth would not help their strained relationship, she lied. "Perhaps. It would be pleasing to linger

a while here on Norrath.” Telling an untruth for a just reason no longer felt like a sin to her. She didn’t do it often. But when a situation called for it, as this one did, it was nice to be able to do so convincingly. It was one of the gifts she retained after her bond with Innoruuk was severed—a ghost of mortality still haunting her mithyr heart.

*The last echo of him I still possess.*

Thinking about her en’zari hurt. More so because of the true reason she had answered the call and returned to Norrath. She would have come anyway—at least that was the lie she told herself. No. Surely, she could not have sat idly by while her world was threatened. Still, it was not this fact that had spurred her to action. The rumors of Innoruuk were what brought her home without hesitation. “I needed to prove the stories about my en’zari are false. He would never be part of some dark alliance, no matter what they say.”

She had not meant to speak the words aloud, and hoped she had said them quiet enough that they went unheard.

A derisive snort from Sayvikon attested that was not the case. “And if he is?”

“He is not.” She would not even entertain the possibility.

True to form, Sayvikon was not placated. He continued to push, oblivious of the dagger he was driving into her soul. “Our watchers say otherwise.”

“Damn the watchers!” Vyskudra regretted her outburst when several dragons glanced their way. Lowering her voice, she bared her fangs at her friend. “Whatever this plague is, Innoruuk is *not* a part of it.”

“I only wish it were a simple plague. The ravaners have devoured entire civilizations on other worlds, leaving wastelands awash in chaos in their wake. But that is not the worst of it.” The green shuddered. “It is said their Queen of Lies bends others to her will, worming her way into the hearts of the just. Monstrous!” He shook his head. “I pray for word of our vanguard’s swift victory. Would that they slay every last one of the vile horrors before we ever have to raise a claw.”

Grinning, Vyskudra stretched out her tail and nudged the

smaller dragon. “You have never savored the taste of battle, old friend. Why you are even here is a mystery.”

Sayvikon puffed out his chest and unfurled his wings. “I am no coward!”

“I was implying no such thing.” She nudged him again. “I just meant a battlefield is a waste of your talents.”

“On that count we agree.” The dragon slumped down on his haunches. “But Lord Nagafen insisted even scholars take up arms. Besides, Yelinak wanted me to—” His jaws clapped shut.

“So Yelinak *did* ask you to keep an eye on me!” As she already suspected this, the validation should not have infuriated her so. Still, hot anger boiled in her chest and she shifted back to the spire. “I do not need—”

“The portal opens!” Lady Vox’s melodic voice sprang from their right, pulling Vyskudra’s attention back to the task at hand.

They stood on the eastern edge of the Vale of Alel. The Keldar Mountains formed the southern edge of the valley, and her keen eyes could just make out the walls of Skyreach nestled in the Fyrrus Peaks rising even higher to the north.

About a hundred dragons flew in clusters above them—more stalked the ground around the area—only a small portion of her race had been called to fill the ranks of the reserve. And why should they? More than enough had traveled to Faeloth to ensure victory. Those gathered here were mere pageantry, reaffirming to the world the alliance between the Keldarain and the dragons held—that all would answer the call to protect their shared homeland. At the very least, they would welcome home the heroes who had gone forth to victory.

*The Dragon Knights.*

How she missed being part of that order, the sense of camaraderie as she flew with her fellow riders into battle. The joy she and Innoruuk shared when...

The memories fell from her like dead leaves off an autumn tree. Those days were more than a thousand years gone.

## Dreaming in Shadow

No, even longer than that, she realized. And yet the wound was still there, as tender as it was the moment their bond shattered.

*Many lifetimes to mortals. But it was like yesterday to me.*

Blinking away some stray speck from her eye, she searched the area to keep her mind from falling back into an abyss of emotion.

The mortal armies occupied the far end of the valley. Several thousand strong, the Keldarain stood in small groups well apart from each other. The banners of every kingdom and tribe rippled in the breeze, though none of them sent more than a few hundred soldiers apiece.

*They feel even less needed here than we dragons.*

Power radiated from the spire as a fledgling bubble formed between its massive, arching arms. Apprehension gripped Vyskudra. She needed answers. Answers that would only come from those who did battle on Faeloth.

*Innoruuk is not a part of this, unless he returned to fight beside the Dragon Knights.*

With a rush of magical energy, the portal hummed to life. It glowed with an intensity that challenged the sun itself. The dragons on the ground raised their heads, craning their necks reverently. Those in the sky formed into a pointed skein that circled the spire in the center of the valley. The mortals followed suit, snapping to attention and tightening their ranks. Though small in number, the gathering was still an impressive sight, and one that moved Vyskudra.

*The children of Veeshan and the Nor'I standing together, just as the Skymother willed.*

Expectantly, the assembly waited to receive the victors returning home. When the moments stretched on without anyone coming through the portal, a nervous ripple washed over those gathered. Lady Vox stepped forward, a puzzled look upon her elegant white face.

The portal crackled as a dragon came barreling through. Crashing on its back, the small blue skid across the ground. At first Vyskudra was relieved that the saddle between its

wings sat empty. Then a horror stabbed through her at what she beheld.

The blue dragon grappled with something stuck to his chest. A shapeless form with dozens of tentacles sprouting off in every direction had attached itself to the dragon. The blue screeched, tearing at the creature with claws and teeth.

Lady Vox reared up, unleashing a thin stream of frost that struck the attacking monster in its side. The blob convulsed, its tentacles releasing their grip on the blue. When it fell away, a gasp escaped Sayvikon.

With his attacker dislodged, the blue collapsed upon the ground. All the scales that covered the dragon's chest had been torn away. Much of the flesh underneath was gone as well, leaving a gory wound behind.

Before anyone could react, the massive red Lord Nagafen flew through the portal, banked hard and climbed into the sky. "To arms!" His roar ripped across the vale. "We are routed!" Dropping from the sky, he unleashed a torrent of flames that engulfed both the portal and the throng of shapeless monsters pouring through in his wake. "Focus on the spire. We must not let them through!"

But the creatures were already gaining a foothold around the spire. Surging out of the portal in unbelievable numbers, they tumbled to the ground, rolling over their kin and immediately attacking whatever lay in front of them.

A large black dragon pounced forward, crushing one of the monstrosities beneath her weight then spraying a funnel of acid at those behind it. A group of three multi-limbed creatures melted into a dark gray ichor that oozed across the ground. As she sucked in to unleash another killing torrent, a wave of tentacles and malformed bodies washed over the dragon and Vyskudra lost sight of her.

A stout red replaced the black, sending wave after wave of fire that billowed over the chaotic creatures' forms. Before Vyskudra thought to join the melee, dragons encircled the spire three deep, each attacking whatever sprang into existence through the portal.

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*Nothing can survive that!*

Lord Nagafen landed next to Lady Vox, who now stood closer to Vyskudra. Had she not known his reputation better, she'd have sworn that fear was painted across the ancient warrior's features. "There were too many. It was all I could do to return and warn you. Go, fly to Skyreach and tell Yelinak to send out the call. We need every dragon!"

Lady Vox did not move. Instead, she indicated the portal. "Whatever happened in Faeloth, we can hold them here. The portal is a chokepoint, no matter how long they hold it open."

A growl erupted from Lord Nagafen. "No, we cannot! You don't understa—"

A shockwave rolled over the vale as the sky ripped open. In between where the dragons and mortals stood, an undulating thread of dark energy ran across the heavens like some hideously deformed snake. It floated high above the plain, and even as Vyskudra watched, it thickened and elongated, stretching impossibly wider.

"What is that?" Sayvikon's shout stabbed into her ear.

So captivated by the sight was Vyskudra, she had not noticed her friend pressing close against her side. She pushed him away to give herself the room she would need to take flight. "It is Chaos." She locked eyes with the green and saw the terror bubbling inside him. "Fly close to me. We will face what comes together." The confidence in her voice defied the panic boiling her insides.

The green nodded, though he never lost the fear in his gaze.

"Hold the portal!" The dragon's shout pulled the pair's attention, and Vyskudra concentrated on the gash dancing in the sky.

A sensation washed over her that at first she thought was nerves. A heaviness upon her soul she attributed to being away from battle for so many centuries. With a jolt of dread, she realized she was wrong. Something evil hung tangible over the vale. If the others felt it as well, they gave no sign.

An intense crack split the valley, a sound akin to lightning striking an ancient tree. The rift shuddered, twisting in upon

itself. In the blink of the eye, it grew to ten times its length. With another piercing snap, it arched out a hundred times its size. A thick dark wound cutting across a pale-blue sky, threatening to consume it utterly.

“Hold the line!” The shout came from both mortal and dragon throats alike.

“Fly now!” Lord Nagafen’s voice overpowered all else, and Lady Vox took wing with a scattering of dirt and debris. She hurtled toward Skyreach with a haste driven by desperation, never looking back to those she left behind.

A sudden gust blew from behind Vyskudra toward the rift. At first, it was little more than a consistent breeze. Within mere heartbeats, it built to a torrent of air rushing into the chaotic gash. The storm winds whipped banners, cloaks, and loose garments into a frenzy of motion and color. Anything untethered was sucked into the growing blackness of the breach.

As quickly as it began, it stopped.

Apart from those holding back the relentless assault coming through the spire, the entire valley watched the rift.

The sonic explosion that erupted from the fissure hit those beneath it with such force it crushed the mortals instantly, flinging their broken bodies across the battlefield to become bolts of death raining upon those further back. Vyskudra’s eardrums split as the wave hit her, slamming her to the ground and filling her head with a relentless ringing. It drove her back even as she dug her talons into the hard earth.

Looking up, she pitied her kin who were still airborne. As large as they were, the dragons were thrown about like moths in a storm. Even Vox, who was well on her way to Skyreach, was buffeted by the blast.

Most of the flying dragons recovered, but a few crashed into the ground hard enough that Vyskudra doubted they would be able to rise for the battle.

*If they rise at all.*

It took her a moment to realize that the rift had exploded into a multitude of offshoots. It extended out in all directions

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like some demented spider web, stretching above the heads of those gathered in the vale.

With deafening silence, chaos and terror poured out in waves.

Every strand of the rift opened and a shadowy throng of creatures fell from the sky, washing over the valley floor like a storm of locusts. At first, Vyskudra saw no details—the mass was just an indistinct blob of writhing forms and grasping tentacles. But as the initial surge of monsters fell upon the waiting armies, she began to make out individual shapes.

The ravaners were Chaos given physical form. Her eyes burned just gazing upon the undulating sea of disorder—an incongruous horde of wormlike bodies of which no two seemed the same. Some were long and lanky, others bloated and bulbous. Many were covered in an array of tentacles too numerous to count. Most were smaller than she was, though some were her size. A few even larger still.

The ravaners surged through the rifts, raining down from the sky, falling from each slit in reality like a thick, inky river flowing over a cliff. If any died from striking the ground, those behind rose instantly to replace them. Before the gathered reserves of Norrath could react, the creatures heaved out, covering anything they came upon in a tidal wave of death. A cacophony of screams assailed her from every side as the orderly lines of soldiers disintegrated before the onslaught.

As Vyskudra regained her footing, three of the black beasts fell upon her.

She flung one off with the flick of her shoulder, though it took a chunk of wing membrane with it for its trouble. A second she smashed between a clawed foot and the ground. The third latched onto her back, sinking a ring of razor-sharp teeth into her scales and boring through her natural armor.

Whipping her head around, she bit into her assailant. The creature popped, spraying a thick mucus into her mouth that tasted of rancid meat. The vile flavor was so overwhelming her eyes slammed shut of their own volition, water pouring from them. She retched violently, thrashing around on the ground and howling.

Others attacked her, sinking their disc-like mouths into her hide, but she could not afford them the time to care—removing the putrid ichor from her mouth was all that mattered.

She vomited a half-dozen more times before her vision cleared.

When she regained herself, she realized a score of the Chaos creatures clung to her. Their tentacles wrapped around whatever they could, holding her fast—their saw-like teeth grinding through her scales to the tender flesh beneath.

Unleashing a torrent of acid, she melted those attached around her mouth—a small fraction of the chaotic beings covering her. She had no hope of dislodging them all. In a desperate reflex, she reached out to draw upon nature, even though she knew the sky hung cloudless. What she found repulsed her more than the monsters striving to devour her alive.

The air throbbed with energy.

Not the familiar power her ability allowed her to harness—that of nature during a thunderstorm. This was something unnatural, chaotic, evil...

*And yet... I believe I can wield it!*

As pain rippled over her body from the hundreds of teeth tearing at her flesh, she found herself no longer concerned from where the energy came, only that she needed it, and it was there for the taking. She drew upon the dark magic and a strange surge assailed her—akin to her encounter with Innoruuk's essence during the Bonding. Only this energy was not there to meld with her, to join with her and become one. Too late she realized its sole desire was to consume her whole. To burn her from within, leaving naught but a lifeless shell behind.

She fought it, trying to bend it to her will, knowing her life depended on being able to harness it. Ravaners had torn away scales from across her body, and they began to feed off her even while she still drew breath.

Wrestling with the dark energy, she struggled to gather it up—focus it. Twist it into something she could control, use. With a roar, she released the forces she had harnessed in a wave that surged outward in every direction.

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The vile stench of burnt filth made her retch again even as the blast stripped away the monsters that clung to her.

*Move! If I remain on the ground, I am doomed!*

Her thoughts spurred her to action. She sprang into the air even as her body convulsed.

Pain clawed at her from a dozen wounds. The large tear in her right wing made gaining altitude difficult. Looking down at the sea of writhing blackness, she knew she had been correct: returning to the ground meant death.

A sudden thought stabbed into her soul.

*Sayvikon!*

She banked, her injured wing screaming from the added strain, and glided over the spot the pair had stood before the rift opened. The green dragon was still there.

He had fallen onto his back, one of his forelegs sticking straight up into the air—the other missing altogether. His long throat lay open from just below his emerald head down to the middle of his chest.

Sayvikon's dark red blood poured out to stain the green grass below a sickening burnt color as at least a score of the hideous creatures feasted upon his corpse.

With tears welling in her eyes, she channeled more of the chaotic energy surrounding her. She now knew where it came from—the same evil that had ripped her world open and allowed these abominations entrance. But revenge filled her heart, and she was no longer concerned for what it may do to her.

The power rushed into her in a scorched torrent of hate and she welcomed it with a fury all her own. She pulled in the vile energy until it felt as if she would burst from the strain. Banking once more, she raced down over Sayvikon's body and unleashed everything she held.

Jagged bolts of silver-black lightning ripped from her taloned claws. Where the energy hit the ground, whole chunks of earth erupted, tearing the surface asunder. When it struck a ravaner, the creature exploded. Each tendril of power that lanced down arced into a multitude of others. She continued

to pound the area until Sayvikon's body was all that remained in the center of a wide field of destruction.

Easing down, she landed next to his still form. His eyes were glassy and his lower jaw had been torn away. Worse, she could no longer sense his mithyr heart.

*Those... things... have taken everything from you!*

A sob racked her frame as she nuzzled his side with her nose. "My poor Sayvikon. May the Skymother find you and guide you home."

She closed her eyes to stop the tears from falling and a weight slammed into her back. Teeth dug into a tender spot where she had already lost her protective scales.

Pulling her wings in tight, she rolled over in an attempt to dislodge her attacker. She screamed as her bulk drove the creature's serrated teeth deeper into her flesh.

Before she regained her footing, several more ravaners fell upon her. Clawing and bucking, she scrambled to stay on top of the writhing bodies.

Slicing a tentacle wrapped around her throat, Vyskudra raked her other front claw across a second creature's head, rending it from its body. She whipped away two more of the monsters with a swipe of her tail. Sucking in air, she released a cone of acid, melting the ravaners near her. Panic prodding her to action, she leapt into the air once more and climbed into the sky above.

For the briefest of moments, all she could think of was fleeing. Escaping from the horror below. She forced herself to suck in calming breaths and surveyed the battlefield for the first time since the rift exploded. In every direction, grief was all she found. There was no front line, just pockets where mortals or dragons had managed to carve out a place to stand their ground.

*Islands of life dotting a sea of black liquid death.*

Those dragons still in flight fared little better as swarms of the Chaos creatures harassed them from every side. Though she hadn't seen any of the ravaners fly, somehow they launched themselves from the ground, soaring hundreds

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of paces into the air—their long tentacles latching onto anything nearby.

The more Vyskudra watched, the greater her hatred grew.

She glared at the bolts of magic flashing off the undulating rift.

*You may have brought this plague down upon us, but now you will bend to my will!*

Adjusting her course, she flew next to the rift, close enough so the energy brushed against her. Opening herself up, she pulled in even more of the chaotic power than she had before. She let it fill her to the brim, and then continued to take in more. It threatened to destroy her, burning inside her as if she had swallowed molten lava. But it brought with it an ecstasy she had only known through her bond with Innoruuk. From the melding of her Order and the vile magic's Chaos, she became drunk on its intoxicating power.

Then realization struck her. This melding of forces didn't just feel similar to the Bonding with Innoruuk.

*It is the very same!*

She shook off the implications and turned her attention to the battle. Banking toward a group Dragon Knights surrounded by a mass of converging ravaners, she released the energy. The air became a blinding array of silver-black lightning that forced her eyes shut.

When she looked once more, burnt tentacle-covered corpses rained down from the sky.

She filled herself again, this time welcoming the hot fury of the chaotic magic like an ancient god come to bestow his gifts upon her. There was a price for this power, she knew. Each time she drew upon it she felt herself slipping away, as if her mind were separating from her body. But she did not care. If she did not do something, anything, this fight was lost.

Gliding over the vale, she unleashed her anger in jagged bolts of hate and rage in a steady stream. She never let herself become depleted, and continued to feed off the Chaos floating in the air even as she used it to destroy the ravaners below.

Large swaths of scorched creatures littered the ground in

her wake and she laughed in spite of herself. The joy over the power coursing through her was wrong, she knew, and a small voice inside her head tried to express its objection, but she ignored it.

*Nothing has ever filled me so completely! Nothing since...*

Banking to make another pass, she drove her wings forward, stopping herself and hovering in midair.

There, at the heart of where the rift had first formed, floated Innoruuk.

Dressed in a strange, angular armor, he waved a long twisted staff and screamed orders at the dark minions, though the chaotic horde did not seem to pay him heed. As if sensing her presence, Innoruuk turned and locked eyes with her.

Vyskudra had to fight the urge to flee.

*His eyes... they are no longer his. They are pools of malevolence!*

A wide grin filled his face, and he reached a beckoning hand out to her. **"Come to me, en'zari. At last I have found a path for us to be together once more."**

His words echoed inside her mind and she reeled as the two connected for the first time in millennia. The bond brought no comfort with it. "No..." She could not believe what she saw.

*How...?*

**"The how is unimportant."** Innoruuk glided toward her, seemingly indifferent to the destruction taking place around him. **"All that matters is that I have returned for you."**

Locking her jaws tight, she flew at him. **"How can you be a part of this? What have you done?"**

The smile that filled his still-handsome face was far from warm—it mocked her. **"Come now, en'zari, you cannot lie to me."**

She pulled back on her wings, hovering some ten paces from him. **"Lie to you? Lie to you!"** The chaotic energy bubbling inside her begged for release. It yearned to burn the smug look from the god-like being Innoruuk had become. **"It was you who abandoned me!"**

**"I was a child then, suckling like a babe upon my**

first taste of true power. That child is no more." He laughed casually and waved a hand in dismissal. "I can sense the Chaos filling you." His face became a mask of malice as his eyes bore into hers. "I know the pleasure you feel from feeding off the forces you now control. Join with me. Serve Lamashtu, as I do, and we will be made one again."

Vyskudra shook her head. She glanced down to remind herself of what was at stake. The dead lay in pools of maroon below, both mortal and dragon alike. But the power coursing through her made her complete. It was everything she had been missing since the severing of her bond with Innoruuk. Even with all the time she had spent in the tranquility of Overrealm, she had not found this feeling of peace.

*Peace. Even as war rages around me.*

Her en'zari glided closer. "Yes. You desire it. And I can give you so much more."

Vyskudra made to fly away, to distance herself from Innoruuk, but some force held her tight. She shook her head, trying to deny him even as the lure of his offer tantalized. "You led the ravaners here. You are responsible for the deaths of thousands. Millions!" Her resolve hardened. "What you have done is evil. I will have no part of this wickedness!" She tried to purge the chaotic energy from inside her, but it would not leave. Instead, the power filling her lashed out and a scream ripped from her throat.

Shadowy tendrils flowed from Innoruuk's outstretched hands, weaving their way around Vyskudra. They stabbed into her, joining with the chaos filling her. She would have screamed again had she any control of her body. The tendrils bore inside her, driving into her mithyr heart and tearing at the Order that defined her.

"You shall join with me. Lamashtu wills it." Innoruuk closed on her, wrapping his arms around her long neck and caressing her. "And we will ride together at the forefront of her armies, leading them to the very heart of this world."

She wanted to fight him, to expel his vile essence from her body. But her desire for him was overpowering, and she knew she no longer had the strength to deny her own longing. Opening herself to him, she let the defenses protecting her mithyr heart fall away. She gasped in pleasure as Innoruuk took her.

In that moment, she was whole.

But a moment was all it lasted.

She shrieked as agony shattered their coupling. For an instant, she thought she had been betrayed once more, but she realized he was bellowing too. A pang of desperation washed over her as she felt her en'zari ripped away.

*No! Not again...*

Bolts of lightning and fire and ice struck Innoruuk, driving him back toward the rift. Driving him from her.

Wind whipped past her as she tumbled through the air, and it was not until she struck the ground that her foggy mind grasped that she had been falling.

As she lay on her back staring up into an azure sky, the realization that her body was broken gave her an unexpected sense of serenity. It seemed such a trivial thing. Something hardly worth noting. For high above, dozens of dragons swarmed around the site where she had once again held her en'zari.

She wept for his loss a second time.

Through the gauzy veil of tears, two serpentine faces materialized over her.

An angered dragon spoke first. "You struck down one of our own kind!"

"She was lost to us." The second's voice was familiar, though she did not know why. "I could not allow that abomination to have her."

"You ended her life, and I will see you answer for this." While the first voice was still furious, sorrow laced his words as well.

"We have lost so many today." The two voices played at recognition, but her mind struggled to name them.

## Dreaming in Shadow

Then all at once, her perceptions cleared. Yelinak stood above her to her right, a large bloody gash across his pristine silver maw. His terror was obvious. A fuming Trakanon loomed to the left. She might have laughed, had her shattered body been capable of it.

*Where is your arrogance now? Between the two of you, you possess more than enough for our entire race! It is gone, taken by my en'zari. He came back for me, and you cannot deny him. Nothing will ever deny him again!*

"At least her heart was not devoured. It can yet be saved." Trakanon reached out and placed his forehead upon her chest.

"Are you mad? Do you not sense the Chaos that has infested her?" Yelinak recoiled as if he had been struck. "Returning her essence to the Temple would risk corrupting us all. She must die the true death here, brother."

"No!" A snarl ripped from Trakanon. "I will not allow another of us to perish! I will not let them win!"

A last spasm of agony tore through Vyskudra's broken body, and Trakanon gazed down with a pain-filled smile. "Fear not, dear sister. I will see your heart to the Temple myself. One day a new brood will be born, and your essence will soar again."

*Betrayers! I will feast upon your hearts for what you have done!*

She would have spit her last breath upon them had it not already abandoned her body.



# REVELATION



“And now you know.”

Ithiosar jerked awake, shocked to find himself still submerged in liquid. Gone were the bonds holding him, and his body screamed out to swim, to rise to the surface and gulp in the sweet air that awaited. Yet his mind bade him stay.

A shadow floated before him, an indistinct shape in the darkness of the pool, and he knew it was waiting for a response.

“What am I to know?” How he voiced his question underwater was a minor puzzle among the multitudes assailing him.

The shadow did not respond. Instead, it circled Ithiosar, forcing him to swim to keep it in sight.

“What is it you suppose I have learned?”

The shadow convulsed. “**What you are.**”

“What I am?” Anger rose inside Ithiosar, and his long tail swished back and forth. “What I am has never been in question!”

“**Has it not?**” The degrading tone of the shadow cut Ithiosar to the bone.

With powerful kicks from his back legs, he propelled himself up through the water. High overhead he could see a small pinprick, not of light, but of a darkness less intense than the depths that had swallowed him. Instead of growing larger, the tiny speck seemed to retreat from him with every stroke. He pushed himself harder, surging his tail and front legs to gain speed, but it was all to no avail.

Along with an exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm him came a realization of how he was swimming. Stopping

his ascent, he gazed down at his left foot and tail—both now whole. He flexed his wings without pain.

The shadow hovered before him once more, and Ithiosar glared at it for moments that stretched into moments. “What am I, then?”

“You have always felt distant from the other dragons. That their ideal of perfect Order was not the same as yours.”

Ithiosar hated riddles. Ones concerning himself were worse by tenfold. “Dragons differ from one another.”

“But they do not. Dragons are born from Order. Different scales, different voices, but the same unbending pattern scribed upon their hearts.”

Clenching his jaw, Ithiosar yearned for something to focus on in this dark void other than the shadow floating before him. “What of it?”

The shadow’s deep, melodious laugh rippled through the water. “You are unlike any of your kin. You are unique.”

Ithiosar grew tired of this endless game, and decided it was his turn to remain silent. As he glared at the shadow, visions of the black dragon Vyskudra flashed through his mind. Her Bonding with Innoruuk. The pain she felt over that loss.

*Her death... Her heart?*

“Yes, my child. You are different because the myth that birthed you had an echo of me within.”

Ithiosar grunted a laugh. “The good or the evil? The mortal or the Seraph?”

“Such words are meaningless.” The shadow grew in size, easily twice as large as Ithiosar himself. “I am that which I am.”

*“The herald of Lamashtu? Servant of the raveners?”*

The shadow chuckled once more. “She opened my eyes to greater truths, but the Queen of Lies is long buried. My will—my destiny—are my own. While others have fallen, I endure.”

“And you infused yourself into Vyskudra just before

Yelinak slew her.” That last detail was not lost upon him, and one he was certain would prove useful.

*Dragons are forbidden from killing dragons. For Yelinak to have taken her life...!*

“Yes.” Energy crackled around the shadow, pricking at Ithiosar. It moved forward, enveloping him. “Now heed my words. The time of Order is at an end. Chaos rises, and there is much I require of you... en’zari.”



# FEAST



Keramore Thex glanced about in disbelief as his ears filled with a sound he thought lost to the ages.

The Teir'Dal. His people. Laughing.

Smiles filled every freshly washed face. Dressed in bright patterned silks, even the hardest of his warriors seemed to be at their ease, eating and drinking as endless trays passed from table to table.

The banquet took place in a massive open courtyard, larger than the one at Bastion. Vex Thal surrounded them in all its glory, with proud buildings and beautiful domes just visible on the edges of the dim light.

Tables and chairs were scattered about in orderly chaos, though a wide walkway cut through the center, bisecting the area. Enough furniture had been brought in to not only accommodate his six-hundred and fifty dal, but at least that many of Aten Ha Ra's people who dined with them. Their hosts sat everywhere, sprinkled in between the Teir'Dal, joining them in their conversation and laughter as if they shared a long, fruitful history together, and had not just met.

With the two races in such close proximity, it was easy to see the similarities they shared. While the Umbrans were taller with darker skin, both had noble profiles and strong facial lines. They had their differences—the dal with their longer ears and the Umbrans with their bony, horn-like protrusions on either side of their head, not to mention their extra set of arms—but both races were lovely to look upon.

And still Keramore could not escape the feeling that there was something he should remember about them. Something about these people, this place... and shadows...

“What’s troubling you?” Lanys rested a hand on the crook of Keramore’s arm and gave him a worried look. “I’ve seen you less tense the eve before a battle.”

He smiled past her at Senshali sitting to her left before leaning in and nuzzling her neck, hiding his whispered words from outside ears. “I don’t know. Something feels... wrong. It has nagged me since the day we arrived in this city.”

Her biting laughter was not the reaction he expected. Pulling away, his back stiffened and he glared at her.

Features softening, she took his hand in hers. “I understand. Truly. It has been so long since our people could relax. And I’m speaking of long before we entered this shadow world. Long before the dragons drove us into hiding behind Bastion’s walls. Long before Takish’Hiz fell, even.” Her grip tightened, squeezing his hand. “Do you even remember what it feels like to not be at war? To fall asleep at night without fear that people under your command will be dead on the morrow? I don’t. Since before I was born our race has been at war. Orcs, shissar, ogres... the dragons were simply the last of a long line of enemies made by the dal.” She let his hand go and the meekness he found so alluring fell over her. “Then we came here. And while the wilds of this world are as inhospitable as I could ever imagine, I look around this city and see how we could find peace here. At long last, I can envision a future.” Dropping a hand to her belly, she rubbed it before locking eyes with Keramore. “*Our* future.” She gestured at the gathering. “And I think your people feel it as well—that they could make a home, a life, right here. Away from all the foes we have fought against for so long.”

As she spoke, Keramore scanned the crowd. Joy filled every face he looked upon. Lanys’ words made sense, and he knew they should have comforted him.

They did not.

Still, he gave her a smile and forced away the tension from his shoulders, even though he failed to stave off the apprehension stalking his soul.

He knew it had something to do with how he had

## Dreaming in Shadow

conducted himself of late. Never before had he felt so disconnected from his actions—and it all started when they arrived on this dark world.

*The fact that I may have fathered a child with one of my officers is testament to that!*

He felt bereft of control. Lost. It was the *why* that escaped him. The helplessness cut him like an assassin's knife. The image of Darmil's head falling to the ground came to mind. How could Keramore have killed one of his own just because of a few words said in anger? Not to mention the risks he had taken since their arrival, any one of which could have ended with his death. Keramore was not afraid to die, but he held too many obligations to throw his life away needlessly. Then there was Lanys, and the lust he could scarcely contain. It all added up to...

*To what? That I'm losing my mind? That there is some hand here driving me to do things I know are wrong?*

He thought of shadows, of old truths he should remember, and the vague sensation of time itself slipping away.

Letting out a sigh, he slumped into the cushions of his chair and shifted his attention back to the banquet.

His table, along with two others on either side, were set apart from the rest. He and Lanys sat at the center of the three, with Aten to his right and Senshali to Lanys' left. Thelios and Ailen sat with two of their hosts to his right, and Jerilith was the lone dal with Umbrans on the left. These tables rested at the foot of a wide, four-step staircase that led up to a raised dais. The platform, which came to just below his line of sight while seated, stretched out to cover the entire back third of the courtyard. At its center was an oval-shaped pool of clear, bubbling water. Around the edges of the pool, fountains shot the liquid high into the air to form arcs that returned splashing across the surface.

When he had first entered this courtyard and heard the sound of the water, it had soothed his very soul. Though what he had seen in the center of the pool had nearly stopped his heart.

A dragon, carved in such exquisite detail that Keramore had thought for a moment it was real, stood upon one of its hind legs in the act of launching into the air. Caught by the artisan who had created the masterpiece at just the right moment, the dragon appeared as if it truly was taking flight. The beast's eyes were fixed on the sky, its wings raised, poised to thrust down and propel it higher. Keramore had become so lost in its design he failed to notice the figure perched between the creature's wings until Lanys pointed it out.

It was obviously a male of Aten's race—the horns protruding from either side of his head were testament enough to that, though unlike his hosts, the rider had only one set of arms. The figure held a long lance in his left hand, pointing in the direction the dragon gazed. His other gripped a set of reins that attached to the saddle upon which he rode, instead of rising up to the dragon's head as it would with a horse.

Without noticing he had moved, Keramore found himself twisted in his seat, staring up at the statue once more.

Aten Ha Ra pressed in from his other side. "I am pleased you appreciate our artwork, King Thex."

Her words snapped him from his trance, and he adjusted himself so he was facing front once more. "Yes. I have never seen such artisanship before. Especially on a subject so..." He gave her a forced smile and picked up his three-pronged fork.

As he made to place a piece of meat into his mouth, her hand closed gently around his wrist. "So... what?"

Locking eyes with her, he could discern no malice in them—just curiosity. He placed his fork onto his plate, the bite of meat skewered upon it uneaten. "Where we come from, we are not on good terms with dragons."

Aten shifted so she was staring up at the statue. "That seems a pity. They are such majestic beings." She turned and faced him. "There have not been dragons on our world in generations beyond memory, but from our stories, I think our two races were close. And perhaps could be again." A euphoria hung on her words, as well as something else...

*Excitement?*

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She removed her hand from his wrist. "Where are my manners?" She gestured to his plate. "Please, eat. The entertainment is about to begin."

Her statement took him aback. "Entertainment? You have done so much for us. The food, clothes, baths—"

"I will hear no more of it." Aten giggled, and the sound caressed Keramore's ears. "You are like our lost children returned, and your presence makes the Prince of Shadows happier than he has been in ages."

The mention of their ruler pricked the back of Keramore's mind, and he finally recalled one of the many questions that nagged at him.

*Why have we not met this Prince of Shadows?*

"When may we meet your ruler? I have so much to thank him for."

Giving him a coy smile, Aten averted her gaze and rose. She put her hand upon Keramore's shoulder when he tried to do the same. With four outstretched arms, she addressed the gathering. "Friends old and new, I welcome you. Honored guests, please remain seated. Akhevans, I bid you rise."

*Akhevans! I know that name...*

The sounds of chairs scooting across stone tiles filled the courtyard as over six-hundred akhevans gracefully rose. They all stood mixed between the last of the dal race, who stared up at them with polite curiosity.

"Those of us gathered this evening have been carefully chosen." As Aten Ha Ra continued, all eyes fell upon her. "Tonight we pay homage not only to you, our honored guests, but to our great lord, the Prince of Shadows. To thank him for the blessings he has bestowed upon us and our fair city for so many centuries."

The akhevans began to applaud. Keramore glanced at Lanys and saw a glowing joy in her eyes he had not seen before. The rest of his officers seemed much the same and he chastised himself for his foolish paranoia.

*These people have done nothing but good for us. Why can't I trust them?*

Once the clapping subsided, silence fell upon the gathering. As one, the akhevans bowed their heads.

A strange, mournful music rose from the perpetual darkness. It started faint, and Keramore had to strain to make out the stringed instruments that created the sound. It slowly built in strength, joined by a choir of haunting horns and the steady beat of low drums.

The disparate sounds interwove into a hypnotic melody that came from all sides, as if an orchestra of musicians a thousand strong surrounded them. Keramore could not stop himself from nodding in time with the rhythm, and was not surprised when the akhevans began to sway.

*Where have I heard that name before? Why can't I remember?*

From their throats, a chant arose. The men's low and rhythmic, the women's higher and laced into the music with such precision, Keramore could not distinguish between their sing-song voices and the tune pressing in from the darkness.

As one, those standing shed their robes and started dancing, twisting and gyrating their perfect naked bodies in time with the song they sang. It was so mesmerizing that Keramore did not notice the darkness spilling from the pool until it was nearly halfway across the courtyard. Billowy and black, it carried a slight chill that clawed at his legs as it flowed underneath his table.

He tried to shift in his seat, to see how the pool was producing the thick cloud, only his legs would not comply. Panic gripped him, and he made to stand but found that he could not rise at all. Looking at the enthralled faces of his Teir'Dal, he saw that none of them realized what was happening.

Opening his mouth to cry alarm, Aten Ha Ra's face filled his vision.

"Silence, now." She smiled as his mouth worked without any sound escaping. "It would be rude to interrupt. This show is meant more for you than for them."

His arms were fixed upon the table, and he could only move from the shoulders up. Even still, with as much as he was

## Dreaming in Shadow

whipping his head about, he could not believe that his people failed to notice his plight. Keramore raged against his unseen bonds and the scene in the courtyard continued unchanged—the music wailed from the darkness, the akhevans danced away, and his people nodded along as if free of worry or care.

When he glanced at Lanys, what he saw made him fall still. She had not moved. Her gaze remained fixed upon the dancers, a look of fervent elation filling her. It was the same with all his warriors—his entire people were under some spell or trance, sitting in rapt attention.

Yet even as panic warred with desperation inside Keramore, there was nothing he could do—the strange mist held him tight, like shadows taken on physical form.

*Shadows. Akhevans... the people of shadows. But their race is ages dead!*

The music and singing climbed together, reaching a crescendo that found one akhevan dancer behind every dal. Aten and Senshali moved away, replaced by two of the akhevans who had sat with Jerilith. Keramore made an attempt to turn his head and see what the two dancers were doing behind him, but was unable to adjust his body in any way.

Then, as if a string had been cut, both the music and the singing stopped.

Silence echoed across the courtyard, nothing making a sound save Keramore's beating heart.

Keramore glanced from Lanys and the rest of his officers to his people, and found they remained in a state of bliss.

His heart beat louder, more rhythmically. Only...

*That is not my heart!*

Behind him, the water splashed over stone as something large and wet climbed from the pool.

A ripple reverberated across the surface of the wine in the glass before him as whatever was coming took another step closer.

The wine rippled again.

Straining, he tried to peer over his shoulder, but his invisible bonds would not allow it.

Hot breath licked the back of Keramore's neck as something sniffed him. Large globs of water fell upon him like heavy rain as Ithiosar the Black's wide head came into view, looming over his shoulder, and Keramore could not stop the gasp that escaped his lips.

*No!*

The dragon's neck snaked around so the beast was looking at him from the front. "Welcome to Vex Thal, vermin." Keramore could not imagine a dragon smiling, but that was the only way to describe the expression on the monster's twisted reptilian face.

With lumbering, unhurried steps, the dragon moved its bulk around the table to stand amidst the gathering of enthralled elves, never taking its gaze from Keramore's. Fear burned through Keramore's veins as he clenched and unclenched his jaw, the only motion he was able to achieve. Despite himself, he marveled at the dragon's size. Though it stood on all fours, the great beast towered over his head.

Bending its neck, Ithiosar sniffed first Lanys, then Keramore once more. Its tongue flicked out, caressing Keramore's neck and cheek. "It has been too long since I tasted elven flesh." The dragon chuckled, moving closer to Lanys and baring its dagger-sized fangs. "Perhaps you would enjoy watching me devour your woman?"

"You are not to hurt them." Aten Ha Ra stood strong before the dragon, her words echoing off the surrounding darkness. "The Prince was very clear."

Ithiosar sighed, his breath reeking of acidic death. "I am well aware of your Prince's demands." Locking its saucer-sized eyes on the akhevan, a low rumble poured from the dragon. "He also promised me vengeance!"

"And vengeance you shall have." Turning to the pool, Aten raised her hands high into the air. As she did, the music surged as if it had never ceased and the akhevans' chants joined in once more. "Oh great master, I have done as you commanded and delivered the trespassers unto you. Come forth and bless them with your glory!"

## Dreaming in Shadow

Behind Keramore, the water bubbled once again, violently splashing about, as if a second great horror was emerging from the pool's depth. This time he was able to crane his neck and look behind him.

*By the Seraphs!*

Long, crackling ropes of energy burst from the surface, each as thick as his leg. They were vaguely translucent, with a dim light pulsating deep inside their core. As if alive, the energy slithered from the pool like a hive of snakes, several lapping painfully against Keramore's legs as they wormed their way through the shadow fog. The appendages spread out to cover the entire courtyard.

As one, the cords rose from the fog, wrapping each akhevan who in turn reached out and gripped the shoulders of the elf in front of them. Keramore tried to shake off the hands holding him, but this only made his captor tighten her grip. The dancers continued to chant and sing even while being accosted by the tentacles of energy stretching out from the pool. If the power licking at their skin pained them, it did not show on their faces as they frantically spun their heads in time to the melody.

The music and chanting reached a fevered pitch. At its climax, the tentacles slammed into every akhevan they surrounded, boring into their backs. The akhevans' arms flung out, and with eyes wide their singsong chants transformed into cries of agony. When the energy burst from their chests, they slumped forward, falling silent. Without pause, the ropes of power drove into the skulls of the Teir'Dal before them.

A searing pain washed through Keramore as the distinct smell of burnt hair and flesh filled his nostrils. Gone was the force that had prevented him from speaking, and his throat strained as his screams joined those of his people. Never before had agony enveloped him so completely.

His body boiled from within.

Through the tears blurring his vision, Keramore watched as the world around him melted away. The strong and beautiful akhevans twisted in upon themselves, their clothes

rotting to nothing more than rags. Their skin turned black, covered in chitin, their second set of limbs giving them the insect-like appearance Seshali had when they first met.

The table sitting before him lost its luster, its wood warping and splitting. The silver plates and cups transformed into little more than rusted metal. Even the food changed from the succulent meat he had savored to something putrid that smelled of rot and decay.

The city of Vex Thal dissolved into ruins, the once-proud buildings surrounding the courtyard falling into disrepair in the blink of an eye.

This, Keramore realized, was the truth that lurked behind the shadows.

The akhevans' bodies began to wither into dry husks, as if the tendrils of energy boring through them were sucking their life force away and feeding it into the dal. Keramore's screams increased, his lungs tearing under the strain as the burning energy pumped into his body. Had molten metal been poured down his throat, it would have been less agonizing.

Far worse was watching his people change, mutate. What he saw cut off his screams and replaced them with wails of bottomless sorrow.

Their lustrous pale skin dulled to an ashen gray. Some darkened further to the color of night itself. Hair of auburn and yellow faded to shades between snow white and jet black. Eyes of blue and green and hazel now burned with an unholy glow. Like some hellish vine, bony horns ripped from their scalps, tearing through the flesh just above the temple and ending in dull points near the back of the skull.

*Akhevan horns.*

Though a broiling agony filled him, the vision of his people thrashing as their bodies were corrupted by this evil sent icy chills cascading down Keramore's spine. A sob wracked his frame when he gazed upon Lanys. All that she had been was gone, and in her place the visage of something dark and sinister—so like the face Aten Ha Ra had worn—stared back at him. He couldn't bear the thought of what this

transformation was having upon his unborn child. He prayed silently that it perished.

As the pain slicing through Keramore slowly receded, so did the screams of his people. A low, rumbling laugh replaced the silence left behind. Struggling to catch his breath, Keramore glared up at Ithiosar who remained hovering over him.

“A fitting end, don’t you think, vermin?” Ithiosar rotated its head to gaze upon the rest of the Teir’Dal. “The last of the noble dal, twisted into the evil your race only played at being before.”

A deformed creature scuttled up next to Ithiosar, and had it not spoken, Keramore would not have recognized it. “The Prince of Shadows has opened the portal.” Aten’s voice rang with glee. “Guide his new minions back to the spire that they may serve as vessels of his glory!”

As one, the Teir’Dal rose, arms at their sides. All except Keramore, who found himself still unable to move. He made to speak, but only a rasping gasp escaped his lips.

It was enough to catch Ithiosar’s attention. “As payment for all you have done to me and my kind, I offer one last gift—though I fear you will not appreciate it as much as I.” The large black dragon bent to fill Keramore’s vision. “You get to live.” The monster shifted its bulk around and began lumbering down the space between the tables, a cruel laugh spilling from it. “You shall remain my guest here on Umbra. If we must share this shadow world, at least I’ll have your torment to fill the hours with delight.”

As the dragon retreated, the Teir’Dal fell into formation behind it. None ever glanced Keramore’s way, not even Lanys or his other lieutenants. Their eyes fixed, their movements sluggish, he knew they did not walk of their own free will.

When Ithiosar reached the edge of the strange illumination of this place, it stopped and glanced over its shoulder. “For the remainder of your years, the burden of your failures shall haunt you from the shadows. You have lost not only your war, but your race as well.” The dragon barked a laugh. “I have taken everything you have ever loved. And now I will use it

to serve my new cause—seeding Norrath with the majesty of Innoruuk.”

Tears carved rivers down Keramore’s ashen cheeks as he watched his people dissolve into the shadows. By the time the last of the Teir’Dal vanished from sight, the bonds no longer held him. Still, he could not summon the will to rise.

Pushing on the rotten table, it broke apart and fell into a heap on the ground. He slipped from his chair to join the debris onto the cold, broken stones. Curling in a ball, he wept for all he had done. All he had lost.

*Please, Anashti, take my life from me now.*



# ALLIANCE



The spires burst to life, casting a bright blue-white light that shattered Umbra's relentless gloom. The portal crackled and popped, tendrils of power licking out, and the excitement that had been building inside Ithiosar the Black bubbled to the surface as he glimpsed the catacombs that lay beneath the ruins of Quin'Sari shimmer into existence.

*Home!*

Though it was impossible, he almost felt Norrath calling to him, and he took an involuntary step closer. He longed for the warm sun to radiate over his body, to have the clean cold air of Velious fill his lungs, to wallow in the countless scents of life that was the land of his birth. It had been too long since he had experienced anything but the oppressive misery this world had to offer.

The reminder of his misery snapped his attention back to the present, and his eyes shifted to the writhing black cloud hovering by his side. Standing this close, the Chaos emanating from it was palpable. It pressed against him, wrapping him in a noxious blanket of comfort. The juxtaposition of feelings a sharp reminder of how different he was from other dragons.

*I am of both Order and Chaos.*

In following Keramore to this bleak place, Ithiosar had discovered so much of himself, had answered so many nagging questions about why he had always been at odds with his kin. Yet the answers he received had only led to more profound questions, which now plagued his mind and threatened to rip apart everything he believed.

Behind Ithiosar, stretching off into the strange darkness of the land, huddled the entranced throng of Keramore's vermin.

Even twisted into something less elven, with their dusky skin, luminous eyes, and bony horns, he found them revolting.

As if from some silent command, the mass shuffled forward, those in the lead stepping into the portal and disappearing in the blink of an eye. Ithiosar watched them as they passed, their eyes lifeless and vacant. He marveled at the power to control so many minds at once while activating a dead portal and holding it open.

He squared himself on the shadowy form. "Sending them back alone seems perilous. Are you certain I shouldn't accompany them? I could—"

"**Your time with me is not done.**" The form shifted, winding and twisting its way between Ithiosar and the portal spire. "**They have their part to play. You have another.**"

Fighting the urge to lash out, Ithiosar's gaze danced between the gaseous form and the portal that would take him back to Norrath. "There is *nothing* for me here!"

"**That is where you are wrong, en'zari. Your time among the shadows has awakened you, yes. But you only stand on the cusp of what you will become.**"

The statement gave Ithiosar pause, numbing his disgust at the notion of spending more time in this accursed place. Though he doubted the shade capable of showing emotion, he could have sworn it was smiling.

"**True power is within your grasp. I have shown you your past, now I shall guide you to your future.**" The dark form undulated as if it had turned its attention to the portal. "**One day all of Norrath will be mine. And you shall rule by my side.**"

Ithiosar stood silent for a long time, watching the mindless vermin file into the portal. As much as he wanted to follow them and escape this place, the shade's tantalizing words kept his feet from moving—his desire to subjugate the mortals paled next to the promise of seeing all of Skyrhine kneel before him.

As the last of the Teir'Dal vanished, Ithiosar bowed his head low and opened his mind to the god of hatred and shadows. "**Then it is here I shall stay... en'zari.**"

## Dreaming in Shadow

The portal winked out, banishing its beautiful light and plunging Umbra back into perpetual darkness as the spires grew cold and dormant once again. For the briefest of moments, fear gripped its icy claw around Ithiosar's throat and he wondered whether the shade would ever open the doorway again. Pushing his doubts aside, he wordlessly vowed to do whatever was necessary to gain the power the shade promised.

*And then, we will see who rules by whose side.*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Maxwell Alexander Drake—or Drake as he is known to friends and fans alike—has been writing professionally since 2007. In addition to working for Daybreak Games on the EverQuest Next project, he is the author of the award-winning *Genesis of Oblivion Saga*. When he's not writing, he teaches creative writing at fan conventions and writers conferences across the country, as well as holding monthly classes for the Clark County Library District in Las Vegas.

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*The Genesis of Oblivion Saga* is Drake's first major series and has won both a 2009 and 2011 Moonbeam Young Adult Fantasy Award for excellence in literature, as well as being named Dragon Roots Magazine's Best New Fantasy Saga.

You can read the first five chapters of *The Genesis of Oblivion Saga*, as well as keep up to date on this series at its official website, [www.genesisofoblivion.com](http://www.genesisofoblivion.com).