

BRYAN GARGAN

The Thief and The Warden

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*To Alyssa, my two boys B and T, and my Mom.
Thank you for being the kind of love that feels less like chance and
more like something quietly expected all along. The kind that
doesn't arrive by accident, but stays as if it was always meant to.*

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Prologue

House Varnis didn't struggle to find mercenaries. It struggled to find the right kind.

Pamerial was generous with stories. Truth was another matter. Elira Varnis had learned early that the difference between the two was repetition: a name that survived long enough, passed between enough different mouths, stopped being rumor and became something else entirely.

She heard Snaxx's name for the first time in a guildhall. Small for Pamerial, the kind of place that had never quite grown into its ambitions: a single long room with a notice board at one end and a clerk at the other who had developed, over many years, the particular expression of someone who had stopped expecting the day to surprise him. During the day it was bustling, loud with the specific noise of people who needed work and people who had it arguing about the terms. At this hour it smelled of old beer and honest sweat, and most of the adventurers had gone home, and a drunk was arguing with the notice board.

He wasn't performing. He was simply insisting, the way people insist when they've decided the world has made a mistake worth correcting. He addressed the board first, then his drink, then Elira, as if she had always been standing there and he had only

just noticed.

“A goblin did it,” he said. “Small thing. Green. Snaxx, I think they called her. Walked into the merchant vault and came out like she had every right to be there.”

The board didn’t respond. Neither did anyone else. Guild-halls swallowed impossible things daily; most dissolved before they could stick.

The second mention didn’t dissolve. It anchored. A shipwright at a dockside tavern, enormous and disheveled, a beard that had long since stopped answering to anyone, the kind of face that looked like it had been in arguments with weather and lost most of them. He turned cheap ale in slow circles as if it might explain itself. “She doesn’t take everything. That’s what’s strange. Only what she came for. Clean enough that afterward you start wondering if the rest was ever really guarded at all.” He exhaled through his nose. “Snaxx. If she’s on your job, it’s already done. You’re just late to noticing.”

After that, the name accumulated. Guild work, dock work, tavern gossip, the kind of name passed between people who agreed on nothing else. A traveling merchant swore she’d taken only the one thing he was sure couldn’t be taken. Another claimed she left entire contracts intact except for the single clause that mattered. Someone once called her a thief who only took orders from beautiful women and better odds. That line spread faster than any other. Elira didn’t correct it. She remembered it, because even in exaggeration it implied preference, and preference implied pattern.

By the time Pamerial stopped arguing about whether Snaxx

existed in any conventional sense, the city had already moved on to describing what she did instead.

She worked. That was the word that stuck. Not clever, not dangerous, not impossible. Worked. As if the city had recognized in her something it valued above spectacle: someone who showed up, did what she was supposed to do, and left. A thief who treated the job like a craft and the craft was something worth taking seriously. That was what the stories kept returning to, underneath all the embellishment. She was good at what she did and she got it done and that, in a city full of people claiming both, was apparently remarkable.

Elira followed the name through places where names weren't carefully kept: guildhalls where ink was cheap and mistakes were permanent, taverns where truth loosened its grip, docks where honesty was measured by weather and timing. None of it went into any official record. House Varnis kept thorough files on everything. This wasn't for House Varnis.

Every account repeated the same intent from different mouths. Snaxx arrives. Something changes. Snaxx leaves. Never lingering. Never explaining. Always already gone before understanding finished forming.

One guild contact paused a long time before speaking, as if he regretted remembering it. "She doesn't look like trouble," he said. Then, quieter: "She just makes you realize too late that something already happened."

Elira stood outside afterward in the cold, turning that over. House Varnis had no shortage of people who looked like trouble.

What it lacked was someone who got things done without becoming a problem in the process. She hadn't realized until that moment how tired she was of the alternative.

Days later, the city confirmed what the whispers had already implied: Snaxx was in Pamerial, at The Crooked Lantern.

Elira didn't go immediately. She let the information settle, waited for any contradiction to surface. People were always loud when they first arrived somewhere; they only became legible once they stopped announcing themselves.

Pamerial was still awake when she finally set out, but only in the way cities remain half-conscious, aware enough to witness, not enough to interfere. The rain had been falling for some time, steady and indifferent, the kind that softened stone and muffled footsteps and made everything feel slightly closer together than it was. Not a storm. Just water, persistent and unremarkable. The coat was cold where it pressed against her shoulders, the damp working in from the collar, and she didn't particularly mind. She had walked worse streets in worse weather for less reason than this.

The Crooked Lantern leaned slightly into the street, as though it had given up on pretending to be straight. Warm light pressed through the windows and blurred in the rain. Noise thudded inside, conversation and laughter and the particular hum of a place that had been full for hours and intended to stay that way.

Elira paused only once at the threshold before entering.

Professionally Unprofessional

Rain tapped softly against Pamerial's crooked rooftops, less falling than settling, as if the city had grown tired and decided to soak instead of breathe. It ran in thin, uneven sheets over patched tile and leaning timber, slipping through old repairs like it knew exactly where things failed.

Below, fog pressed low into the streets, thick and close, swallowing lantern light before it could travel more than a few steps. What glow remained broke apart in the damp air, smeared gold and dull amber, like even illumination couldn't hold its shape for long.

Somewhere distant, a bell tolled midnight as if mildly surprised to still be employed.

The Crooked Lantern sat half-sunk into the street like it had been built to endure being ignored. Timber beams sagged with age and use, the sign above the door creaking even when nothing moved it, as though the building couldn't quite agree on whether it was still upright. Inside, the air was warm, but it was not comforting. It was the kind of warmth made by bodies

too close together, too long, where breath, smoke, spilled drink, and old grudges settled into the grain of the walls and refused to leave.

It was doing what it always did best: watered-down ale, bad decisions dressed as entertainment, and people disappearing upstairs with the confidence of those who hadn't yet considered consequences in any meaningful way. Snaxx appreciated that kind of honesty. No one here pretended, but more importantly, no one here was safe pretending.

Snaxx had been nursing the same drink for an hour.

Which meant one of two things: either the night was slow, or it was about to get interesting.

She was small enough that most people forgot her until it became inconvenient. She was goblin-born, green-skinned, built compact and balanced, all efficiency and tension held in close. Nothing wasted, nothing ornamental about her frame, just the kind of physical confidence that came from knowing exactly what her body could do when things turned sharp. The world had never been kind to her, so Snaxx learned early that being overlooked was just another tool, one that was right alongside knives, locks, and other people's assumptions.

She still carried the remnants of her last job. There was dirt worked into the seams of her gear, faint stains she hadn't bothered to clean off yet. Not worth it. She was alive, paid, and already on her way out of Pamerial; the rest of it could stay behind her.

Her eyes were the part you remembered too late. They were sharp, restless, always tracking movement like she was already

halfway through a decision most people hadn't realized they were part of yet. Even when she stood still, it felt temporary, like she was only pausing between outcomes.

When she spoke, there was usually a smile tucked into her easy and casual cadence, the kind that suggested she knew exactly what people wanted to hear and exactly how far she could push that before it stopped being funny. Flirtation came naturally, but it wasn't invitation so much as technique: a way of leaning in just enough to see what someone would offer before they realized they'd started negotiating.

If it didn't work, she had no problem ending things directly. She preferred when she didn't have to.

The tavern door opened.

Not the way most people opened it, because most people simply entered. This woman arrived as though she'd already been accounted for.

Conversation didn't die so much as *reorganize*. Voices lowered instinctively, like the room had decided without consultation that nothing spoken at full volume would matter anymore. Laughter continued, but quieter now, uncertain of its own timing. Even the usual clatter of the Crooked Lantern seemed to step half a pace back, as though the building itself had developed manners it did not normally possess.

Heads turned to look, not all at once, but in a slow, reluctant wave of attention that spread from the door outward. People noticed her in stages: first the shape, then the movement, then the realization that neither belonged in a place like this.

Then, attention stopped spreading. It settled.

Tall, composed in a way that felt older than memory, though

nothing about her insisted on being noticed. Deep green fabric wrapped her frame with exacting grace, tailored so precisely it seemed inevitable rather than worn. Rain slid off her coat without lingering, as if it refused to settle where she stood. Her boots were clean in a way that drew the eye and then quietly discouraged it from staying too long, as though attention itself grew uncertain. Her gloves had never touched anything they hadn't needed to, or anything they hadn't been permitted to understand.

Her features held that sharp, quiet symmetry of the long-lived folk. She was fine-boned, unhurried by time. A thin earring of pale metal traced the line of one elongated ear, just visible when she shifted. She clearly looked court-worked, precise, the kind of restraint that did not announce status so much as assume it. It did not dangle or sway; it held its place with practiced composure, as though even ornamentation in her presence was expected to behave properly. When she turned her head, it caught the light briefly and released it again, like a formal acknowledgment given and withdrawn at the correct moment in conversation.

Snaxx's eyes narrowed. Interesting.

The woman let her gaze move through the room with quiet ease. She was not searching, but taking it in, as though she already understood what sort of place this was and what sorts of people tended to occupy it. Her attention lingered just long enough on each corner to acknowledge it before moving on, unhurried, unbothered, certain of where she was meant to end up.

Her gaze found Snaxx.

Not like a search resolving into success, but like recognition

arriving exactly where it was expected to. There was nothing abrupt in it. Just a soft settling, as though the room had quietly agreed to this outcome before either of them had stepped inside.

She crossed the room without hesitation. Not weaving through tables, not adjusting her path for comfort or courtesy. Around her, tavern folk subtly made space before she reached them, realizing the need a moment too late. Chairs did not move, but they were no longer in her way; conversation bent slightly around her passage, less in obedience than in instinctive deference to something it didn't feel entitled to interrupt.

When she reached Snaxx's table, she paused, not for permission, and not for effect, but with the quiet courtesy of someone acknowledging that she was stepping into another person's space.

She did not rush to sit.

One glove slipped free first, set aside with absent precision where it would not interrupt anything or anyone. Her attention moved briefly to the chair, where she was not inspecting it so much as confirming it would hold the conversation she intended to have. Only then did she lower herself into it, composed and unhurried, as though settling in were simply the final part of arriving rather than a separate decision.

She arranged her posture with an easy, practiced grace, a natural result of someone used to making even intrusion feel appropriately placed. A brief stillness followed, it was not awkward, just complete, like the moment had finished settling.

Her hand moved.

A small velvet pouch hit the table between them. It gave a soft, deliberate clink.

Coins.

Snaxx didn't touch it. She studied the woman the way she'd study a locked door: slowly, patiently, as if the surface itself might be misleading about what waited behind it. The woman's presence wasn't loud, but it filled the space by certainty, not force. She was someone accustomed to rooms adjusting around her, not the other way around.

"Snaxx," the woman said. "I need someone discreet. Quick. Morally flexible."

Snaxx smiled faintly. "That narrows it down to about half the city."

Without a flicker of reaction, the woman slid a folded parchment across the table. "There's an estate outside town," she said. "House Varnis."

The name changed the air. Not with fear or reverence, but with something older, heavier, as if the room itself remembered it before the conversation had fully formed. Snaxx tilted her head. "Oh," she said. "That kind of problem."

The woman leaned forward a fraction. "And before you ask, yes, It's haunted."

Snaxx looked at her properly then. A silver ring caught the lanternlight: a thorn wrapped around a tower, the unmistakable mark of The Velvet Choir, too precise to be decorative. An organization that didn't exist until you were already part of

it. Jasmine clung to the woman's presence, but underneath it something sharper. It had a tinge of iron, like it was blood that was cleaned too thoroughly. Just beneath her sleeve, where the fabric shifted, the mark once more was visible.

Snaxx didn't comment. She didn't need to. The question was no longer about the job. It was about what kind of person brought this job to a goblin in a tavern and expected it to sound like business.

She leaned back slightly, her smile sharpening. "So you're either very rich," she said, "or very interesting."

"Both are acceptable," the woman replied.

Snaxx finally reached for her drink, but watched the woman instead of drinking. "You got a name?"

After a pause: "Elira."

"..Just Elira?"

A fraction of silence, then, carefully: "Of House Varnis."

Snaxx let that settle. Her eyes flicked once briefly, sharp, measuring. "...Right," she murmured. "So I'm either being hired by you, or by the problem you live inside." A pause without denial or correction. Then Snaxx exhaled through her nose, almost amused. "Let me guess," she added lightly. "I break into your estate, retrieve your thing, and everyone calls it business instead of irony."

Elira's expression didn't shift. "I would not call it irony."

"No," Snaxx said. "You wouldn't." She set the drink down, untasted. "Well, Lady Varnis. You've officially ruined my boring evening."

Elira looked like someone who had temporarily lowered her standards for efficiency's sake. Snaxx appreciated that kind of honesty in a professional, though she didn't trust it.

Elira's gaze stayed steady. "Are you interested in the job?"

The velvet pouch sat between them like a polite threat. Snaxx tapped it once with one finger. Coins meant more than metal. They meant desperation. Secrets. Occasionally murder.

"Depends," Snaxx said.

Elira folded her hands neatly on the table. "On what?"

Snaxx leaned forward slightly. "On whether you're the kind of rich that gets people killed," she said, "or the kind that pays for it afterward."

Elira's eyes sharpened, just slightly. She understood the question. "I am the kind of rich," she said evenly, "that cleans up my own consequences."

Snaxx hummed softly, as if weighing the answer from several angles at once. "Mm. That's a dangerous kind." Her fingers tapped once against the table. Then, almost casually: "And just

to be clear, this job of yours is *inside* your consequences, isn't it?"

Elira didn't answer immediately. That, in itself, was an answer.

Snaxx watched her carefully. Her smile held, but it had gone thinner at the edges. "No correction?" she asked lightly. "No misunderstanding to clean up?"

Elira let the moment settle. "I find misunderstandings more dangerous than silence."

A soft laugh slipped from Snaxx. "Fair."

The tavern noise swelled and fell around them. Their table felt untouched by it, as if the room had politely decided not to interrupt. Elira slid the parchment further forward.

Snaxx unfolded it enough to glimpse an estate sketch and task details. The estate was large, Gods, unreasonably so. "Let me guess," she said. "Masks. Noble guests. Family secrets. A chandelier nobody's allowed to mention."

Elira blinked once. "...Yes."

Snaxx grinned. "Violent family reunion. Got it."

"It is not violent."

Snaxx looked up. "You said that too fast."

A pause stretched. Elira adjusted one glove. "It is occasionally violent."

"Much better." Snaxx leaned back. "And the haunted part?"

Elira was quiet just long enough for the answer to feel deliberate. "House Varnis has a habit of revealing people to themselves. Some may call old houses haunted when they are simply unwilling to admit they are being observed."

"Yes," Elira said. "It usually is." And for the first time, her mouth twitched. Not quite a smile, but it looked close enough to be dangerous.

Snaxx noticed. She let the silence stretch.

"Alright," she said. "I'll do it."

Something in Elira's posture eased, fractionally. Snaxx immediately ruined it. "On one condition."

Stillness returned. "Conditions were not part of the arrangement."

Snaxx tilted her head with an expression of pure innocence. "Oh? I thought we were both improvising morally flexible professionalism in a tavern full of bad decisions. I assumed creativity was implied."

A pause. Elira stared at her. Snaxx smiled back, bright as a spark near dry wood. Finally, Elira exhaled once through her nose. "State it."

Snaxx leaned forward. "If I survive your dramatically haunted estate and return your shiny little key," she said, "you take me to dinner."

The table went quiet.

For the first time all evening, Elira looked genuinely caught off guard. Good.

"You are negotiating additional payment," she said at last.

"I prefer to call it emotional hazard compensation." Snaxx let that settle before adding, almost casually, "Also, I'm charming. It's a known issue."

Elira regarded her for a long moment. Then, calmly: "One dinner."

Snaxx blinked. That was easier than expected, which made it immediately suspicious. Naturally, she made it worse. "Good. And a drink."

"That is not part of the agreement."

"Standard recovery protocol after being stabbed, betrayed, or emotionally devastated during the assignment," Snaxx said smoothly. "Very medical."

Elira's expression did not change. "You are assuming quite a lot."

"I like to prepare for noble houses realistically."

Elira held her gaze. A measured silence stretched between them. Then, with perfect calm: "Do not make me regret agreeing to this."

Snaxx's finger shot out, pointing. "Too late. You already said yes." Her voice softened a fraction. "Pleasure doing business with you."

"Do not confuse this with pleasure."

Snaxx stood, pocketing the coin pouch. "Oh, I never do," she said. "That's how people get emotionally invested." She leaned in slightly before turning away. "One more thing."

Elira paused. "Yes?"

Snaxx grinned. "If I survive this assignment, I expect you to admit I'm your favorite problem."

A long silence. "Leave," Elira said flatly.

Snaxx laughed. "See you tonight, Lady Varnis." She walked out into the rain, a bounce in her step, as if she'd already decided this job was going to be interesting.

The door creaked shut behind her. The rain hit immediately: cold, familiar, honest.

* * *

Pamerial at midnight was a city that never quite decided if it

was asleep or pretending to be. Lantern light bled gold across wet stone streets. Carriages moved like shadows. Somewhere in the distance, music was losing an argument with the weather.

Snaxx pulled her coat tighter and set off uphill.

Behind her, through the tavern window, she could still see Elira sitting at the table, completely still and perfectly composed, entirely too interesting. Snaxx smiled to herself. "Well," she muttered. "That one's going to be trouble."

Not the job. Not the estate. Her.

Snaxx didn't like how much she liked that. The coin pouch in her pocket felt heavy not with coin but with implication. There was going to be a dinner she absolutely intended to collect.

She rolled her shoulders and kept walking, toward House Varnis, toward whatever kind of bad decision wore a noble name and didn't bother hiding it.

Above the city, fog thickened. Somewhere within it, a manor waited.

Watching, as if it had expected her.

Pamerial grew quieter the higher Snaxx climbed. Not a peaceful quiet, but rather a waiting one, the kind that suggested the city had already heard about her plans and was deciding whether to intervene.

She passed a wine merchant's shuttered stall, a pair of cats conducting serious business in a doorway, a lantern that had given up flickering and settled into a dull, resigned glow.

The kind of city details that existed only at this hour, when Pamerial stopped performing and became just a place that people happened to live in. Snaxx paid attention to hours like this. They told you more about a city than any map.

Rain softened to mist as she left the lower districts behind. Lantern light thinned. Streets narrowed. The stonework grew older, less forgiving, as if the city were shedding newer skin the higher she went.

House Varnis didn't appear so much as register itself. A silhouette on the hill that felt less built than assembled from intention.

Iron gates. Black stone. Lanterns spaced with uncomfortable precision, every light too evenly placed, as if symmetry itself had been weaponized. And above it all: the manor. Too many windows were lit. That was never a good sign. Either someone was home, or something wanted to be seen.

Snaxx slowed beneath the outer tree line. Crouched. Watched. No guards in sight.

Which meant nothing, and everything. Absence of movement here didn't feel empty. It felt stored.

"...Right," she murmured while moving along the perimeter instead of taking the obvious gate. "Wouldn't be that easy."

Near the blind corner, the hedgerow thickened. The bush had some old growth that seemed deliberately neglected, designed to look like it wasn't. Her boots sank silently into wet soil. Each step placed with care, not caution. Ahead, a lantern swung into view with a slow, predictable arc. Groundkeeper. Or bait.

Snaxx didn't decide which. She simply waited. The light passed.

For a breath of time, the estate felt unobserved. She moved.

The garden wall loomed ahead. The green, leafy wall stood tall, it looked nearly twelve feet, and had uneven stone softened by ivy that had grown too confidently to be accidental. IT seemed higher where sightlines mattered. A wall built by people who trusted height more than understanding.

Snaxx's mouth curved slightly. "Yeah... like that'll stop me." She reached it and stopped. Her hand pressed to the cold, wet stone, and something beneath it answered. Not magic she could see, but something deeper, like pressure behind glass. The wards didn't flare. They noticed. The air shifted, subtle and internal, as if the estate had turned its attention toward her heartbeat and decided to listen more carefully.

Snaxx froze. Waited. Nothing followed. The quiet held, aware in a way that felt intentional rather than passive.

She'd felt ward systems before. There was the blunt kind that pushed back, the reactive kind that screamed, the bureaucratic kind that logged your presence and sent a report somewhere. This was none of those. It didn't resist or record. It simply noticed, the way a person notices a door has been left open without yet deciding what to do about it. That distinction mattered. Systems that reacted were predictable. Systems that waited were something else entirely.

"...Hello to you too," she whispered. Then she climbed.

Halfway up, the wall stopped behaving like stone, not with

resistance, but with its awareness. As if the structure had begun accounting for her weight, adjusting its understanding of itself to include her. She adapted: subtle shifts in grip, rhythm, breath, reading the surface the way she'd read a room. The ivy didn't merely support her. It accommodated her. Which was far more unsettling than if it had fought back. Things that fought back had edges. Things that accommodated had intentions.

The second-floor balcony came into view. Its door slightly ajar. It looked like it was not open enough to be careless, not closed enough to be safe. It all seemed perfectly wrong. Snaxx studied it for a moment longer than necessary. Wind moved the curtain inside.

Slow.

Rhythmic.

Breathing, if you wanted to think about it that way.

She didn't. Instead, she noticed old iron anchors, too intentional to be decorative set into the stone below the balcony. Someone had once moved through here often enough to justify their presence. Or still did.

A lantern drifted again below, closer this time. Snaxx held still until it passed. She shifted onto the balcony ledge. No sound. No protest from the wood. The house didn't react here, which was worse than resistance.

She crouched at the door and listened. Nothing obvious. Which meant everything subtle. The door hadn't been forced. It had been left open.

Snaxx stared at it a moment. A slight smile touched her lips.

“Alright,” she whispered. “Let’s see what you want.” Her hand reached for the handle, then froze.

The wards shifted again. Not outward. Inward. Something inside had just turned its head toward her, deciding to pay attention. The house had truly noticed her now.

Snaxx’s grin softened. “...Good,” she murmured. “I was starting to feel ignored.”

She stepped inside.

The air changed, it felt suddenly aware, as if the house had been holding its breath and finally decided she was worth acknowledging with an exhale. The door clicked shut behind her. Snaxx didn’t turn immediately. Rule one in places like this: never give the room the satisfaction of watching you react first.

Stillness settled around her. Too clean. Too arranged. The entry hall stretched wide, not spacious, composed, as if everything in it had been placed for observation rather than comfort.

Portraits lined the walls. Every frame looked identical. There was something off though, Snaxx looked closer, and saw that every subject was different, every face was blurred. Not painted poorly, not aged. It looked like their faces were erased, in the same deliberate way, as if identity itself had been edited out of the room.

Snaxx tilted her head. “...Right,” she said, exhaling through her nose. “Because that’s not ominous at all.”

She looked at the nearest one more carefully. The technique

itself was fine, it had some confident brushwork, good use of shadow, someone who knew what they were doing with fabric and light. But where the face should have been, the paint had been worked over, layer on layer, until it resolved into something that almost looked like intention: not blankness, but refusal. Whoever had done this hadn't made a mistake. They'd made a decision.

She moved along the row slowly, checking each one. All the same. All deliberate. A family that had spent considerable effort making itself unrecognizable from the inside out. Snaxx had broken into noble houses that displayed ancestors like credentials, arranged in order of importance, labeled with titles and dates and accomplishments. This was the opposite of that. This was a gallery of people who had agreed, collectively, to become no one.

House Varnis, she was beginning to understand, had a very particular relationship with being seen.

A sound from deeper in the house, it was not footsteps, nor speech, but something closer like fabric moved by someone not quite ready to be visible. Snaxx shifted her weight, eyes scanning the corridor ahead.

The hallway split into three directions. To the left, darkness so uniform it looked intentional. To the right, candlelight that flickered too evenly to be natural. And straight ahead, a long corridor ending in a mirror.

Snaxx didn't move.

For a moment, she just stood there, her breath caught somewhere between her chest and her throat. The air behind

her shifted once more, but this time it was not against her skin, but deeper than that, like something unseen had leaned closer, quietly deciding where she was supposed to go.

Her fingers curled slightly at her sides. "Seriously?" she snapped quietly. "This is what we're doing now?"

The mirror at the end of the hall flickered. Not a shift in reflection. Recognition.

For a moment she saw herself in it, but the image was not quite right. Her silhouette. Her posture. Her grin. But her eyes were already looking somewhere deeper inside the house than she was standing. Then her reflection smiled a fraction too slowly, lifted a hand, and tapped once on the inside of the glass.

A sound answered.

Behind her.

Sharp. Real.

Snaxx didn't turn. Her jaw tightened. "...You've got to be kidding me."

The candlelight in the right corridor flickered once. And then the mirror changed its mind.

The reflection didn't vanish. The reflection replaced her, it no longer showed Snaxx standing there, but rather it showed Elira. The new reflection was standing exactly where Snaxx should have been. Still. Controlled. Watching. And her expression wasn't neutral. It was focused, specifically on Snaxx, as if she'd been waiting there longer than the house itself.

Snaxx's breath caught, not out of fear. She was just thinking fast. The second tap didn't come again. It didn't need to. The

mirror wasn't showing what was behind her anymore. It was showing what was already aware of her presence.

Snaxx didn't blink. Didn't breathe right for a moment.

"...I don't like that," she whispered. "It doesn't feel like I'm seeing Elira. It feels like I'm being seen *through her*."

The mirror held Elira's patient gaze, unblinking. For the first time since Snaxx had stepped into House Varnis, it felt less like the house was watching her and more like it was confirming her location to someone else.

An Expected Invitation

Snaxx stood perfectly still, one hand resting near the weight of the dagger beneath her coat.

A moment ago, the mirror had reflected exactly what it should have: rainwater darkening the edges of her hood, damp boots on polished floorboards, one thief standing in a noblewoman's private hall making what could generously be described as questionable life choices.

Now it showed Lady Elira Varnis, standing in her stead, still and composed, her gaze fixed. What unsettled Snaxx wasn't the magic, she'd worked around stranger things. It was Elira's expression: not surprised, not searching. Informed. As though the manor had quietly whispered the news the moment Snaxx crossed the outer wall, and Elira had simply let the evening continue.

"Well," she said softly, folding her arms, "you look like you've been expecting me."

The reflection gave no answer. Elira's gaze remained fixed through the glass, patient and exact, like someone watching a chessboard several moves ahead.

Snaxx had spent most of her life learning how to enter rooms unnoticed. She trusted reflections the way sailors trusted weather: carefully, and only after enough storms to earn their respect. This mirror didn't behave like weather. It behaved like attention.

She stepped closer anyway. Curiosity had been trying to kill her for years; by now, they had an understanding.

The mirror's silver frame caught the candlelight strangely, its edges shimmering. The center stayed too smooth, too still. It was like water pretending to be glass. It should have shown the room behind her. Instead, only Elira remained.

Snaxx tilted her head slightly. "You could have just sent a note."
Silence.

"Actually, no. That would've been less dramatic. Forget I said that."

As if offended by the suggestion, the candlelight flickered once. A soft draft moved through the corridor. The reflection changed again, but there was no shatter, no flare, no performance. It simply wasn't wrong anymore.

Snaxx stared at her own reflection: sharp eyes, rain-damp hood, one goblin thief with excellent instincts and increasingly poor boundaries. She looked innocent, which somehow made it

worse.

She let out a slow breath. "Right," she muttered. "Haunted rich people. Very normal."

She could work with that... Probably.

She crossed to the open balcony doors, pulling the folded estate map from inside her coat. Rain tapped softly against the stone outside. Wind stirred through the curtains in slow, measured waves. Below, House Varnis continued its performance: music from the ballroom, laughter rising and falling in practiced timing, crystal glass catching candlelight just so. Everything functioned exactly as it was meant to.

Up here, it was quieter.

Snaxx spread the parchment across the small table within the room and leaned over it. The manor unfolded in layers: ballroom, gallery, family chambers, study. And then between either entrance of the ballroom there showed a line too careful to be decorative. Not an accident, not quite a warning. Something drawn by someone who had wanted to remember it and regretted it afterward.

She traced it with her eyes. "...Of course," she murmured.

That interested her. But her attention moved elsewhere.

Second floor. East Wing. A private suite marked not with a name but a crest, the symbol of a thorn wrapped around a tower. The same symbol from Elira's ring. The same one she'd kept half-hidden beneath her sleeve in the tavern.

No label. No title. No “Lady Elira.” Just quiet certainty. Ownership.

The suite sat apart from the main family corridor, connected by a narrow stairwell that bypassed the ballroom entirely. It was close enough to the study to matter, yet separate enough to avoid being seen.

Below it, faint ink in older handwriting read: *East suite reserved. No staff access during gatherings.*

No explanation.

None needed.

Snaxx exhaled softly. So that was her room. She leaned against the balcony railing and stared out into the rain, the plan settled into its usual shape: find Lord Adrien, find the study, find the key, leave. Minimal complications. A professional evening.

Now there was Elira’s suite – objectively a terrible idea, yet unfortunately, a much better one. She considered this with all the seriousness it absolutely did not deserve. On one side: discipline, professionalism, the kind of restraint that kept people alive. On the other: Lady Elira Varnis, who watched through mirrors and left doors open.

That wasn’t a fair comparison.

Not even close.

Snaxx glanced back toward the mirror. No guidance, no reaction; just her reflection looking mildly displeased at the quality of her own judgment. Which she would later have to defend with extremely unconvincing logic.

“Most people,” she said quietly to herself, “pick one bad idea and stick with it.”

She folded the map neatly, then turned toward the quieter eastern corridor. The study could wait; curiosity, again, had already moved ahead without her. And if Lady Elira Varnis intended to haunt the entire evening, the least Snaxx could do was be polite enough to visit first.

She slipped into the hall, quiet as intention, heading toward the East Wing and the woman who had almost certainly expected this exact choice.

Somewhere behind stone, glass, and whatever careful systems Elira had built into this building, Snaxx suspected her change of direction had already been noticed. She smiled to herself. Good. She hated disappointing beautiful women, especially those who watched through mirrors and looked as if they’d expected this choice anyway.

Snaxx moved through the corridor as if she belonged, a pretense she knew was never truly hers, but always worth attempting. House Varnis did not feel like a normal estate. It felt aware... but quietly, the way a system feels that has seen enough intrusions to start adjusting its responses.

The farther east she went, the more the atmosphere shifted. Sound thinned behind her. The ballroom laughter dulled into something distant and uncertain, as if it had been moved behind too many walls to remain honest. The air changed too, becoming colder, cleaner, as if maintained, not lived in.

Snaxx kept to the edges of the corridor where shadow pooled thicker and carpet muted intention properly. Her steps were measured, but they were not cautious here, just efficient. The difference mattered.

She passed a pair of portrait alcoves. Old Varnis ancestors, painted with unsettling precision. Their eyes followed her as she moved past, the painting showed either exceptional technique, or a family that had stopped correcting small problems a long time ago.

Snaxx gave them a brief nod. "Evening," she murmured.

One of them looked unimpressed. She continued on.

The manor offered no resistance to her movement, which was the first thing she noticed. No tightening in the air, no shift in pressure, no warning ripple through whatever systems House Varnis used to decide who belonged where. As if the house had already decided she was allowed to proceed, for now. That thought lingered longer than she liked.

The corridor widened into a junction where three paths split cleanly: one toward the Study Wing, one to the East Wing suite, and a third narrower service passage threading quietly between both, it was unmarked and almost certainly intentional.

Snaxx stopped, her gaze moving between them.

The Study Wing was the objective. The contract. The coin. Simple and familiar, safe in the way dangerous things become safe when well understood.

The East Wing was not part of the job. Which was precisely why it felt impossible to ignore.

She exhaled through her nose. The problem with curiosity wasn't its volume. It was its insistence on being heard.

She stepped toward the East Wing. The air in this area was not colder or warmer, just suddenly attentive, as if something within the house had registered her hesitation and was now watching more closely.

The corridor tightened as she moved through it: less space, less noise, less invitation to linger. Deeper carpet absorbed her steps. Lantern light, strategically lowered, discouraged hesitation. This was a space built for certainty, not visitors.

Then she saw the door: simple wood, dark finish, no ornamentation of note. In a house like this, that in itself was a warning.

No guards. No visible locks. Only a ward etched into the frame that was so faint it could have been decorative, until you noticed the pattern repeating in a way that felt less like design and more like attention. Snaxx slowed. This ward wasn't built to stop intrusion. It was built to recognize it.

She crouched slightly, studying the seam between door and frame. "Polite," she murmured. "That's new."

Her fingers hovered near the edge of the wood. Listening. These kinds of wards didn't care about force. They cared about choice, but intent was always louder than movement.

Behind the door, the manor felt quieter still, as if whatever was inside this room had convinced the rest of the house not to

interrupt it.

Snaxx let out a slow breath and adjusted her stance. "Alright," she said softly. "Let's see what you're protecting."

She reached for the handle. Paused. Her body gave her a tingling sensation that was not a warning, not a threat, something quieter than both. Like recognition without permission. Snaxx was stopped just long enough to notice it.

"This is either very wrong," she whispered, "or very inviting."

She opened the door. It gave without resistance, She did not strain, and there was no complaint from the old hinges, no protest from wood or metal. Just a quiet, deliberate shift, as if the room had already agreed to this moment and was simply allowing it to proceed.

Snaxx stepped inside. The silence struck her first, it seemed so very close to a structured quiet, so meticulously arranged it had lost all trace of accident.

The East Wing suite wasn't large, but everything in it sat with an unnerving precision that was rare in lived-in spaces. Every item occupied its designated place with intentional permanence. Against the far wall, a wide bed dressed in deep green linens, folded to precise corners, which was not decoration, but disciplinary order made visible. A writing desk near the window presented itself in quiet tiers: sealed correspondence, stacked ledgers, and a single unlit candle placed subtly off-center, as though perfection had been deliberately unsettled. A stone washbasin, pristine, clean with the meticulousness of something never permitted to be anything else.

Snaxx listened. The room pulsed with a soft, controlled rhythm. The air was layered with a faint jasmine over something sharper underneath. Iron. Subtle and familiar. Not the scent of recent presence, but of residual memory, belonging to someone who never forgot where they'd been.

Her gaze moved slower now, tracing patterns rather than objects. Ward traces throughout: subtle, deliberate. Not barriers or warnings, the wards were merely presence recorders, designed not to prevent entry but to log it.

“So that’s the game,” she murmured.

She moved deeper inside. Near the far wall, the wardrobe stood partially ajar, clothing arranged with quiet discipline. Inside there were travel garments sorted not by wealth but by purpose, function first, color secondary, every fold identical and every seam aligned. Someone for whom leaving this room was more frequent than staying in it.

Snaxx drifted toward the desk. Where everything else obeyed the room’s system, one thing didn’t: a silver key with a thin black ribbon around its top, resting on a sheet of paper.

Not hidden. Not guarded. Placed.

She stopped, attention snapping clean and immediate. Nothing in House Varnis had been careless. This, too, was deliberate. She stepped closer, fingers hovering over the paper, avoiding the key.

The handwriting was clean, precise. Elira’s.

“If you are in my room, you are either very competent... or very

dead.”

A deliberate pause in the script, then:

“I hope for your sake it is the first.”

Snaxx breathed softly through her nose. “Confident,” she murmured. No visible trap, no obvious ward trigger, only placement, meaning, expectation, and beneath it all, certainty itself.

She reached out and took the key.

The instant her fingers closed around it, the room’s attention shifted. There was not an alarm, but recognition, as if something unseen had quietly checked a box and moved on.

Snaxx slipped the key into her pocket, deliberately. Then she paused, her attention drawn to the wardrobe. Still slightly open. Not inviting. Not hidden. Just present, as if it had been waiting for the sentence to finish. She studied it for a long moment.

Snaxx slipped the key into her pocket. Then paused, her attention drawn back to the wardrobe. Still slightly open. Not inviting. Just present, as if it had been waiting for the sentence to finish.

“Well,” she murmured, “this feels like a bad decision with excellent lighting.”

She stepped toward it. The moment her hand touched the edge, the room’s focus shifted again. The wood was warm in an unnatural way. For a moment, nothing happened. There was again - no alarm, no ward flare, no consequence. Just silence, held too evenly to be passive.

Then a sound that didn't belong to the wardrobe. A chair shifted somewhere in the room softly with a controlled, deliberate move, like someone adjusting their posture after deciding patience had run its course.

Snaxx froze. Her instincts abandoned their assumption of permission.

A calm, familiar voice came from behind her. "You took it faster than expected."

Lady Elira Varnis.

* * *

Snaxx didn't turn. She didn't need to; the room's attention already had. Whatever was speaking wasn't reacting to her presence, but rather it was confirming it. A measured pause followed, as if the silence itself was checking alignment before continuing. Snaxx kept her hand near the wardrobe edge.

"Well," she said lightly, still facing forward, "that depends on your expectations."

A pause. Then, closer, not in distance, but in certainty: "The wardrobe was optimistic."

Only then did Snaxx turn. Elira stood near the desk. Not seated, not newly arrived. Just present, as if visibility was not an entrance but a decision the room had finally stopped delaying. Moonlight from the tall window cut across her in a clean diagonal. Gone was the masquerade finery. Here was only control and clarity. Elira's gaze sweeping briefly across Snaxx's hand, then the wardrobe, then settling on her. Not

surprised. Assessing.

Snaxx let the silence sit long enough to test its edges, then lifted her chin slightly. "You're earlier than I expected."

Elira's expression did not shift. "I did not arrive earlier. I remained." Her words weren't an explanation; they were a correction.

They looked at each other. For a moment the question of who had entered first blurred. Snaxx adjusted her stance casually on the surface, but no longer without clear intent. The air between them felt measured now.

Elira took a single step forward. Not to close distance, but to define it. "I assume," she said evenly, "you have my key."

Snaxx's smile flickered. "I prefer to think of it as temporary custody."

A faint, almost amused shift crossed Elira's expression, but her attention remained fixed. "That is not a legal term."

"I'm not a legal person."

"Clearly."

The silence that followed had structure. Snaxx felt it before she identified its source: the mirror on the far wall. No longer reflecting anything. Just dark glass.

Elira spoke again, and the room followed her voice before Snaxx

did. "You are standing in a warded space inside my private suite within House Varnis," she said calmly. "You bypassed layered detection, crossed an active gathering floor, and entered a room not meant to be entered without acknowledgment."

A pause. "And yet you are still speaking."

Snaxx tilted her head slightly. "I'm adaptable."

"That is one interpretation." Elira stepped closer, but not in a way to shorten the space, but to make it undeniable. "You did not come here for the key," she said. Not as a question, but as a conclusion.

Snaxx's smile shifted subtly. "Didn't I?"

Elira's gaze held steady. "No." She paused briefly before adding, "You came here because I allowed you to know where to look."

The room settled further, as if listening had become its primary function. Snaxx exhaled slowly through her nose. "That's a generous interpretation of breaking into your room."

"It is an accurate one."

That should have been reassuring, but somehow, that sounded worse. Snaxx glanced briefly toward the desk, then back. "And if I refuse that interpretation?"

Elira's eyes narrowed slightly. "Then you are lying to yourself." Not with sharpness, but with certainty.

Snaxx held Elira's gaze for a long moment, then let out a quiet laugh. "...Alright," she said. "That's worse."

Elira did not react to the humor, but she also didn't discard it either. Which, Snaxx decided, was its own kind of warning. Elira turned slightly toward the desk. "You retrieved what I asked for," she said. "That completes the contract." A pause. Then, quieter: "The rest depends on what you believe you are doing here."

Snaxx leaned back slightly against the room's stillness, testing whether it would yield. Her eyes flicked once to the dark mirror, then back to Elira. "...I think," she said slowly, "you already know the answer to that."

For the first time, Elira didn't answer immediately. In that silence, it felt as though the room itself was waiting for her response more than Snaxx was. "I know what you intend to imply," she said at last.

Snaxx smiled. "That's not an answer."

"It is a boundary," Elira replied.

"Ah," Snaxx murmured, tilting her head. "So you do have those."

Something shifted, not in Elira's expression, but in what she permitted to show. A recalibration, quiet and exact. "You are very comfortable in spaces that do not belong to you," she said.

Snaxx stepped fully away from the wardrobe, letting distance

become part of the conversation rather than mere space between objects. “Not true,” she said lightly. “I’m comfortable in spaces that haven’t realized I don’t belong yet.”

Something in Elira’s focus sharpened with interest. Her gaze tracked Snaxx’s movement. “You are aware you are still inside my room.”

“I noticed.”

“And yet you are not leaving.”

Snaxx gave a slight shrug. “I’m evaluating exit options.”

Elira didn’t hesitate. “There are three. One leads back the way you came. One leads deeper into the manor.” Another pause. “And one leads to a conversation you will not be able to unhave.”

Snaxx went still for half a heartbeat, then exhaled through her nose, amusement glinting in her eyes. “That last one sounds like the most interesting option.”

Elira didn’t immediately acknowledge the humor. She watched Snaxx the way people watch a move they’re deciding whether to allow. “You flirt.”

Snaxx placed a hand over her chest. “I prefer socially adaptive communication.”

“Still flirting.”

“Only if you’re helping it misbehave.”

A pause, sharper now, less conversational. Elira’s voice lowered slightly. “You retrieved my key.”

“I did.”

“You entered my private suite without permission.”

“With minimal resistance.”

“You’re not behaving like a thief.”

“And you’re not reacting like someone offended by that,” Snaxx countered.

The silence that followed was measured rather than tense. Elira stepped forward just enough to subtly alter the shape of the space between them. “You are correct,” she said quietly.

Snaxx blinked. That shouldn’t have carried weight. It did. “I am not upset,” Elira continued. “I am assessing.”

Snaxx’s smile thinned slightly. “Oh,” she murmured.

A flicker that showed a tiny amount of amusement crossed Elira’s expression, but it was controlled immediately. “You expected anger.”

“I expected consequences,” Snaxx corrected.

“There will be consequences.” A pause. Then, quieter: “Just not the ones you are imagining.”

The humor didn’t break. It rerouted. Snaxx studied her properly, Elira had this stillness and control, the way she even stood routed the silence around her.

“...You were watching me before I entered,” Snaxx said slowly.

Elira offered no denial. “I was aware of your approach.”

“That’s a polite way of saying yes.”

“It is a precise way of saying yes,” Elira corrected.

Snaxx gave a quiet, reluctant laugh. “Fair.” A beat. Then, softer: “Why?”

Elira regarded her for a long moment. The room didn’t interfere. “Because you do not take things at face value,” she said.

Snaxx raised a brow. “That sounds like a compliment.”

“It is an observation.”

“Still feels like one.”

Elira’s gaze held steady. “Do not confuse observation with intent.”

Snaxx smiled again, but smaller now, sharper at the edges. “Too

late,” she said.

That made Elira pause just briefly, and within in that pause, something subtle shifted decisively in the room. “You are still deciding whether this is a theft,” Elira said quietly.

Snaxx met her gaze without hesitation. “And you are still deciding whether I’m leaving.”

Neither moved first. Neither yielded space. Just two people standing on opposite sides of something neither had named yet.

Elira finally spoke. “You are not wrong.”

“About what?”

“Either.”

The air tightened once more, but not with tension, rather with alignment. As if the room itself had accepted a direction. Snaxx exhaled softly. “...This is going to be a problem.”

“Yes,” Elira said. A beat. Then, almost imperceptibly: “It already is.”

And for the first time since Snaxx had stepped into House Varnis, it no longer felt like she had broken in. It felt like she had arrived exactly where she was expected to be.

3

The Gap

For a long moment after Elira spoke, neither of them moved.

It already is.

The words settled into the room, carrying a truth that felt older than their arrival. Rain whispered against the balcony stone. Below them, the masquerade continued; music rising faintly through the floors, laughter spilling from rooms full of people who thought they were attending the important part of the evening.

They weren't. The true heart of the evening was here, in the quiet stillness between them, in the dangerous little space where neither was willing to step back first.

Snaxx leaned lightly against the wardrobe, arms folded, studying Elira with an open interest most people learned to hide for survival. Snaxx hid little; it was one of her more concerning qualities. "Well," she said at last, her voice low and amused, "this is usually the part where people either kiss me or threaten me."

Elira did not blink. "That says alarming things about your life."

"Only exciting things."

"I am unconvinced."

Snaxx smiled. There it was again, that impossible balance Elira carried. Controlled enough to make every word feel deliberate, but never so cold that it felt distant. Like warmth that had simply been taught better manners. Frankly, it was unfair. Snaxx had robbed easier people.

She pushed off the wardrobe and stepped a little closer, slow enough to remain a choice. "And which are you leaning toward, Lady Varnis?"

Elira's gaze followed her. "Threats are more efficient."

"Disappointing."

"Practical."

"Still disappointing."

That earned the faintest shift at the corner of Elira's mouth. Not quite a smile, yet it was close enough to be dangerous. Snaxx noticed immediately. "Ah," she said softly. "There you are."

Elira sighed, the sound carrying years of patience worn thin by exactly this kind of person. "You are exhausting."

“And yet,” Snaxx said, “you invited me into your bedroom.”

“I invited you into a test.”

“That is not how I plan to describe it later.”

“That,” Elira replied, “is exactly why I am concerned.”

Snaxx pressed a hand dramatically to her chest. “I’m wounded.”

“No,” Elira said calmly. “You are persistent. Different medical category.”

The room felt lighter now. Not safe, never that, but easier to breathe in. Which somehow made it more dangerous. This was how people got attached: not through grand gestures but through small moments of being seen and not dismissed, of someone simply staying.

Elira turned, walking slowly back toward the desk where the silver key still rested beside the note. She picked it up, turning it once between her fingers. “The key,” she said, quieter now, “was never the test.”

Snaxx leaned against the wardrobe once more, watching her. “I suspected as much. Most women don’t make me break into their rooms just for trinkets.”

Elira ignored that with visible effort. “It was never about whether you could steal it. I already knew you could.”

Snaxx’s attention sharpened. “Oh?”

Elira met her eyes. "I wanted to know what you would do when you realized you were already inside someone else's design." The words settled differently this time, less like a challenge and more like the truth.

Snaxx tilted her head. "And what was the correct answer?"

Elira considered her for a moment. Then, "You gave it back." Simple. No flourish. Somehow heavier because of it.

Snaxx let out a quiet breath. "That almost sounded like trust."

"It sounded like observation."

"I still think it was trust."

Elira set the key back down. "I think," she said, "you enjoy surviving by forcing people to underestimate your seriousness."

Snaxx grinned. "It saves time."

"And creates paperwork."

"Only for other people."

That, finally, made Elira smile.

Small. Brief. Real. It changed her face more than it should have. Snaxx noticed immediately and, self-preservation clearly not her strongest skill, said: "You should do that more often."

Elira looked at her. "Smile?"

“Yes. It’s devastating. Very unfair. I feel manipulated.”

“I will take that under advisement.”

“Please don’t. I’m trying to remain professionally compromised.”

The silence that followed was softer. Shared rather than empty. Then something shifted in the manor. A low, resonant sound moved through the walls themselves. It was heavy, deliberate. The mirror darkened. The candle on the desk flickered once. Every ward in the room seemed to inhale.

Elira’s expression changed instantly. All softness gone. Focus returned like a blade being drawn. “That,” she said calmly, “would be the reason I hired you.”

Another tremor rolled beneath the floorboards.

Snaxx straightened. “...I’m guessing haunted architecture?”

Elira was already moving for the door. “Worse,” she said, glancing back once. “Family architecture.”

Despite everything, Snaxx smiled. Because apparently, this was what counted as foreplay now. She followed.

* * *

The tension from Elira’s room didn’t vanish. It reorganized itself, it felt less confrontational now and more like a lock that had accepted a new key. Elira opened a service door and stepped through into a different part of House Varnis entirely. Not

luxury. Control made physical.

The room beyond was compact, deliberate, and hidden behind the elegance of the East Wing like a blade sewn into formalwear. A large table dominated the center, covered in layered maps of Pamerial and the surrounding noble estates.

Pins and dark string connected names, movements, obligations, and betrayals with the quiet intimacy of someone who trusted paper more than people. Wax seals sat broken beside opened correspondence.

Along one wall, a chalkboard listed names, times, and coded shorthand whose meaning seemed to shift with prolonged staring. Another rack held lockpicks, sealing stamps, false signets, vials, disguises, and several things Snaxx recognized immediately and decided not to comment on. A narrow spiral staircase in the corner disappeared downward into the manor's service corridors.

This was not where guests were brought. This was where decisions became consequences. Snaxx stepped inside slowly. Elira moved through the room like she belonged to its structure more than its furniture. She didn't sit. She organized presence, her measured, but deliberate attention flicking briefly toward Snaxx.

Snaxx found that very attractive. Leaning against the edge of the map table, she said: "So this is where you keep the real personality."

Elira did not look up from the papers she was adjusting. "This is where I keep the version of myself that survives relatives."

“Even better.”

That earned the faintest pause. Not quite approval. Close enough. Snaxx’s gaze moved across the chalkboard. One section stood out immediately:

EVENT WINDOW — MIDNIGHT TO 3 AM

STABILITY WINDOW — POST 3:10 AM

And beneath it, circled twice in dark black chalk:

UNACCOUNTED GAP (REPEAT OCCURRENCE)

That was the kind of phrase thieves either loved or died around. Sometimes both.

She pointed. “That feels like the reason I’m here.”

Elira stepped beside her. “Yes.” She took a strip of black chalk from a tray and drew a precise circle around the words. The mark smoked faintly as it settled into the board, it was not decoration, but an anchor. “This is not a ghost problem. Not a theft problem. Not even strictly a Varnis problem.”

Her finger moved to the map, indicating three points: the ballroom, the gallery, the service corridors below. “These spaces overlap during the masquerade. Movement, visibility, access. They should create noise.” Her finger tapped once. “Instead, something appears in the absence between them.”

Snaxx frowned slightly. “The gap.”

“The gap,” Elira confirmed, turning toward her. “This estate is layered with old ward architecture. Some inherited, some improved, and some left behind by ancestors who should have been supervised more closely.”

“Family magic,” Snaxx said. “Always the healthiest kind.”

Elira ignored that with experience. “One of the old protections is a permanent variation of *Guards and Wards*. It twists perception: corridors obscure themselves, doors appear where they shouldn’t, people arrive in places they didn’t intend to reach. It’s a nightmare.”

“Romantic.” Snaxx scoffed.

Elira shot her a look. “The problem is that someone is using the ward structure deliberately, not breaking it, but guiding it.” She pointed again to the circled note. “They’re creating gaps.”

Snaxx straightened. Not from danger, but from sudden interest. “So, we find the person?”

“No.” Elira reached into a narrow drawer, placing two objects on the table: a small black glass bead, warm to the touch, and a folded strip of paper sealed with dark wax. “We find the route.” She slid the bead toward Snaxx. “You’ll go to the gallery during peak masquerade. Watch for misplaced movement. Patterns that correct themselves. Places people avoid without knowing why.”

Snaxx picked up the bead. “And if I find it?”

“Break this.” She nodded toward the bead. “It forces the estate’s wards to notice everything at once.”

Snaxx turned it between her fingers. “And whatever is hiding

stops being hidden.”

“Yes.” Elira paused, lowering her voice. “This is where most people panic.” Their eyes met. “Try not to.”

Snaxx’s smile came back, thin and a little dangerous. “Careful, Lady Varnis. You’re starting to sound like you trust me.”

Elira held her gaze for a long second before saying, “I trust competence.” She sighed. “You’re still applying for the rest.” That should not have felt like flirting. It absolutely did.

Snaxx tucked the bead away, then crossed to the disguise kit. If she was walking into a noble masquerade, she would at least look expensive doing it. She worked quickly, starting with her posture. Less rogue, more guest who absolutely belonged and simply chose not to explain herself.

A dark half-mask with a delicate crack near one edge. Muted colors, refined lines. Enough elegance to disappear in plain sight. Enough danger to remain herself.

When she finished, she turned. Elira looked at her, and for one brief second, she truly saw Snaxx. Her look did not seem like it was professional, or even strategic. Then, smoothly: “Impressive.”

Snaxx grinned. “That sounded suspiciously like admiration.”

“It sounded like an observation.”

“Mm. Still think it was admiration.”

Elira stepped aside, clearing the doorway. "Gallery peak is approaching." As Snaxx passed, Elira spoke again, quieter: "Don't mistake visibility for safety."

Snaxx paused beside her. Close enough now to smell jasmine again beneath the clean edge of rain and old paper. She smiled without looking away. "I was hoping you'd say something dramatic before I left."

Elira's expression didn't waver. "I expect you back alive."

The words landed harder than anything dramatic could have.

Snaxx held her gaze, then smiled softer this time. "Dangerous thing to say to a woman trying to impress you."

And with that, she stepped out into the gallery, where masks drifted past one another in practiced patterns, laughter rising and falling in waves that never quite reached anything real. Music bled up from the ballroom below, steady enough to keep people swaying, soft enough to hide behind.

* * *

Snaxx stepped into the flow without breaking stride. She let the room take her without a fight. That was always the trick: don't fight a place like this. Let it carry you until something felt wrong enough to matter. Her eyes moved lazily, as people expected them to, scanning faces, hands, jewelry worth stealing later, doors, and servants moving like they'd rather be invisible.

Nothing urgent. Nothing worth the effort, until there was something tugging at the edge of her attention. Not a sound, or even the movement of the dancers, just... a rhythm slipping.

She didn't turn toward it, didn't need to. Instead, she let herself drift past, brushing the edge of whatever it was without looking directly.

A couple beside her broke into laughter that was too loud, too sudden. As they did, they stepped sideways. Both the same direction, at the same time, without speaking. Snaxx's gaze flicked for a heartbeat. Then away.

"...Huh."

She kept walking, not slowing, but now listening with her whole body. Another guest crossed her path, nearly shoulder-checking her before veering off at the last second. It all seemed too clean, too easy, as if the room had made the decision for them.

Snaxx adjusted her pace, letting the current carry her back through the same stretch without making it obvious she'd noticed anything.

That's when it happened. A masked figure moved ahead of her, close enough to touch. They stepped forward and didn't turn. Snaxx's brow twitched, just slightly, as the figure kept going. They aimed straight ahead, then simply they weren't there anymore.

She took another step before stopping, as though the realization had arrived half a second late. She didn't spin or react, just settled near a column, one shoulder resting against it as if she'd paused for no reason. Her eyes tracked the space where the figure had been.

"...Alright," she murmured under her breath, voice low and

thoughtful, “that’s interesting.”

Only then did she allow herself to truly look towards where the figure was. Her eye landed on a section of wall that shouldn’t have mattered, and on it, a portrait. Old, severe, it watched the room as if disapproving of everything. Its frame, cracked at one edge, was easy to miss. This explained why everyone did.

Snaxx tilted her head slightly, studying it now with quiet focus. A faint grin crept in. “You weren’t supposed to stand out, were you?”

Her hand brushed her pocket, feeling the bead. She didn’t take it out. Too early to start breaking things. Elira had been very clear about that. Break it, and the wards wouldn’t just notice the room, but they’d notice *everything*. Including her. Including who was standing on the other end of it.

Snaxx huffed a quiet breath through her nose. “...yeah,” she murmured, “let’s not announce ourselves just yet.”

Her fingers slipped away from the bead, leaving it where it was. Waiting.

“Let’s not announce ourselves just yet,” she murmured, and stepped back into the gallery flow. Her mask tilted just enough to change how she was seen, less observer, more participant. She angled her path slightly more direct. Just enough to see what happened when she didn’t play along.

“Let’s see if you push back.”

Snaxx pushed off the column like she’d lost interest. Which,

to anyone watching, she had. She drifted back into the crowd, letting it carry her slowly, unhurried, another masked body with nowhere urgent to be. Guests moved through the space in soft currents: laughter, conversation, drifting silk and wine.

Every so often, someone angled too close to that quiet stretch of wall. And every time something small went wrong. A step that didn't land where it should have. A shoulder that turned before the mind caught up. A conversation that wandered off without anyone remembering why it stopped.

Snaxx let herself follow the crowd toward it, caught between two guests arguing about something unimportant. One of them nearly bumped her shoulder. She adjusted without thinking, letting herself slide forward with them. They reached the space, and peeled away, like they'd always meant to.

She felt it then, just not with her eyes, but with her balance. A faint pressure at the edge of movement, like the room nudging her weight just slightly off center, trying to make her turn. She corrected immediately. "Yeah," she muttered. "You're pushy."

Another step, and the pressure returned. Stronger now, but still careful, as if there was a hand at her back trying to steer her politely out of a conversation she wasn't invited into. Snaxx exhaled slowly through her nose, and slowed her pace. Let the crowd pass. Watched instead of walking.

She saw it again. Approaching the wall there was a masked guest. Moving with a different rhythm, heavier and more certain. They reached the space without hesitation, correction, or drift. They just kept going.

Snaxx's attention sharpened. "...There you are."

She didn't move directly behind them, as that was too obvious. Instead she let the room carry her along the edge of their path, close enough that if they turned, she'd already be there by coincidence. The guest stepped forward. The space reacted, but not to resist. It accepted them. No push, no correction. They simply continued forward and vanished through the portrait without acknowledging it was a threshold.

Snaxx didn't stop. She adjusted her pace mid-step, drifting into the same rhythm they'd used without realizing they'd set one. Her foot crossed the edge, and the room decided she belonged there too.

"...Gah," she breathed softly.

The other side wasn't a room. It was just... the next place. A narrow stone corridor, old enough that the air felt pressed into shape by years of use rather than design. The sound of the gallery didn't follow her through. It simply stopped at the threshold, like it had no interest in continuing.

Snaxx stayed still for a moment, letting her eyes adjust. She looked back: no portrait, no seam, just wall. She exhaled softly and stepped on. Slow. Easy. Like she already belonged where she was going.

The corridor carried her without resistance. Its slope was almost imperceptible at first, a gentle descent that only revealed itself in the rhythm of her steps. The air shifted as she went deeper, it was not colder or warmer, just more contained, like the building had begun to hold its breath.

She didn't hurry. Haste belonged to people asking permission

from their surroundings.

She had no interest in that kind of conversation. A faint draft passed through the stone ahead, threading through gaps too old to be called cracks. It didn't feel like wind so much as circulation moving through a system that had been left running long after its purpose had been forgotten.

Her fingers rested loosely near her side. Close enough to her dagger to remind her it was there, but not close enough to suggest fear. After a while, the corridor shifted. Not dramatically. Nothing announced itself. It simply widened into a small landing space, where the stone changed tone beneath her feet, as though a different set of hands had worked this section of the manor long ago.

Here, the structure paused. Not ending. Just reconsidering.

On the far side, the passage split into two directions. The left corridor sank slightly lower, ceiling pressing down in places where stone had settled unevenly. The air there felt disturbed. The kind of disturbed that was recently passed through, not stayed in. The right corridor was cleaner. Straighter. Maintained.

Snaxx stopped at the fork. She didn't choose immediately. She listened instead.

Somewhere beyond the stone, something moved, the sound was not loud or clear, but enough to suggest rhythm where there should have been stillness. A pattern that didn't belong to either corridor.

Her head tilted. "...There you are."

Not accusation. Recognition.

Her weight shifted once, subtle and final, and she took the left corridor. No hesitation marked the decision. No ceremony followed it. Only movement forward, as though she had always been meant to continue in that direction and the world had simply taken its time agreeing.

Breaking the Rhythm

The corridor carried her deeper, then something shifted, not in the stone, but in the way the space held itself. Snaxx slowed, just a fraction.

The air felt used, like someone had been standing in it too long.

She kept walking anyway. "...you're bad at hiding," she said under her breath, voice easy, unimpressed. "thought you should know."

The corridor widened ahead without warning. No transition, just space where there hadn't been any. Snaxx stepped into it and stopped.

Three figures waited, spread across the room as if they'd been there long enough to settle into it. They wore hoods over their faces, not ballroom masks, with no decoration or performance, only clean, practical shapes.

Their posture said enough. Snaxx let her eyes move over them

once. Spacing. Hands. Weight. "...Oh," she said softly. "You're not lost."

One of them tilted their head slightly. "You're not the one we expected."

Snaxx huffed a quiet breath. "Yeah. Starting to get that."

Her weight shifted onto one hip, casual on the surface, ready underneath. She glanced between them again. "You've been standing here a while. Too still for a random hallway. Too quiet for a mistake." A beat. "You're waiting for Lady Varnis"

Silence. That was answer enough.

The second figure spoke, voice low. "You should leave."

Snaxx looked at them like they'd said something mildly inconvenient. "Yeah," she said. "not really how my night's going." Her hand brushed her pocket for a second checking if the bead still there. She didn't take it out yet.

Instead she leaned forward slightly, as if letting them in on something. "You picked a weird place to set a trap. Narrow approach, no exit I can see, and you're all standing like you don't expect a fight." Her eyes swept across them. "Which tells me you're not here for me."

She straightened again, then her expression sharpened. "Bad news for you," she said, tone shifting to be something less casual now, it was more pointed. "you got me instead."

The third figure moved. Not much. Just enough. The space tightened around it. Snaxx didn't flinch. She took a step

forward, closing distance deliberately. “You waiting to kill her?” she asked plainly.

Her eyes locked onto the first figure. “See, now I’ve got a problem. Because she’s paying me, and I kind of like getting paid.” She rolled one shoulder, settling into herself. “So here’s what we’re going to do. You can tell me who you are, why you’re lurking in her manor, and what you think you’re going to accomplish...” A small pause. “...or you can try to stop me from walking past you.”

Silence, heavier now. The first figure spoke. “You don’t understand what you’ve stepped into.”

“Yeah,” Snaxx said. “I do. I stepped into something meant for someone else.” Her fingers flexed once at her side. “Now you deal with me.”

The air shifted. This time without pretending otherwise. The corridor tightened. The space closed ranks. Snaxx didn’t move. Didn’t reach for the bead. Didn’t draw her dagger.

She just stood there, meeting them head-on. Because whatever this was, it had been built for Elira, and now it had to deal with someone who played by different rules.

Silence broke the moment they committed to it.

The first attack announced itself with absence. One instant the space between Snaxx and the nearest figure existed normally, and then it didn’t. She moved on instinct, body dropping a fraction lower before her mind finished identifying why. A blade cut through where her ribs had been a heartbeat ago. It

passed so close she felt the pressure drag along her side without ever fully touching her.

She twisted hard, letting momentum carry her out instead of resisting it. Her boot scraped stone as she pivoted. The second figure was already there.

Not closing distance. Removing it.

Snaxx barely had time to bring her dagger up. The impact hit harder, it was less a clash of steel, more like her arm meeting a decision that refused to move. Pain flashed up her forearm, sharp enough to tighten her breath. "*Kahnen*—" she started, then bit it off and shoved instead: a short, brutal push with her shoulder, not elegant, just enough to interrupt their rhythm. The figure staggered half a step.

Half a step was everything.

Snaxx slipped into the gap they hadn't realized they'd opened. The third movement came from her blind side. She felt it before she saw it, there was again a shift in the air, a tiniest tightening along her spine. She dropped forward instead of turning, letting the strike pass over her back. Stone cracked somewhere behind her as it hit empty space and overcommitted.

She rolled her weight forward, came up low, and drove her elbow into the closest figure's midline. Not graceful. Effective. The impact bent them just enough to break their timing. That mattered more than damage.

She exhaled sharply through her nose, resetting her stance before her body could decide to be tired. Her forearm was still complaining. She ignored it.

Two of them moved again, tighter this time, coordinated. They weren't trying to overpower her, but they were trying to remove her ability to choose. One came high, one came low. Snaxx read it in the fraction of a heartbeat before it finished forming.

She stepped into the low strike instead of away from it, risking contact on her own terms. The blade skimmed past her thigh close enough to burn heat into the air beside it. At the same time, she raised her dagger just enough to catch the upper strike off-line, which was not stopping it, but rather redirecting it, turning the angle so it no longer mattered where it landed.

Steel scraped against something heavier than metal, it was the intent that was heavier being forced to change direction mid-thought. It still shoved her back a step. She used it. Her heel slid, but she controlled the fall into motion, turning backward pressure into a pivot that brought her out of their overlap zone instead of deeper into it.

Her breathing had tightened. Not panic. Pure focus, the kind that starts to burn at the edges.

Snaxx dragged her wrist across her lower lip without looking away from them. "You're fast," she said, voice rougher now. Less teasing. "But you're still thinking in turns."

She lifted her dagger slightly unthreateningly, just ready. "That's where you're wrong."

They moved again, all of them together. Not three attacks, but one coordinated decision. Snaxx struck first. Straight into it. Not to win. To break timing.

Her shoulder took the edge of the first strike. The pain flaring clean and immediate, bright enough to make her vision blur

for half a second. “Damn it,” she breathed, and kept moving, let it carry her forward instead of knocking her back. Her dagger came up in the same motion, not cutting, not killing, just forcing space where space wasn’t supposed to exist. The second impact clipped her side and she felt it differently from the others. It was deeper, duller, the kind of hit that wouldn’t announce itself properly until later. She hissed through her teeth and pressed on, because now she was inside their rhythm, and inside rhythm, systems could be disrupted.

She shoved forward again close enough now to see the way their masks didn’t quite reflect light correctly. Close enough to feel how their movements weren’t reacting to her, but to a shared understanding of where she *should* be next.

That was the weakness. Not strength. Assumption.

Snaxx drove her elbow forward again, harder, forcing one of them to break formation just to avoid taking the hit clean. That break rippled. Not dramatically. But enough, enough to breathe, enough to reset, enough to stop being something they were executing against and start being something they had to adjust for.

She exhaled slowly. Shoulders rising and falling once.

“You don’t get to wrap this up nice.”

She stopped trying to match them. She let the next movement come in fully. The first intruder committed forward directly, it was efficient, built to end distance instead of fight it. Snaxx stepped just off-line at the last possible moment, letting the blade pass so close it dragged cold air across her ribs. Her shoulder followed immediately, not away from danger but into

the space the attacker had just abandoned.

Her elbow drove in hard. The intruder folded mid-step, momentum collapsing under them. They hit the stone hard and stayed down.

Snaxx was already turning, and the turn cost her. Her shoulder had pulled wrong, causing her movement to be shorter than she needed it to be. The second one had already adjusted, coming in diagonal, catching her mid-rotation. She saw it too late to avoid cleanly, so she took it: a sharp strike to her upper arm, the same arm that had already been complaining since the first exchange. The pain this time was not something she could file away neatly. It arrived loud and stayed.

“Hells—” The word came out before she could stop it. She twisted into the impact anyway, using it instead of resisting, stepping inside their reach while they were still completing the swing.

Her dagger came up, not to block, but to ruin their line. Steel met steel once. A controlled deflection, their weapon sliding just far enough off-course that their center opened for a fraction of a second.

That was enough.

Snaxx drove forward, shoulder first, collapsing their structure before their brain could correct it. The second intruder dropped hard, breath gone from their body in a way that didn’t look recoverable.

She stood over them and breathed. Just breathed. The arm was wrong in a way that was going to get worse before it got better, and the side was starting to make itself known properly

now that the immediate crisis had paused long enough for her body to notice. She rolled the shoulder once, felt it catch, stopped rolling it.

She turned to the last one.

The third hadn't rushed in. That was wrong in a different way, the figure did not show hesitation, but rather coordination. They stood a few steps back, watching the fallen bodies like they were confirming procedure rather than reacting to loss.

Snaxx shifted her stance slightly. "Your timing's off," she said flatly. "You're not moving like you care about winning."

The intruder didn't answer immediately. Then: "We were not instructed to win."

Snaxx's eyes narrowed a fraction. "That's usually the part where people start improvising."

"No." The intruder's gaze moved, but it was not to Snaxx, it was just past her. Toward the corridor she'd come from. Snaxx noticed it. The direction of priority. Not her. Something beyond. "We are maintaining continuity," they said quietly.

Snaxx tilted her head slightly. "That's a weird way to say you're guarding a hallway."

"It is not a hallway," they replied. "It is a passage." The word landed heavier than it should have.

"From what?" Snaxx asked.

The intruder finally looked directly at her again. "For what remains contained." A pause. Then, quieter: "And for what must not be seen."

Snaxx tightened her grip. "There's a difference?"

The intruder didn't answer that directly. Instead: "If Elira Varnis enters this space, we are authorized to terminate her."

The words hit harder than any blade had.

"...You were sent here to kill her," Snaxx said slowly.

"Only if necessary," the intruder corrected. Another pause. "She is a deviation risk."

Snaxx let out a short, humorless breath. "That's a polite way of saying she's in the way." The intruder didn't react to that which told her more than words could. "So what's so important you'd burn your own people to keep it quiet?"

The intruder's expression tightened. "Preservation," they said. "Of House Varnis."

"That's not preservation," Snaxx said. "That's hiding something rotten and hoping it doesn't smell loud enough."

Silence.

"If it is exposed," the intruder said, quieter now, "House Varnis ceases to exist as it is known."

That changed the weight of everything. Not louder. Deeper.

Snaxx stared at them. "...And Elira doesn't know this?"

A pause. "She knows enough," the intruder said. "That is why she must not be allowed here."

That clarified something Snaxx didn't like. Elira wasn't just involved, *She was in the way*. "Family," Snaxx muttered under her breath. Not a question. A conclusion forming in pieces she didn't fully trust yet.

The intruder shifted their stance, not toward attack, it shifted towards resolution. "That is not a term we use."

Snaxx tightened her grip on her dagger again. "Yeah," she said. "You people keep saying things like that. Makes it worse, not better."

The intruder's gaze flicked once again toward the corridor Snaxx had come from, then back. "If Elira Varnis reaches this passage," they said, voice lowering, "she destabilizes what is contained here."

Snaxx's eyes narrowed. "She's already in her own house."

"No." A beat. "This estate is not hers alone."

That landed differently now, not because it was confusing, but because it sounded practiced. Something repeated until it stopped sounding strange. Snaxx shifted her weight. "You're starting to talk like the walls matter more than the people."

The intruder didn't deny it. Instead he exhaled once. "I will

return you to the perimeter.”

Snaxx barely had time to register the shift in tone. “What th—”

He moved with controlled efficiency, stepping just inside her guard, not to strike with a blade but to break her alignment. His forearm came up under her weapon arm, redirecting it just enough that her center line opened. Snaxx twisted immediately, trying to reset distance, but he was already there.

A second contact at her shoulder. Not a hit. A placement. Something pressed into a nerve point with deliberate precision. Her body reacted before she could choose otherwise. Strength drained from her grip for half a heartbeat.

That half heartbeat was everything.

The intruder caught her before she could recover fully, shifting his weight to guide her fall instead of letting her collapse uncontrolled. Snaxx’s last clear thought before impact was irritation. Not fear. Not panic.

Just— *cheap trick*.

Then the world tilted. Stone rushed up. Her vision snapped sideways. Everything went dark.

* * *

Snaxx came back to herself in pieces.

Sound first, music still rolling through the room like nothing had changed; then weight, stone under her back, cold enough to tell her she was lying down; her fingers moving before thought arrived.

No dagger. That was enough to make her open her eyes.

The Gallery.

Masks. Laughter. People pretending too hard at being important. Nobody looking at her. That told her more than anything else. Snaxx pushed herself up on one elbow, her movement was a little stiff, shoulder not quite happy about it, head slightly off balance, like someone had cut through her awareness and left without closing the door properly. She rolled it once, and winced as the pain interjected.

She sat up fully, slower than she wanted to, then leaned back against the column like she'd chosen to be there.

Around her, the crowd kept moving. A pair of guests drifted close enough to glance her way. "Too much wine?" one whispered, amused. The other gave a soft laugh and kept walking.

Snaxx didn't react. Let them think it. Let them make her small and harmless. Mistakes like that worked in her favor more often than they didn't.

She adjusted her posture, testing her shoulder. Still usable. Good enough. Her hand flexed. Empty. Right, that part came back next. Her eyes tracked the room, but she was not searching for answers, just exits, then movement, then the normal paths people used when they didn't think they were being watched. Snaxx exhaled through her nose. "...Fine," she murmured, and pushed herself fully upright.

Snaxx stayed standing longer than she needed to, not because she was unsteady, but because for a moment, she wasn't sure which direction counted as forward anymore.

Her shoulder pulled tight when she shifted her weight, a dull reminder that someone had been precise with her when she wasn't paying attention. She tested it again. Slow. Deliberate. It answered back wrong, but usable.

Around her, the Gallery kept moving like she was already accounted for. Masks drifted past. Laughter slipped between people who didn't look twice at her.

Going back was one option. Back to Elira with her controlled voice, the structure, the job that had started all of this before it became something heavier. She could walk out of here, report what she'd seen, let someone else pretend they understood it. Simple. Clean. The choice people made when they wanted to survive neatly.

Her fingers flexed once at her side.

Then there was forward. The place behind the portrait. The part of the house that stopped behaving like a room and started behaving like something she'd been moved through without a say in it. Where she hadn't just been stopped, she'd been taken apart in motion, set back down, and left to figure out what still lined up on its own.

That part mattered more. Not because it made sense. Because it didn't. Snaxx's jaw tightened. Elira would call it the job. The intruders would call it the passage. Both sounded like people explaining something after the fact. She didn't like after the fact.

Her weight shifted once. Away from the exit. Away from the idea of going back to order.

“Gonna regret this later,” she murmured. And started forward.

She stepped straight into the portrait the same way she had before, like the frame was just another stretch of bad judgment in a building full of them. No resistance. No sound. The surface took her without changing shape, like it had always been a doorway pretending to be paint and wood.

Then it let go.

Stone returned under her feet. The corridor was there, narrow and old, pressed into shape by time rather than design. The Gallery was gone behind her without ceremony. Snaxx exhaled once through her nose, as her shoulder gave a dull reminder as she adjusted her weight, but she didn't stop to check it.

This time, she didn't hesitate before starting forward. Not fast. Not cautious. Forward, with purpose instead of curiosity.

The air changed with a shift in pressure ahead, as if the corridor had more people in it than it was admitting. Snaxx slowed. Not stopping. Just listening with her body.

There.

Footsteps. Then low, structured voices that were not deep in conversation, but in coordination.

She stepped out of the corridor into the wider junction space. This time it wasn't empty, it was occupied, by more than what she was expecting.

Snaxx didn't announce herself. She just let her weight settle into place where it wouldn't betray her first movement.

The one she remembered most clearly was there again. He was the tall one with too-clean posture, the kind of fighter who didn't waste motion, every step approved somewhere before it happened. Like the earlier fight hadn't been resolved. Just paused.

Snaxx didn't know his name. Didn't care enough to ask.

Then movement at the edge of the space, a figure slipping out through the architecture of the passage, not fleeing or hiding, but simply leaving as though they already knew exactly how much attention they deserved. Snaxx caught only a fragment: dark fabric, a measured pace, no reaction to the bodies on the ground. And then they were gone.

She didn't chase, as it hadn't fully registered identity yet, but something in the way they moved lingered with her, not as fear or confusion, but as a quiet internal note that they didn't belong in the same category as everything else in the room.

The last intruder's eyes shifted toward her. "You returned," he said.

"Wasn't done."

The air between them tightened, not through magic or reaction, but through people deciding where violence would sit in the next few seconds.

"You should not have come back alone," he said.

Snaxx let out a short breath through her nose. “Yeah. People keep saying that right before I stop listening.” Her weight shifted, but it wasn’t into a stance yet, just readiness returning to her body despite the shoulder still pulling wrong.

The intruder stepped forward once. Measured. Controlled. “This passage is not yours to correct.”

Snaxx’s eyes flicked briefly toward the corridor behind him. Then back. “Didn’t come back for you. Or for this place.” Her shoulder shifted slightly as she adjusted her weight, pain now something she had to budget around. “I came back because Elira doesn’t walk into something like this blind. And I’m not letting her do it alone just because it gets messy for me.”

A faint pause. Her mouth tightened. “If I die figuring it out, fine.” Then, quieter, flat and certain: “But I’m still figuring it out.”

The intruder didn’t answer. And in that gap, Snaxx moved.

Not a charge. Just closing distance before the conversation could turn into something more organized than she liked.

Pain flared in her shoulder as she accelerated, feeling louder than before, less something she could budget around and more something she had to drag herself through. She used it anyway. Less clean movement, more committed one. The intruder reacted immediately, stepping into her path. They met at mid-distance.

His first contact wasn’t a strike. It was a controlled, short pivot into her injured side, just enough pressure at the shoulder joint

to steal power from her arm. It was the same arm. Of course it was. Snaxx felt her movement shorten instantly, like someone had cut a line she'd been relying on harder than she'd realized.

Her grip loosened for half a breath; he followed through immediately, controlled, efficient, with nothing wasted. A second adjustment, his forearm sliding in tight against her upper body, forcing her balance to fold instead of break. Her foot caught wrong on the stone. The world dipped.

Not dramatic. *Just wrong angle becoming gravity.*

Snaxx hit the ground hard enough to feel it in her ribs on the same side that had taken the clip earlier. "Damn—" she got out, and then the breath was gone and there wasn't room for words.

Her arm didn't respond cleanly when she tried to push up.

"Stay down," he said. Not angry. Not loud. Certain.

Snaxx lay there for a moment longer than she wanted to, breathing through it, taking stock. The arm was genuinely unhappy now. The ribs had joined the conversation. The rest of her was functional but voting for a strong opinion on the floor's merits as a resting place.

She ignored the vote. "Yeah," she muttered. "You say it like you're used to people listening."

She let that sit for half a beat longer than was safe. Then tilted her head from the ground, eyes half-lidded. "Tell me, does that usually work right before someone proves you wrong, or after?"

Not a challenge shouted. Timing disruption. The kind that makes someone adjust their certainty a fraction too early.

His weight came down again, pinning her shoulder properly, locking the joint just enough that any real force would risk tearing it before it helped her. Her body stilled.

Not surrendered. Just temporarily outvoted.

The intruder leaned in slightly, adjusting his grip with clinical precision. "You are persistent."

Snaxx blinked once, slowly, then looked at him like she was counting something behind his words. "That's usually the part people notice right before they mess up."

Her free hand was pinned awkwardly beneath her, half-trapped between stone and her own body. Useless, almost. She stopped fighting upward. Instead she shifted sideways just a fraction, letting her shoulder stay compromised, letting him think she had nothing left in that angle. His pressure adjusted with her movement, following, correcting.

Exactly what she wanted, because now he was close.

Too close.

Snaxx turned her head slightly away from him and looked past him. At his waist, there was a shape that didn't belong in a clean uniform.

Her dagger. Not discarded, nor dropped. Tucked into his belt line like something recovered and then forgotten.

Snaxx's breath didn't change, but her focus did. "Oh," she said quietly.

Not surprise. Recognition.

The intruder shifted, noticing the change too late. Snaxx moved.

Not up, not out. In. She let her pinned shoulder take the strain for one more second. That was long enough to give him confidence in the hold. Then she twisted her body into the angle he was controlling. Pain spiked through her arm, sharp and immediate and genuinely unpleasant. She ignored it.

Her free hand shot down and forward, not towards escape, but toward his waist. Fingers closed around the hilt. Not elegant, nor even trained, it was right timing under bad conditions.

His grip tightened immediately, realizing what changed.

Too late.

Snaxx brought the blade up between them in the same motion she used to drag herself partially out from under his weight. He tried to adjust. She was already inside the correction.

The dagger found the open space he wasn't protecting.

The intruder froze for half a breath, not from shock, but from understanding the exact moment the situation had moved past recovery. Snaxx held eye contact for a beat. Then pulled the blade free. He collapsed sideways, control leaving his body all at once.

Silence dropped into the corridor again.

Snaxx stayed where she was for a moment longer than necessary, one hand flat on the stone, not quite ready to trust her legs with the full weight of the decision. Her shoulder was going to be a real problem by morning. The ribs were already a problem now. She was going to feel every single one of these choices

tomorrow in specific and detailed ways.

Worth it. Probably.

She pushed herself upright, slow and deliberate, and looked down at the dagger in her hand, then her free hand moved to her pocket. Not reaching for anything, just checking. The bead was gone.

Not lost, she knew the difference. The pocket wasn't torn, nothing had spilled. It was simply gone, the way those things went when they did what they were built to do. She'd felt it crack under his weight when he had her pinned, felt the small give of it through the fabric, and hadn't had the space to think about it until now.

Which meant Elira had felt it too.

Snaxx stood very still for a moment. The corridor was quiet. The junction space held nothing that moved. Somewhere deeper in the dark, whatever the intruder had been maintaining continuity for waited with the patience of something that had been waiting a long time already.

She was thinking about Elira in the operations room, feeling a thread go taut and then gone. Knowing the wards had just noticed everything at once. Knowing Snaxx had found the route, and not knowing anything else. Not what was here in the junction, nor how many, or even if the person she'd sent in was still standing.

Elira was already moving. Snaxx was certain of it, the same way she was certain of exits and sightlines, not because she had seen it, but because she understood how that particular woman

was built.

Elira was walking toward something she didn't have the full picture on.

Snaxx exhaled slowly through her nose. Her shoulder and ribs had opinions otherwise, but she ignored both and turned toward the corridor she'd come from.

She needed to get back, not to report or hand off the problem, she just needed to get there before Elira did something decisive without knowing what she was walking into.

She started back through the portrait, into the light.

Ordinary Silence

Elira felt it from the operations room.

Not loudly. The bead didn't announce itself the way a ward breach did. There was no flare, no alarm, no cascading alert through the estate's older systems. Just a single, clean severance, like a thread pulled taut and then gone. The kind of signal she'd designed to be unmistakable only to someone who knew exactly what they were listening for.

She was already on her feet before she'd finished understanding it.

The folio went under her arm. The masquerade coat came off, the darker one underneath already in place. She'd put this outfit on an hour ago, when the gap in the ward pattern had shifted from recurring anomaly to deliberate pattern. She'd been waiting, patiently, with the particular controlled tension of someone who has decided the next move and is simply allowing events to catch up to the decision.

The bead breaking meant Snaxx had found the route, and in the same moment the wards had noticed everything at once, tracking every movement through the passage, every person in the junction, every body in a space it had no business occupying.

What it did not tell her was whether Snaxx was still standing.

Elira did not run. Running through your own gathering drew questions she didn't have time to answer. She moved the way she always moved when the stakes were high enough that speed had to be hidden inside composure: purposeful, unhurried on the surface, everything underneath in motion. She took the service corridor rather than the gallery floor, the narrow passage behind the east wall that the staff used and the guests never noticed.

She was thinking about the bead. About the timing. About the three minutes it had taken her to reach the corridor entrance from the operations room, and what three minutes meant in a space where someone had already decided violence was an appropriate tool.

She turned the corner into the east passage and stopped.

Snaxx was there.

Still moving. That was the first thing Elira registered. It was not that she was standing, but that she was already in motion, already covering ground toward her, like stopping had simply not presented itself as a reasonable option. Dagger loose in her grip, shoulder sitting wrong, corridor dust on her coat and something darker at the hem that she either hadn't noticed or had decided wasn't worth her attention yet. Her eyes found

Elira before her feet did, sharp and immediate, taking stock of the situation the way someone does when they've learned that the first few seconds after a fight are when the next problem usually shows up.

The relief was something Elira did not fully acknowledge, even to herself. She simply allowed it to pass through her and set her expression back into order.

Snaxx reached her and stopped. Not cleanly, as she pulled up a little too fast, and has to redistribute her weight in a way that suggested her body had opinions about the shoulder that she was actively overruling. She looked at Elira the way she'd looked at the tavern table, at the estate map, at the locked door in the east corridor: like she was already three steps into figuring out what came next and had simply paused to check whether Elira was ahead of her or behind her on it.

Elira's gaze moved over her quickly. The shoulder. The hem. The way she was holding the dagger slightly lower than she probably intended, compensating without realizing it. Not cataloguing. Accounting.

"You're injured," she said.

"Mildly."

"That is not a medical unit of measurement."

"It is in my system," Snaxx said, sheathing the dagger carefully with her good arm doing most of the work, keeping her face neutral about it. "The bead... I didn't break it on purpose. They

had me down and it just went. Pocket got crushed. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Elira's voice was even. "It did exactly what it was designed to do. I felt it fire." A pause, smaller than it looked. "That's why I'm here."

Something moved in Snaxx's expression briefly, and then it was gone. She didn't comment on it. "Four of them. Three are staying put. The fourth got out, but I don't know when or who exactly, I was busy. But they were gone by the time I came back through."

Elira absorbed that without moving. The stillness of someone receiving a confirmation they had half-prepared for and were no less unhappy to hear. "And the passage itself?"

"Still open. Whatever's down there is still down there." Snaxx shifted her weight slightly, caught herself doing it, stopped. "There's something I need to tell you."

"Tell me while we move."

"Elira."

The use of her name without title made Elira stop. Snaxx didn't do it often. She'd learned, somewhere over the course of the evening, that it carried weight with this particular woman, not because it was presumptuous, but because it meant Snaxx had decided something mattered enough to be said plainly.

Elira turned fully toward her. Waiting.

Snaxx met her eyes. “The last one. Before the end. He told me—” A beat, her jaw tightening slightly. This was not for effect, the movement pulled something that was already sore. “If you walked into that passage, they had orders to kill you.”

The corridor was very quiet.

“Orders,” Elira repeated. The word came out precise, controlled, stripped of everything except its meaning.

“His word. Yeah.”

Elira was still for a moment that lasted slightly longer than stillness usually did. Then she looked away redirecting her gaze. She looked towards the corridor wall as though reading something written in the stone, some calculation being run behind her composed expression.

“They’ve known about the gap longer than I have,” she said quietly. Not to Snaxx. To herself, or to the corridor, or to whatever version of House Varnis she was currently accounting for. “I suspected someone was managing it deliberately. I did not know they had moved to this.”

“You suspected,” Snaxx said. “And you still sent me in alone.”

Elira’s eyes came back to her. “I sent you in because I believed the risk was informational. Not terminal.” A pause. “I was wrong about the degree.”

It wasn’t an apology. It wasn’t dressed like one. But there was something in it, it had a weight, a precision in the admission

that landed the way apologies sometimes did when they came from people who didn't give them casually.

Snaxx studied her for a moment. Something in her side twinged quietly as she breathed, but she kept her expression level. "Most people would've just said sorry."

"Most people were not wrong in a way that nearly got someone killed."

"Hm." Snaxx let that sit. "The one who got out, they did it as if they knew that place. Not like a guest, not like someone hired to stand in a corridor. Like they'd been down there before and were just coming back."

Elira's expression shifted. She felt something tightening at the corners of her mouth, a thought arriving that she didn't immediately share. "Describe the movement."

Snaxx thought about it for a second, which was not long, but it was just enough to find the right shape for it. "Like it was theirs," she said. "The way you walk through a room that's yours. Nobody looks at a place like that unless they own it."

That landed somewhere specific. Elira's expression didn't change, but her hand moved with a small, controlled motion, the folio shifting under her arm. She was thinking about a name. Snaxx didn't push. Some information arrived faster if you let the silence do the work.

"The passage," Elira said at last, "connects to a section of the

estate that was sealed during my father's tenure. Officially." The word officially carried its own quiet weight. "I have been trying to determine what it connects to for a few months. The gap in the ward pattern suggested something was being actively maintained down there. Not just preserved."

"Maintained by who?"

"That," Elira said, "is what I intend to find out." She looked at Snaxx directly. "Tonight."

A beat of silence.

"With me," Snaxx said. Not a question.

Elira looked at her. Not at her face, but at her shoulder, her side, the careful way she was standing. Something shifted in her expression, small and controlled, the kind of thing that would have been invisible an hour ago. Then she looked back up and didn't say what she was thinking.

"You know the route," she said. "You've been through the junction. You know what the passage does to movement and how to correct for it." Her voice was even, professional, laying out a case. Then, quieter: "And you came back when you didn't have to."

Snaxx was quiet for a moment. Outside, distantly, the masquerade music had started drifting up through stone and floor, the muffled sound of a party that had no idea what was happening one level beneath it.

"I want it on record," Snaxx said, "that the dinner we agreed

on should now include dessert. Emotional surcharge. Very standard.”

Something in Elira’s posture eased, subtle enough to miss unless watched carefully, and Snaxx had been watching. “That is not a recognized compensation structure.”

“I’m pioneering the field.”

“You are going to be the death of formal negotiation.”

“Only the boring kind.” Snaxx glanced toward the corridor that led back toward the gallery, then back to Elira. “You were already heading down there yourself. I can tell. Your coat’s different.” She tilted her head and stopped the movement a fraction before she would have rolled the shoulder with it. Old reflex. Bad idea right now. “So. Shall we?”

Elira looked at her for a moment with a particular look, the one that was still deciding how much to allow, still running the calculation between control and something that kept not behaving like a variable. Then she reached into the folio and drew out a thin strip of warded parchment, folded twice, sealed at the edge with dark wax. She also drew out a second, smaller item: a small vial, dark glass, stoppered with wax. She held it out without comment.

Snaxx looked at it. “What is it?”

“Ward-salve. It won’t fix anything, but it will keep the pain from making decisions for you.”

Snaxx took it, unstoppered it, and pulled the side of her tunic away from her skin without ceremony. The bruising along her ribs had already started to color, but she didn't look at it too long. She pressed the salve in with her thumb, cold first, then something quieter underneath, the pain stepping back a few feet and agreeing to wait. She tucked the tunic back, handed the vial back.

Elira pocketed it and said nothing. If she'd looked, she didn't mention it.

"Take this," Elira said, the parchment following. "If the passage attempts to redirect you, press it to the nearest wall. It won't stop the ward architecture, but it will anchor your sense of direction."

Snaxx took it. "And if it tries to redirect you?"

"I wrote it. It knows better."

Snaxx grinned. The ribs still hurt, but less. "That is genuinely the most attractive thing you've said all evening."

Elira turned toward the corridor without answering. Which was, Snaxx had come to understand, its own kind of answer.

* * *

The gallery was louder than she remembered. Or maybe it was just that things were louder now, her body's way of making itself known in quiet spaces. They came in from the service side and the noise hit first. There was music, the clink of crystal, and the low roll of voices performing a good evening. Snaxx

gave herself three breaths before she started moving once more.

Elira was already through beside her, already composing herself into the masquerade like slipping on a second coat. She didn't scan the room. She simply became part of it, and the room accepted her the way rooms always did: immediately and without question.

Snaxx took a different approach. She let herself drift into the current with her mask adjusted, and her shoulders loose, or as loose as one of them was willing to be right now. The salve was doing its job, the ribs manageable now as long as she breathed carefully and didn't do anything sudden. The shoulder was still a problem she was going to have a genuine conversation with later, but she'd found the angle that cost her the least and was using it.

She positioned herself half a step behind and to Elira's left. Close enough to be present, far enough to be deniable. The familiar geometry of moving through a room with someone, even if she'd only learned Elira's geometry tonight.

A guest drifted too close on her right side. She stepped left without thinking and the movement caught wrong, a flicker of something sharp through her ribs before the salve pushed it back down. She kept walking. Nobody noticed. That was the trick with crowds: they only saw what you gave them to see, and she wasn't giving them anything.

"They all know who you are," she said, low enough for only Elira to hear.

"They know what I am," Elira said, not slowing. "There is a distinction."

"Do they know what you're doing right now?"

"They know I am moving through my own estate during my own gathering. The details are mine."

"And if they knew the details?"

Elira's stride paused briefly, recalibrating rather than hesitating. "Some of them sent the people in the corridor," she said quietly. "I don't know which ones yet, so at present, they know nothing."

Snaxx glanced across the gallery as they moved past masks, laughter, and crystal catching light in practiced arcs. It was any of them, any collection of people who had looked at Elira and decided she was a problem needing a solution in a corridor beneath her own house. The anger arrived quietly, as it usually did for her. Not hot, just certain and useful. It made it easier to keep her pace even when there was something worth breaking it for.

She watched a man in a silver mask bow slightly as Elira passed. A woman in dark red touched her companion's arm and leaned in to murmur something, eyes tracking them across the room. A pair of guests near the east wall laughed too quickly at something, and then one of them glanced toward Elira and away again in the same motion. The room contained the small, involuntary tells of people performing indifference they didn't quite feel.

Snaxx catalogued all of it without turning her head. Old habit. In rooms like this, the ones who wanted to be invisible were usually the ones worth watching. The ones performing normalcy were harder, unlike if they'd rehearsed it. But rehearsal had its own rhythm, and rhythm was always something she could find if she looked long enough.

The shoulder twinged again as she shifted to let a guest pass. She absorbed it without breaking stride, without changing her expression, without doing anything except making a private note that she and the shoulder were going to need a serious conversation once this was over.

"You've done this before," she said quietly. "Walked through a room knowing someone in it wants you gone."

Elira didn't answer immediately. A guest stepped aside for her without being asked. She acknowledged it with a nod so fractional it barely qualified. "It is an occupational condition of House Varnis," she said at last. "You learn to treat it as weather."

"Weather you can predict?"

"Weather you can account for." A pause. "Prediction implies certainty. I've never had the luxury of certainty about this."

Snaxx considered that. There was something underneath it that was not bitterness exactly, but the particular flatness of someone who had made peace with a thing they hadn't chosen. She filed it beside the Velvet Choir mark, beside the operations room, beside every version of Elira that had surfaced over the course of the evening and refused to resolve into a single simple reading.

She didn't say anything. She kept walking.

The portrait was where she'd left it, severe and cracked at one corner, disapproving of everything in the gallery with the particular expression of someone who had been disapproving for long enough that it no longer required effort. Elira stopped beside it without any sign that she was surprised by its nature. Of course she wasn't.

"You've known about this," Snaxx said.

"I've known about the threshold. Not what it led to." Elira studied the frame for a moment, her expression thoughtful, but something in it that looked almost like grief held at a careful distance. "My father had this portrait commissioned and hung in this specific location thirty years ago. I always assumed it was eccentricity. He had a great deal of it."

"What changed your mind?"

"The gap," Elira said simply. "Once I understood the gap was deliberate, everything he placed in this estate started looking different. This portrait. The line on the map you noticed. The sealed section." She was quiet for a moment. "He built things to be found later. I simply did not know, until recently, that I was meant to find them."

"Or that someone else might find them first."

The pause that followed was brief and precise. "Yes," Elira said. "Or that." She glanced at Snaxx. "After you."

Snaxx looked at her. "That's the second time tonight you've sent me through this headfirst."

"You know the route."

"I also know what's waiting on the other side."

"Yes," Elira said. "Which is why I'd rather you enter ahead of me than behind." A pause. "I will be directly behind you. You will not be alone in there."

It was a small thing. It was also not a small thing. Snaxx held her gaze for a moment, then turned toward the portrait.

"For the record," Snaxx said, "I'm counting this as part of the hazard compensation."

"Noted," Elira said. "Go."

Snaxx stepped through.

The gallery fell away behind her, laughter, music, and conversation breaking off mid-note and mid-sentence. Stone closed in, and the air shifted again into that contained quality, old and pressurized, like something held in one shape for a very long time. The corridor was exactly as she had left it, narrow, sloping, dark in a way that felt deliberate rather than merely unlit.

A sound behind her. Elira stepping through.

Snaxx didn't look back. She listened instead to the footsteps settling onto stone, steady and unhurried, a quiet exhale as the threshold released her. Then silence, except for both of them

breathing in the same enclosed space.

“Still standing,” Snaxx said.

“I noticed.” Elira’s voice was closer than expected. She’d moved up quickly, closing the gap between them to something that was less about tactical spacing and more about simply not being separated. “How far to the junction?”

“Two minutes. The slope gets more obvious before it levels. Watch the fork, then we take the left corridor, not the right.”

“The right maintains itself. The left has been disturbed.”

“You can tell from here?”

“I can tell from the way the air moves,” Elira said. “The ward architecture breathes differently around spaces that have been recently used.” A pause. “It is difficult to explain to someone who doesn’t work with ward systems.”

“Try me.”

A brief quiet. Then: “You know how a room feels different after someone has been angry in it? The feeling that precedes understanding?”

Snaxx thought about the operations room, where the maps, string, and chalk lay on the table containing the version of Elira that survived relatives. “Yeah,” she said. “I know that.”

“Old ward architecture retains something similar. Not emotion. Intention. Spaces where people have moved with clear purpose feel different from spaces that have simply been passed through.” Another pause. “The left corridor has been used tonight by someone who knew exactly where they were going.”

“The one who got out.”

“Almost certainly.”

They moved in silence for a moment. The slope revealed itself gradually beneath their steps, the corridor narrowing and then widening again as it curved. Snaxx kept her pace even, the salve was doing its job, the ribs manageable now as long as she breathed carefully and didn't do anything sudden. The shoulder was a separate problem, still pulling wrong when she shifted her weight, but she'd found the angle that cost her the least and was using it.

Elira matched her pace without comment, without slowing to check on her, without doing anything that would require Snaxx to acknowledge she was being accommodated. It was the kind of consideration that didn't announce itself. Snaxx noticed it anyway.

“The third intruder,” Snaxx said. “Before the end. He said this estate is ‘not hers alone.’”

Elira didn't answer immediately. When she did, her voice was careful. “That is not a ward term. That is a position.” A pause. “Someone is making a claim on this estate through the passage rather than through any legitimate means. Which means they

know they would not survive the legitimate means.”

“Because you’d stop them.”

“Because I would have grounds to,” Elira said. The distinction, quiet as it was, carried its own weight. “And they know it.”

Snaxx thought about the figure moving through the junction without looking at the bodies. The measured pace. The absolute certainty of someone who had been in that space before and expected to be in it again. “This isn’t new,” she said. “Whatever they’re doing down here. They’ve been building to it.”

“Yes,” Elira said, quietly. “I believe so.”

“How long?”

A pause that lasted one full step, then two. “The ward irregularities began appearing approximately eight months ago. Subtle at first, it was the kind of thing you attribute to age, to settling, to the ordinary entropy of old enchantment. I have been maintaining this estate’s ward architecture since my father’s death six years ago. I know what ordinary entropy looks like.” Another step. “This was not that.”

“But you couldn’t prove it.”

“I could not locate it,” Elira said. “Which is a different problem. I knew something was being done deliberately. I did not know where the entry point was, or who was using it, or what they were moving toward. The gap kept appearing in the same

window, around midnight to three, and always disappearing cleanly before I could trace it to a source.” A brief quiet. “Tonight was the first time I had a reason to put someone inside the window rather than observe it from the outside.”

Snaxx absorbed that. “That’s why you came to the tavern yourself. Why it had to be someone specific.”

“I needed someone who could move through the estate unseen, read a space correctly, and make decisions without instruction.” A pause. “Someone who would not freeze when the space stopped behaving like a space.”

“High praise,” Snaxx said. “Very romantically phrased.”

“I am not known for romantic phrasing.”

“You’re known for it more than you think.” She kept her voice easy, light, the tone she used when she wanted someone to feel the ground was steady without announcing that it wasn’t. “The fourth one... the one who got out. They weren’t there for the fight. They were there to oversee it.”

“Yes.”

“Which means someone gave that order. Someone who knew you’d eventually find the passage and wanted insurance in place before you did.”

“Yes,” Elira said again. Quieter this time.

"That's not someone hired," Snaxx said. "That's someone patient. Someone who planned around you specifically."

Elira's jaw tightened, just fractionally. "I am aware of what it implies."

"I know." Snaxx didn't push further. Some information arrived faster if you let the silence do the work, and some things needed to be carried a little longer before they could be said out loud. She understood both.

Snaxx thought about the line on the estate map, the one too careful to be decorative, drawn by someone who had wanted to remember it and regretted it afterward. "Your father," she said. Not an accusation. Just the shape of it arriving.

"My father," Elira agreed. Quietly. The word carrying more than it had space for.

The landing appeared ahead, a small space where the stone changed tone, as though the corridor paused to reconsider. Beyond it, the fork split left and right, the air already feeling different between them.

Snaxx stopped at the edge of the landing, the motion costing her a little as pain caught in her shoulder when she pulled up short. She let out a quiet, controlled breath through her nose. Elira stopped beside her without comment. Close enough that Snaxx could feel the warmth of her presence against the corridor's cold.

Both of them looking at the same space. Both of them understanding, for the first time in the same moment, that

whatever was at the end of the left corridor had been there long enough to stop being a secret and start being a foundation.

The kind of thing that, once seen, couldn't be the same house anymore.

"You don't have to," Snaxx said. Not gently. Just honestly. "You could lock it down tonight, go back up, finish the gathering. Come back to it when you have more."

Elira was quiet for a beat. Then: "I have spent a few months watching this gap appear and disappear in my own estate. In my father's estate. At least three of those months believing it was a ward malfunction, a structural echo, something with a clean answer I was simply missing." Her voice didn't waver. But it settled, the way things settle when they stop pretending to be lighter than they are. "I do not believe that anymore."

"What do you believe?"

It wasn't a challenge. Snaxx asked it the same way she asked everything that mattered. She had asked Elira this question simply, with the full expectation of an honest answer.

Elira was quiet for longer than usual. Longer than she allowed herself to be in most circumstances. The corridor held its breath around them, old stone and older intention, the fork ahead waiting with the patience of something that had been waiting for a very long time.

"I believe my father built something down here that he intended to protect," she said at last. "I believe he did not tell me about it because he thought the protection would hold. I believe he was

wrong.” A pause. “And I believe that whatever it is, whoever is moving toward it now understands its value better than I currently do. Which means they have been here before. Which means the passage has been open longer than eight months.” Her voice didn’t change. But something underneath it shifted. “Which means I have been standing above something my entire life and calling the silence ordinary.”

Snaxx looked at her. In the low light of the corridor, with the masquerade stripped away and only the dark between them, Elira looked exactly like what she was: someone who had been holding something very carefully for a very long time and had just decided to put it down.

Not because it had gotten lighter. Because she’d gotten tired of pretending it had.

“Okay,” Snaxx said.

She reached out with her good hand and touched Elira’s arm briefly, deliberate contact that wasn’t comfort exactly but something adjacent, solid and present. Then she let go and turned toward the left corridor.

Elira fell into step beside her. Their shoulders almost touching in the narrow space. Snaxx was careful with that almost. The warded parchment was in her pocket; whatever Elira carried was in her own. Moving together into the part of House Varnis that had spent thirty years pretending it wasn’t there.

The corridor received them without resistance.

Which, by now, Snaxx understood was the most unsettling thing it could do.

The Passage

The left corridor changed the further they went, as it simply allowed things to become apparent at whatever pace it judged appropriate. The stone here was older, less certain of its own geometry. The ceiling pressed lower in places, not from damage but from intention, as though whoever built this section had not wanted people to walk through it comfortably. The air had a different quality down here, held in place as though something had been waiting in it for a very long time and had stopped noticing it was still waiting.

Ward-script appeared about halfway down, etched rather than carved, fine and deliberate, running along the walls at shoulder height in continuous lines that curved with the corridor rather than breaking at the seams.

Snaxx slowed. She had walked this corridor twice already. She had not seen this. “That wasn’t there before,” she said.

Elira stopped. She looked at the walls, then at her own hand, still

resting against the stone. Something shifted in her expression, not surprise exactly, more like a hypothesis arriving before she was ready for it. “No,” she said quietly. “It was not visible to you.”

“But it is now.”

“Because I am here.” She said it the way she said things she was still working out something carefully, with each word placed before the next. “The script is keyed to House Varnis blood. It would remain invisible to anyone the ward architecture did not recognize.” She paused. “My father built it that way deliberately. The corridor shows itself only to family.”

Snaxx looked at the walls, and gazed at the continuous lines of script, the density of it, all the things she had walked past twice in the dark without seeing any of it. “So I’ve been down here twice,” she said, “and the house was keeping this from me the whole time.”

“Yes.”

“Charming,” Snaxx said. She looked at Elira. “How did it know you were family? Is it because you touched the wall?”

Elira looked at her hand again. The question settled over her slowly, the way questions settled when the answer was already present but not yet named. “I don’t know,” she said. Which, Snaxx had learned, meant she had a theory she was not ready to say out loud yet.

Elira moved without slowing, her hand occasionally brushing the corridor wall in a way that was not for balance, but with something more deliberate about it, fingers reading the stone the way Snaxx read rooms.

“Still active,” Elira said quietly. “The whole system. Thirty years and it’s still running.”

Snaxx looked at the ward-script on the walls, running for thirty years in a sealed passage with no one maintaining it from above. “Well,” she said. “That’s either very impressive or very bad news.”

“It means my father built it to last,” Elira said, half to herself. “Whether that was wisdom or arrogance depends on what we find at the end of it.”

Snaxx let that sit. It was the kind of line that didn’t need a response and would only get worse with one. She shifted her weight slightly instead, testing her shoulder, which answered back with the same dull complaint it had been filing since the second fight, unhappy but functional. She had worked through worse. She would continue to work through this.

“The script changes here,” Elira said, stopping at a section of wall. Her fingers hovered close to the stone without touching it. “Below this point, different handwriting. Later. Someone continued it.”

“Your father?”

“No. His hand is precise. Architectural. This is—” she paused, “—urgent. Like someone writing quickly because the thought

would not wait. Someone adding to his work over a long period of time.” She straightened. “Someone who had nothing but time.”

Snaxx looked at the walls as they walked. The script was densest in certain sections, whole passages of it layered over itself so many times the stone underneath had almost disappeared. She thought about what it took to fill a wall that way. The hours. The years. The particular discipline of someone who had nothing else to do and had chosen, out of everything available to them, to keep working.

They looked at each other in the blue-white light.

“Someone already down here,” Snaxx said.

“Yes,” Elira said, then she kept walking forwards.

Ward-lights appeared as they went deeper, spaced into the walls, burning a cold blue-white that did not flicker or warm or behave like fire at all. It simply existed, steady and indifferent. The shadows they cast fell wrong, everything doubling slightly, as if the light could not agree on where it was coming from. Snaxx had seen enchanted lighting before. It was usually built to be comfortable, to approximate the warmth of a lantern. This had not been built for comfort. It had been built to last.

The corridor opened into the junction space.

The bodies were where Snaxx had left them.

Three of them. The ward-lights lit them without mercy. Two were face-down where they had dropped. The third had fallen against the wall and stayed there, head tipped back at an angle

that said everything without ambiguity. Dark pooled beneath each of them, already going tacky at the edges, spreading in the particular way of things that had stopped being contained.

Elira stopped. She looked at them the way she looked at everything she needed to understand. She looked upon the scene fully, without flinching away. Her gaze moved across the space: the spacing of the bodies, the positions, the angle of each fall, the dark spread beneath them reading the shape of what had happened with the particular clarity of someone trained to read spaces. She was doing what she always did. Accounting. She looked over at Snaxx.

Snaxx met her eyes steadily and said nothing. She had stood over worse outcomes in smaller rooms for less justification. This was clean work, unpleasant, but clean, and she was alive to be looked at about it, which was the only professional assessment that mattered. She let the look hold a beat longer than necessary, let Elira read it without any help from her. She had done what the job required. This was what the job looked like.

"For what it's worth," Snaxx said, "they started it."

"I did not ask."

"No. But you were looking at me like you were doing math."

A pause. "I was not doing any such thing."

"Lady Varnis."

Another pause, shorter. "I was assessing the situation."

"Sure," Snaxx said. "Me too. Situation is that I went in, they were waiting, I dealt with it, they're still dealt with. Professional outcome. You should be pleased."

Elira looked at her for a moment with the expression she used when deciding how much to acknowledge, then turned back to the bodies and looked at them one last time, not with horror or grief exactly but something quieter and more permanent, before turning away. "Come," she said.

"One second."

Elira paused. Snaxx was already crouching beside the nearest body, professional and unhurried, going through the pockets with the practiced efficiency of someone who had been doing this since long before it was attached to anything as organized as a job. She had not had time before, she had been busy surviving, and then busy getting back up, and then busy going back in. She had time now.

Coins, a few. They had a good weight to them, nothing marked. A ring she pocketed without examining closely. A folded slip of paper from the second one, sealed with plain wax, no crest. She held it up briefly, then tucked it away. The third had nothing useful on their person, it seemed as whomever had briefed them had been careful about what they carried. That in itself was information. People who travelled light to a job like this were people who expected to be searched if something went wrong.

She stood. "Okay."

Elira was watching her with an expression Snaxx could not entirely read. Not disapproval. Something more complicated than that.

“They came to kill you,” Snaxx said simply. “Anything they were carrying is evidence. And I get paid by results, not by sentiment.”

On that, Elira turned and kept walking. Snaxx followed. She did not mention what she had seen in Elira’s face when she looked at the third body, the one against the wall. It had not been horror. It had been the recognition of someone who understood exactly what had been asked of Snaxx and had not fully allowed herself to understand it until she was standing in front of the proof.

Beyond the junction, the passage narrowed then widened into something that was not quite a corridor anymore. The stone underfoot changed, smoother and more deliberate, worked by different hands than the rough-cut passage above. Ward-script layered the walls here, dense and revised, added to over years rather than inscribed once and left. The kind of work you returned to.

“They were not just using the ward system,” Elira said, reading the walls as they walked. “They were improving it. Every time the passage opened, someone came down here and worked.” Her finger traced one of the newer additions without touching. “This is months old. Not decades.”

“So whoever’s been running those gaps,” Snaxx said, “they weren’t just visiting.”

“No. They were maintaining a relationship with whatever is down here. Regular contact. Regular work.” She lowered her hand. “Someone who knew this space as well as I know my own estate. Better, perhaps, given what they have been doing to the ward architecture.”

That landed the way things landed when they were worse than expected. Snaxx let it sit and kept moving.

This corridor went on longer than she had expected. It felt longer than the first passage, longer than the junction, longer than seemed reasonable given what she had mapped of the estate above. It did not stretch or distort in any obvious way. It simply continued past the point where she had assumed it would end, curving gently downward, the ward-script thickening on the walls the further they went. The air grew more contained with each step, the kind of pressure that had nothing to do with depth and everything to do with what was being kept.

Then the corridor simply stopped.

The passage ended in a wall, and set into that wall was a door so flushed with the stonework it was nearly invisible. It showed no frame, no handle that announced itself, only a faint seam and at eye level a ward-mark so worn it might have been a shadow. It stood open with a hand's width, a thin line of light coming through. Not candlelight, not lantern-light. Something steadier. Something that had been burning a long time.

Snaxx studied it for a moment. “No lock,” she said.

“No,” Elira agreed. “He would not have locked it from this side.”

Snaxx pushed it fully open and went through first.

The smell reached her before anything else.

Old paper and tallow and something herbal and faintly sweet, the kind of thing burned over a long period to cover other smells. Underneath it all was the particular quality of air that had been breathed by one person in one space for longer than air was meant to be breathed that way.

The chamber was larger than it had any right to be this far below the manor. Ward-lights burned in sconces along the walls, cold and blue-white, and in their light the room gave itself up in pieces.

A bed against the far wall. Made, but not recently. They could see the linens creased in the way of something slept in and smoothed over too many times to count. Beside it a small table, a cup with dark residue at the bottom, a book left face-down with its spine cracked from being treated that way too often. The details of a life arranged the way lives arranged themselves when no one was watching and there was no performance left to give.

Snaxx looked at the cup. The book. The one crease in the pillow that had not been smoothed out with the same care as the rest of the linens, showing a small failure of routine, or perhaps a deliberate one. She had broken into enough spaces to know the difference between a room that had been lived in and a room that had been inhabited. This was the second kind. The space had started to take the shape of the person inside it, the way water took the shape of its container. Whoever had been here had been here long enough for the room to become them.

The question arrived quietly, the way Snaxx's questions usually did, which were not announced, just present.

'How long could someone survive in a space like this?'

The ward-lights provided illumination. The air was breathable. Survival was not the hard part. What you became, in a space like this, over the kind of time she was starting to calculate from the evidence in front of her, *that* was the question she kept to herself. Elira was already carrying enough.

A desk consumed by ward-work. Diagrams, calculations, sheets of parchment layered so deep the desk itself had disappeared beneath them. Ink-stained. Worn at the edges. Years of work, not sessions. The same instinct she had seen in Elira's operations room. There were maps, string, chalk, but stretched over a longer time, in a smaller space, with no one to say when to stop.

She looked at the desk more closely. The layers of parchment were not random, it seemed as if there was a system to them, older work underneath, newer work on top, the same diagrams revised across decades as the understanding of the ward architecture changed. Someone who had started as a student of her father's work and had become something else entirely. This was a peer, or possibly more than that.

And the walls.

Every surface covered. Ward-script in places, but also drawings both architectural and precise, the manor above mapped from memory and revised repeatedly until the paper was nearly worn through. Room by room, corridor by corridor. In some places the drawings were crossed out. In others marked

with symbols Snaxx did not know but recognized the feeling of. This was the work of someone churning through a problem that would not resolve, returning to the same point from different angles, unwilling to accept the answer was not there.

The thing that got Snaxx, looking at the walls, was not the scale of it. She had seen obsession before. What got her was the discipline. Whoever had done this had kept to a system. Old work on the left side, newer work on the right, dates in the corners, revisions marked clearly. They had maintained their own record, their own archive, their own methodology. This was the work of someone who had refused to unravel.

She did not look too closely at the dates.

In the center of the largest wall, where a portrait might hang in a normal room, there was a mirror.

It did not reflect the chamber. It reflected a different room entirely. It looked like the entry hall of the manor above, or something very similar. Lit warmly, the way it looked during a gathering. And in it a woman stood with her back to them, facing the far wall, her posture unhurried, perfectly still.

Snaxx looked at it for a long moment. "What is it showing?"

Elira was quiet. When she spoke her voice was careful in a way it had not been before, the particular care of someone choosing words around something they do not want to say directly. "It is a Longing Glass," she said. "My father documented one in his ward notes. I read about it once and did not understand why he would bother recording it." A pause. "They show the viewer what they most want to see. What they are most reaching toward. If you look long enough, you stop being able to look

away, and the image holds you there, in whatever it shows you, until someone pulls you back.”

Snaxx looked at the woman in the mirror. Standing in the manor above. Back turned to everyone in the room as if she had only just arrived and had not yet decided to stay. “She wanted to be upstairs,” Snaxx said.

“Yes,” Elira said. Quietly.

“For thirty years.”

Elira did not answer that. She turned away from the mirror. Snaxx looked at it a moment longer. The woman in the glass had not moved. Perfectly still, perfectly patient, standing in warm light she could see but could not reach. Snaxx understood, in an abstract way, that she should also look away. She did not, quite yet.

The mirror shifted.

It was a subtle change. It no longer showed the same room, the same warm light, and the woman was gone. In her place was something else. A street Snaxx recognized without being able to name. Narrower than the ones she worked now, lower buildings, the particular quality of light that meant a city that did not have the coin for good lanterns. A version of herself stood there, small and green and unhurried, not going anywhere in particular. Not looking over her shoulder. Just standing in a place that felt like it belonged to her, the way nothing had belonged to her in a long time.

She stared at it longer than she meant to.

Then it clicked what she was looking at, what the glass was doing, and she took one clean, deliberate step back before looking away.

Elira was watching her and did not comment, but she had seen the step.

“Don’t touch it,” Elira said quietly.

“Wasn’t going to,” Snaxx said as she moved to the desk. She was not looking at the ward-work. She was looking at something smaller, set apart from the diagrams with the deliberateness of an object placed rather than left. On the desk laid a journal, leather-bound, its cover worn smooth on one side from handling, the wear on the left side.

Beside it sat a seal pressed into dark wax holding a letter shut. The seal showed the same thorn wrapped around a tower mark that was on Elira’s ring and wrist.

Snaxx noticed Elira’s hand move to her own wrist before Elira had made a decision to move it. The gesture was small, involuntary. She had the hand of someone who has just seen something and reached for the nearest related thing without meaning to. Elira pushed back her sleeve.

The mark was there. It had always been there. Snaxx had seen it in the Crooked Lantern and put it somewhere in her head and moved on. But Elira was looking at it now the way you looked at something you had always assumed meant one thing and had just understood meant something else entirely. The mark had not changed. What it pointed to had.

The silence in the room was different from the silence in the

corridor. The corridor's silence had been waiting. This one had already happened.

Snaxx did not speak. She watched Elira look at her own wrist and understood without needing it said that she was watching someone's history rewrite itself. She knew what that cost. She knew there was nothing to say that would not be the wrong thing, so she said nothing and gave Elira the moment.

After a long moment, Elira spoke.

"He marked me to find this place," she said. "Before he sealed it."

One line, delivered with perfect control, and beneath it at the very edge of that control something with no clean name, not grief or betrayal exactly but both and neither, waiting a long time to be understood correctly.

Snaxx crossed the room and stood beside her, not touching, just present. She had done this before. She had stood beside people in the moment things became real, and learned that the worst thing you could do was try to fill the space. The space was doing something. It was necessary. You stood in it and let it do what it needed to do, and you were there so the person inside it was not entirely alone while it happened.

Elira did not look at her. She was still looking at the wrist, at the mark, at thirty years of meaning she was in the process of taking apart and rebuilding into something she could carry.

The ward-lights burned cold and steady. Behind them, the Longing Glass held what it had been left with, the same thing Snaxx had seen, a narrow street and a version of someone who did not have to fight for everything, standing unhurried in light

that was not blue-white and cold. No sound came from above; the seal held it back, the masquerade and music kept on the other side of whatever her father had built down here. The quiet was complete, the kind that had been this room's only company for a very long time.

After another moment Elira pulled her sleeve back down.

"We should look at the journal," she said.

"Yeah," Snaxx said.

She thought about the portraits upstairs. Every face erased. A family that had agreed, collectively, to become no one, with a chamber below all of it that held the evidence of why.

Elira reached for the journal. The cover was warm from the ward-lights, or perhaps from something older than that. She held it for a moment, feeling the weight of it, and then she opened it.

Severance

Elira opened the journal. The first pages were her father's hand. From across the room, Snaxx could see the difference in the writing. Lord Adrien's script was architectural, controlled, the hand of someone who had spent a lifetime making his words look like decisions. It covered the first several pages. Then it stopped. And the other handwriting began.

Snaxx watched Elira read. She had positioned herself near the door with her back to the wall, facing the room, an old habit, a useful one, giving her a clean line of sight to Elira, the desk, the Longing Glass, and the chamber entrance. Everything accounted for. She kept her weight even, her injured shoulder settled, and she watched.

Elira's expression did not change on the first page or the second. She read the way she did everything, completely, without announcing what she was finding. But Snaxx noticed what was not expression: the slight stillness in Elira's hands when she moved from her father's writing to the other hand, the single breath she took before continuing, fractionally longer

than the ones before it.

Something at the transition between voices.

Snaxx did not ask. She waited.

Elira read for a long time. The ward-lights burned their cold blue-white. The Longing Glass held its narrow street, its unhurried figure, patient in its frame. The room held its smell of old paper and long hours and a life arranged around the absence of everything above it.

Snaxx had catalogued the room twice already. She did it again anyway. She looked at the exits, objects, weight distribution of everything on the desk, the angle of the chamber door. This was the kind of another old habit that kept her hands busy when her body wanted to do something her brain hadn't approved yet. Her shoulder made its opinion known every time she shifted her weight against the wall. She ignored it. The Longing Glass sat in her peripheral vision, showing her what it was showing her, and she kept her eyes off it the way you kept your tongue off a sore tooth. She thought about saying something. Decided against it. Thought about moving closer. Decided against that too. Elira was reading and the room was doing what the room did, which was hold everything very still and wait, and the only useful thing Snaxx could contribute to that was to do the same.

She was not, by nature, good at doing the same.

At some point Elira sat down. Not dramatically, but she simply reached for the chair beside the desk and drew it toward her without looking up from the page, and sat, and kept reading. Snaxx marked it. Elira did not sit lightly.

More pages. The second set of handwritten words were precise, small, nothing wasted, yet it filled most of the journal. It remained consistent throughout, no deterioration, no change in pressure or spacing across what must have been years of entries. Whoever had written this had not unravelled down here. They had stayed exactly themselves, which was either a remarkable act of will or the particular stubbornness of someone who had decided very early on that they were not going to give their circumstances the satisfaction.

Eventually Elira stopped.

She did not close the journal. She held it open on her lap, looking at the current page, and was still in the way she was still when she was holding something that required both hands and would not be put down easily.

Snaxx pushed off the wall and crossed to the desk. "What does it say?"

Elira was quiet for a moment. Then she read aloud.

"The child arrived on the fourteenth day of Greymere. She is three years old. Her mother died in the autumn. Attendants of her mother sent her north with a letter within a caravan who did not stay. I knew this day would come. I had known since before the child was born that it would eventually come. I had simply hoped I would have more time to determine what to do about it.' "

Elira lowered the journal slightly. "He writes in the first entry that he knew about her from the beginning. She was not a discovery. She was a decision he kept postponing."

Snaxx said nothing. Elira read again.

“ ‘She cannot go back to Blackhollow. House Grimmsworn would use her as a claim against House Varnis. This is a legitimate grievance, by their accounting, though I would contest it. I cannot acknowledge her publicly. The same reason, amplified. She is a bastard of a rival house and I am the lord of this one and there is no version of that truth which does not end badly for House Varnis. I have spent three days looking for a third option. I have not found one.’ ”

A pause. Then, quieter: *“ ‘She will be comfortable below. She is young enough that she may not fully understand what this means. I will visit. I will ensure she has what she needs. It is not the life she would have had if things had been different, but it is a life, and it is safe, and it is more than what Grimmsworn would give her.’ ”*

Elira closed the journal on her finger. “He wrote that on the day he sealed her here. She was four years old.”

The room was very quiet. Snaxx looked at the walls with the drawings, the dates, the decades of careful, refused-to-stop work. She thought about what four years old looked like. What it understood. What it didn't.

“She was four years old,” Snaxx said. The words came out flat and even, which was how her anger usually arrived. Her words were not loud, just certain. Then, quieter, more to herself than anyone: *“Kien. Four years old. Gods, ar'ekoon kesh te thinking.”*

She hadn't meant to slip into Ghukliak. She rarely did, outside of certain company. It just sometimes happened when something hit hard enough that common tongue felt too thin

for it.

Elira did not comment. She opened the journal again, to a different section. "I was forty-three when she was born. I was away studying ward theory, advanced binding, years away from home. I came back to a house that had never mentioned she existed." Her voice was even. It was the evenness of someone finishing the sentence before they allowed themselves to feel it. "He stopped visiting when I returned."

Snaxx looked at the walls. The systematic drawings, the dates in the corners, the revisions marked clearly. Decades of someone refusing to stop thinking. She thought about the age of those dates. She thought about what it meant to be sealed underground at four years old and still be here now, still working, still building something. "How old is she?"

"Old enough to have spent most of her life in this room," Elira said. "Young enough that she should not have had to."

Snaxx looked at the Longing Glass, trying to remember the figure from before, standing in the warm upstairs light, back turned, perfectly still. Thirty years of wanting to be somewhere that was sixty feet above her head.

"The fourth person," Snaxx said. "The one who got out. That was her."

"Yes. She knows how to move through the passage in ways the ward architecture cannot anticipate. She built those pathways herself over decades. She can appear and disappear through

it as she chooses.” A pause. “She was there. She watched you. She left before you came back through. The Velvet Choir is hers. The three members she sent were not masquerade guests clearly, but they were her people, sent to stop me reaching this room before she was ready.”

Snaxx thought about the measured pace, the complete absence of reaction to the bodies. She had read it right. She just had not known what she was reading. “She left the journal on purpose,” Snaxx said.

“Yes.” Elira turned to the back of the journal, where the handwriting changed back to her father’s hand, tighter now, more technical. She read aloud.

“The blood-key is woven into the mark I have given Elira. She does not know this. She believes the ceremony was a ward-practitioner’s rite of passage, as I told her. In fact I used her blood to anchor the seal. Her presence in the passage will cause the ward-script to become visible; her blood is what the architecture has been waiting for. If the seal is ever to be properly closed, if the passage is ever to be shut permanently rather than merely maintained, then the key will need to be removed. It will need to be removed from her. I have documented the method in the following pages. I did not want to. I have done it anyway. In the event that I am no longer here to do it myself.” Elira lowered the journal.

Snaxx was looking at her. “He took your blood without telling you.”

“Yes.”

“For a seal you didn’t know existed. To contain a sister you didn’t know you had.”

“Also yes.”

The silence that followed was a different quality from the silences before it. Snaxx let it sit for a moment. Then: “What does removing it involve?”

Elira turned to the technical pages. She read them in silence, not aloud, her expression doing nothing that Snaxx could read from across the room except becoming progressively more still. When she finished, she closed the journal.

“The mark has to come out,” she said. “The binding my father wove beneath it has to be severed from the ward architecture. It will be—” she paused, choosing the word with the care of someone who was not going to minimize it, “—painful. The mark will be removed physically. It will leave a wound. But it is the only way to close the seal permanently... to ensure the passage cannot be reopened from either side.”

Snaxx stared at her incredulously. “There’s no other way.”

“I have read the technical entries twice. There is no other way.”

“What about—” Snaxx started, and stopped, because she was not a ward practitioner and she knew it, and she could see from Elira’s expression that whatever argument she was about to construct from instinct and stubbornness was not going to find purchase against thirty years of ward theory. She tried anyway.

"There has to be something else. A workaround. A way to sever the binding without—"

"There is no other way," Elira said again. Quieter. Not unkind. "I know what you are doing. I appreciate it. But I have read the entries carefully and I understand the architecture and there is no other way."

Snaxx exhaled through her nose. "He put it in you without asking. You shouldn't have to pay for what he did."

"No," Elira agreed. "I shouldn't. But I am going to, because it is right, and because sealing it also frees her... She has been down here since she was four years old, and the least I can do is be the one who ends that." She held Snaxx's gaze. "I need your help for one part of it."

Snaxx looked at her for a long moment. The composure that was doing more work than composure usually did. The decision already made, standing in front of her, waiting for the moment to act on it. There was nothing to argue against. There was only the decision.

"Tell me what to do," she said.

Elira's expression shifted, this look did not contain a smile, but it did have the particular relief of someone who had expected to have to argue further. She explained the anchor disc, the junction, the eastern wall, the pull. She explained that the seal had three points and she could only be in one place. She explained that when she began removing the blood-key, the

ward architecture would resist and she would need to focus entirely on the working.

“You may hear things from the chamber,” she said. “Do not come back.”

“Define things.”

“The removal will be painful. I will manage it. But I need to focus entirely, and if you come back I will have to manage you as well, and I cannot do both.”

It was not said unkindly. It was said precisely, which was how Elira said everything that mattered. Snaxx took the disc. It was heavier than it looked. “I’ll be at the junction,” she said. “Don’t do anything I can’t fix.”

Elira looked at her. Something in that look. “I will endeavour to be precise.”

“Good enough,” Snaxx said, as she turned around and went back towards the junction.

* * *

The junction was exactly as she had left it. Bodies. Ward-lights. The particular silence of a space that had been waiting.

Snaxx crossed to the eastern wall, crouched, and pressed the disc flat against the stone at its base, and she waited.

The ward-lights flickered once, not failing but deliberate, like a system drawing breath before a significant action. The script on the walls brightened all at once, every etched line illuminated

simultaneously, and Snaxx understood for the first time the full scope of what had been written here. Not just a corridor. A record. A thirty-year argument with a father who had never answered.

The pull that started was not subtle. The disc pressed against the stone with a force that had nothing to do with gravity, and Snaxx's hand went with it. She pressed back, shoulder protesting immediately and loudly, and held.

Then the sound from the chamber.

A sharp intake of breath, quickly controlled. Snaxx's jaw went tight. She pressed harder against the disc and did not move.

Elira had said do not come back.

A second sound, not controlled this time, a short raw cry bitten off hard at the end, the sound of someone who had prepared themselves and found that preparation was not enough. Snaxx's whole body went toward it. She stopped herself. Her shoulder screamed at the effort of holding the disc against the wall and she used that pain, channelled it into staying exactly where she was.

The ward-script pulsed harder. The pull on the disc intensified. Something that had been woven into a person for decades was being removed, and the ward architecture did not want to let go of it, and Snaxx could feel that resistance translated through the stone into her hand and up her arm and she held on and held on and held on.

The third sound from the chamber was longer this time, lower, the kind of sound that came from somewhere beneath decision,

where pain stopped being something you managed and became something you simply were. Snaxx pressed her forehead against the stone wall for one moment, eyes closed, and held the disc and did not go back.

She had never wanted to go back to somewhere so badly in her life.

Then: silence.

The disc started to burn hot decisively, then finally released. Clean and complete. The pull vanished. The ward-lights steadied. The script on the walls went dim, settling into something that felt permanent rather than active. Done.

Snaxx sat back on her heels and breathed for exactly two seconds.

Then the passage changed.

It started at the far end, but there was a deep resonant sound, like stone deciding to be something other than stone, working its way up through the corridor in a wave. The ward-lights went dark in sequence, one after another, each extinction moving toward her like a countdown. The air pressure dropped. The walls did not move but the space between them contracted, the ward architecture withdrawing into itself, folding up the passage as it went.

“Snaxx.” Elira’s voice from the chamber doorway, rougher than she had ever heard it. “We need to move. Now.”

Snaxx was already moving. She reached the chamber door and stopped for half a second. Elira was upright, standing under her own power, her left arm against her body and her right hand

pressed over her wrist. Dark blood was seeping through her fingers. Her face was composed. Her eyes were sharp and very bright. She was the most deliberately composed person Snaxx had ever seen and she was bleeding through her hand and the passage behind Snaxx was actively dying.

“Don’t,” Elira said, reading whatever was on Snaxx’s face. “Keep moving.”

They ran fast, together, up the slope that seemed steeper than it had going down. Snaxx’s shoulder announced itself immediately and loudly, the muscles that had been holding the disc against the wall for the last several minutes now being asked to do something else entirely and having opinions about it. She ran through it. She had run through worse. The darkness chased them from behind, each ward-light going out the moment they passed it, as if the corridor was sealing itself up in their wake and could not do so fast enough. The air felt different, it was thinner, or wrong in a way that had nothing to do with air and everything to do with the space itself becoming less certain about whether it wanted to exist. The resonant sound had become something lower and more continuous now, a grinding deep in the stone, the sound of architecture deciding it was finished.

Snaxx had Elira’s good arm, but she was not pulling it, only holding it steady as Elira ran alongside her without complaint, which told Snaxx more than she wanted to know about how much will was currently substituting for everything else.

A crack sounded somewhere behind them, sharp and definitive.

“Faster,” Elira said, which was the only time in the entire evening that Snaxx had heard her say anything that was not precisely calibrated, and that told Snaxx everything she needed to know about how much time they had.

The portrait was ahead. The familiar crack at the corner, the disapproving expression. Snaxx almost laughed. Another crack from behind, closer this time, the sound of something structural giving way. The last ward-light went out.

The passage gave one final contraction and the world tilted and there was no floor and no wall and no corridor at all.

Just a brief and total absence.

Then Elira’s suite.

The deep green linens. The writing desk with its sealed correspondence and stacked ledgers and the single unlit candle placed off-center. The stone washbasin, pristine. Everything exactly as it had been when Snaxx had broken in hours ago, before any of this, before the key and the note and the mirror and the passage and thirty years below.

Snaxx landed on her feet, barely. Elira was beside her, upright, one hand still pressed to her wrist. For a moment neither of them moved. The suite held its composed silence around them, as if it had been waiting for them to come back to where this had started. Then Snaxx said, “Sit down.”

Elira sat. Not because she was told to, but because she had decided to, and Snaxx’s instruction had simply arrived at the same time as the decision. Snaxx was already at the desk, pulling

open drawer after drawer, finding the bandages within one of them.

She came back and crouched in front of Elira and took the wounded wrist in both hands. Elira let her. The mark was gone, almost cleanly and completely, as if it had been removed by something that understood precisely what it was taking and had taken only that. The wound left behind was real and present and Snaxx looked at it for one moment before she started wrapping.

"She's out," Snaxx said. "Your sister. The seal released her."

"Yes."

"You knew it would when you closed it, and yet you still freed her." Snaxx kept her hands steady on the bandage. "On purpose. Knowing she's the one who sent those three intruders."

"I did what was right," Elira said. "What should have been done thirty years ago." A pause. "It will complicate things considerably."

"Yeah," Snaxx said. "It will." She smoothed the bandage and did not immediately let go of the wrist. "For what it's worth, that was either the bravest thing I've ever seen or the most dramatic, and I genuinely cannot decide which."

"It was neither," Elira said. "It was necessary."

"Mm." Snaxx wound on. "You know, most people, when I break into their rooms and steal their keys, it ends significantly less eventfully than this."

"I will take that under advisement for future hirings."

"Please don't. I'd miss the drama."

"You held the anchor," Elira said. "You did not come back."

"You told me not to."

"I am aware that telling you not to do something has not historically been a reliable deterrent."

Snaxx looked up from the wrist. "Is that your way of saying thank you?"

"It is my way of saying I noticed," Elira said. "And for that I am... grateful. That you listened."

"For what it's worth," Snaxx said, "I wanted nothing more than to completely ignore you."

"I know."

"Like, genuinely. Every instinct I have was pointing back at that door."

"I know," Elira said again, quieter.

"I just—" Snaxx smoothed the bandage end flat and did not immediately let go of the wrist, "—decided your instincts were probably better than mine this once. Don't get used to it."

"I would not dream of it," Elira said. And the corner of her mouth moved.

That sat between them for a moment, honest and unadorned in the way things became honest when neither person had the energy left to perform otherwise.

"So," Snaxx said. "Dinner."

Elira looked at her wrist. At the bandage. At the place where the mark had been. Then she looked at Snaxx, and something in her expression had quietly given up on pretending it hadn't been an evening.

"I owe you a dinner," she said. "I am aware of that. And I intend to pay it."

A beat.

"With interest," Snaxx said.

"Do not push it."

"I'm absolutely pushing it."

Snaxx stood, offering her good hand. "Dinner. Drink. And you are going to admit I'm your favorite problem, because I believe I have earned it."

Elira looked at the offered hand for a moment. Then, with the particular composure of someone making a decision they have already made and are only now allowing to become visible: she took it.

"You are," she said, "an exhausting woman."

“You say that like it’s a complaint,” Snaxx said.
Elira did not correct her.

As Agreed

The night crowd had gone home. The day crowd hadn't arrived yet. What was left was the hour itself, grey and honest, the sky not yet committed to light but no longer pretending it was dark. Bakers were already moving in the lower districts, the smell of bread finding its way through the cold air before anything else did. A cart horse stood in patient silence outside a shuttered merchant stall. Two pigeons conducted what appeared to be a territorial dispute on a window ledge with the seriousness of people who had nothing else scheduled.

Snaxx walked through it like she owned it, which was her default relationship with any city at any hour.

Her shoulder pulled on the left side every third step, a dull and consistent complaint she had stopped arguing with an hour ago. Her ribs had settled into something manageable, not good, not close to good, but the kind of hurt that stayed in its lane and didn't make new demands. The ward-salve had done its job. The rest was just time.

She had the coin pouch and her dagger back and had,

apparently, survived House Varnis, which was already a better outcome than a reasonable person would have predicted at the start of the evening.

She also had something else, though she was being careful about how much attention she paid to it.

Before she'd left the suite, while Elira was still composed and correct and standing at a precise distance that implied nothing except that she was always standing at a precise distance, she'd said it simply. Not warmly, not coldly. In the tone of someone settling an account. "I will ensure your name reaches the right ears. You do exceptional work. Pamerial will know it."

Professional and clean, the kind of thing you said to someone you had hired and were satisfied with and were now, in the orderly fashion of House Varnis, compensating appropriately.

Snaxx had said 'thank you'. She had meant it. She had also noticed the particular care with which Elira had framed it, the way it drew a line around the evening, around all of it, and placed it firmly in the category of work completed and paid for and done.

The line had been drawn very neatly.

Snaxx walked out of House Varnis into the pre-dawn grey of Pamerial thinking about that line, about how carefully it had been constructed, about how a person who felt nothing would not have needed to construct it at all. She told herself to stop thinking about it and kept thinking about it for the better part of the walk back.

She got back to the Crooked Lantern as the first real light was

beginning to reach the rooftops. Virok was behind the bar, as he always was. He was a Goliath, broad enough that the space behind the bar seemed designed around him, his head clearing the ceiling by perhaps two fingers when he stood straight, which he always did. She had never determined whether he slept, or when, or if the concept simply didn't apply to him. The room had thinned to almost nothing. The card game was long gone. One figure remained at a corner table, head down on folded arms, breathing with the deep conviction of someone who had made their final decision about the evening some time ago.

Virok set a glass in front of her without a word. She sat down and wrapped both hands around it and let the warmth do what it could for her hands, which had been cold since the corridor and hadn't fully come back.

"You look like you had a night," he said eventually.

"I had a night," she agreed.

He didn't ask what kind. That was one of his better qualities.

She drank. She ate the bread he produced from somewhere without being asked. Outside, Pamerial was beginning its morning sounds, the first carts, a distant bell, the city clearing its throat. She let it all settle around her like something earned.

Then she went upstairs and slept until well past noon, which her shoulder and her ribs and every other part of her agreed was the correct decision.

* * *

The days settled into themselves the way days did after some-

thing significant, not quickly, not slowly, just with the particular texture of ordinary time reasserting its claim.

Snaxx's shoulder improved by degrees. The first day it objected to everything. The second day it merely objected to most things. By the third day it had reached a kind of grudging accommodation with the basic requirements of being a functional shoulder, and she was willing to call that progress. The ribs followed a similar arc, dropping from demanding to inconvenient to the kind of background complaint she could work around if she breathed carefully and didn't do anything sudden.

She spent the days in the comfortable rhythms of the Crooked Lantern, eating morning bread and drinking bad coffee, letting the lunch crowd arrive with its noise and its complete indifference to her. The slow afternoons were the best part, when the tavern breathed out and Virok polished things methodically behind the bar and the light came through the windows at an angle that made the whole place look like it was made of amber.

She talked to people in the passing way she always talked to people, enough to be present and not enough to commit. A merchant passing through from the coast who had opinions about weather. A young woman studying ward theory at the city academy who asked pointed questions about whether ward-breaking was as technical as the books made it sound, to whom Snaxx gave honest but not complete answers. Two men from the docks in the middle of a disagreement that had clearly started before the current conversation and would continue after it.

None of them asked about House Varnis. Word was moving through the city but it hadn't reached this particular corner yet, or if it had, these particular people didn't connect her to it. That suited her fine.

Virok knew. She hadn't told him, but Virok always knew things without being told. He watched the room the way she did, but without any of the calculation, just observation, patient and complete. On the second evening he set a slightly better drink in front of her than usual and said nothing, which was his way of acknowledging something.

"Word's going to start hitting the tavern soon," she said.

"Already has," he said. "Three people asked about you yesterday."

"What did you tell them?"

"That you'd be in touch if you were interested."

"Good answer."

"I thought so."

She thought about Elira more than she had planned to.

This was not surprising, exactly. The evening had been a lot, the kind of a lot that didn't leave quickly, that sat in the peripheral vision of every quiet moment and declined to be ignored. She would be doing something entirely ordinary, eating or sharpening her dagger or listening to Virok's efficient summaries of what had passed through the tavern that day, and something would surface. The exact weight of the disc in her

hand. The three sounds through the door. The particular way Elira had not corrected her at the end.

"You say that like it's a complaint."

Snaxx was self-aware enough to know she was in trouble. She had known it, if she was being honest about the timeline, since approximately the moment Elira had sat down across from her in this very tavern and placed a velvet coin pouch on the table with the quiet certainty of someone who had already decided how the evening would go.

She thought about the line, the neat and careful and professional line, the way it had been drawn with the deliberateness of someone who felt it was necessary to draw it. A person who felt nothing would not have needed to draw it. She thought about that a lot in the slow hours.

The note arrived on the fourth day.

It was exactly what she had expected, which was to say it was very Elira: sealed with House Varnis wax, addressed in handwriting that was architectural and controlled, the kind of script that did not waste a single stroke. The message inside was brief.

The dinner, as agreed. Three days hence, at the manor. The balcony where we first —

A pause in the ink, barely visible, the faintest evidence of a word reconsidered.

— on the east balcony, second floor. Seventh hour of the evening.

— E. Varnis

Snaxx read it twice. She folded it carefully and slipped it into her pocket.

Virok had glanced at the seal before she even set it down. He looked at it, then at her, one eyebrow rising just enough to register, and then he went back to polishing his glass without a word.

Snaxx looked at the fire in the hearth and listened to the tavern doing what taverns did. The low hum of conversation from the corner table, someone arriving through the front door bringing cold air with them, the clink of glasses, the ordinary sounds of a place that kept going regardless. She let the thought of dinner settle somewhere in her head and left it there.

* * *

The east balcony was exactly as she had left it.

This was, on reflection, a strange thing to notice. Of course it looked the same. Balconies did not typically rearrange themselves in the weeks between a thief climbing over their railing and being escorted to them properly through the manor's interior. The iron railing was the same iron railing. The slight lean of the building was the same slight lean. The city below was the same city, doing the same thing cities did in the evening, glowing and moving and making a sound like the sustained note of something too large to see all at once.

Snaxx had climbed that railing with a coin pouch and a job and no particular theory about how the evening would go, and now she was standing on the correct side of it with clean clothes and a shoulder that had mostly forgiven her and a feeling she was continuing to productively lie to herself about.

The table had been set for two, with candles because it was evening and candles were how you lit things, and small pale

flowers in the center of the table, the kind that suggested consideration without announcing it, and what appeared to be the good tablecloth. Snaxx looked at all of this and thought: she did not go to this much trouble for a professional debt. She thought it and then looked away at the city below and kept the thought to herself, pleasantly.

Elira arrived precisely on time, which was the only way Elira arrived at anything.

She was not in masquerade finery and not in the dark functional coat of the operations room. She was in something between, deep green because Elira was apparently committed to a color scheme, tailored in the way all her clothes were tailored, as if they had been made for her specifically and had agreed to behave accordingly. Her hair was done differently than it had been the night of the masquerade, not formally, just carefully. She looked, Snaxx thought, like someone who had told themselves they were not making an effort and had then made one anyway.

She sat down across from Snaxx with the particular composure of someone who had arranged this dinner as a professional courtesy and was prepared to maintain that framing for the entirety of the evening.

"You look well," she said.

"I look like someone whose ribs are at about seventy percent," Snaxx said. "But thank you."

"Seventy percent is a significant improvement."

“Ward-salve did its job. Your ward-salve. So technically you fixed me twice in one night, which I think is above and beyond.”

“I prefer to think of it as protecting my investment,” Elira said. Something in her expression was doing the thing it occasionally did, not quite a smile and not quite not one. “You were rather expensive to hire.”

“I was exceptionally cheap to hire,” Snaxx said. “Fifty crowns and a dinner. Any other rogue would have charged you twice that.”

“Any other rogue would not have survived the passage.”

“Fair point. Maybe I undercharged.”

A member of the kitchen staff appeared at the balcony door, moving with the practiced quiet of someone who had learned to be unobtrusive in formal settings. He was young, with the focused expression of someone taking the job seriously. He set a first course between them with careful precision and retreated without making eye contact with either of them.

Snaxx watched him go, then looked back at Elira. “Does the kitchen staff always move like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like they’re trying not to disturb something.”

Elira glanced toward the door. “They are well-trained.”

"They're acting like they've been briefed. Like someone told them this was something." Snaxx gestured at the table, the candles, the flowers, the city spread out below them.

"It is dinner," Elira said, with the precision of someone not acknowledging the secondary meaning of the sentence. "As agreed."

"Right," Snaxx said. "As agreed."

She smiled and picked up her fork. Elira looked at the city for a moment, just long enough for the candlelight to catch the line of her jaw and the pale earring and the deliberate arrangement of her expression, and then picked up hers. The city moved below them. The candles held against the evening air. It was dinner, as agreed. Snaxx told herself that, and almost believed it.

* * *

They ate, and they talked, and the talking was different from anything that had come before it.

In the manor, their conversations had always had a charge to them, the job, the passage, the crisis, the thing between them that neither of them was naming. On the balcony there was none of that scaffolding. No urgency, no immediate danger, no professional transaction to hide behind. Just two people and a table and a city below and the slight awkwardness of discovering that they had things to say to each other that had nothing to do with ward architecture or intruders or the complicated logistics of sealing a passage. It turned out they had quite a lot of those things.

Snaxx learned that Elira had spent eleven years abroad studying before returning to Pamerial, that she had opinions about warding theory considered controversial in certain circles, and that she had once, under circumstances she declined to specify, been briefly held in a legal dispute over a ward construct she had theoretically not built but had definitely built.

“You built it,” Snaxx said.

“I did not say that.”

“You said ‘theoretically’ not built.”

“Which is not the same as saying I built it.”

“It absolutely is.”

Elira looked at her with the expression she used when she was declining to confirm something while being fully aware the other person already knew. It was one of Snaxx’s favorite expressions of hers.

Elira learned that Snaxx had been working since she was roughly twelve, that she could identify sixteen different kinds of locks by sound alone, and that she had strong opinions about the quality of ale served in Pamerial’s southern districts versus the northern ones.

“The southern taverns cut it less,” Snaxx said. “People down there actually know what they’re drinking. Up here everyone’s performing.”

“That is a significant generalization.”

"It's an accurate generalization. Ask Virok."

"I am not familiar with Virok."

"Big guy. Goliath. Runs the Crooked Lantern. Head almost hits the ceiling everywhere he goes and he's absolutely fine with it." Snaxx leaned back in her chair, comfortable in a way she hadn't been all evening, the conversation having settled into its own rhythm. "He's probably the most honest person I know. Doesn't say much. What he does say is always true."

Elira considered this. "He sounds like good company."

"He's the best company. He doesn't need you to perform anything. There's not a lot of people like that."

The candlelight moved between them. Somewhere below, the city made its usual sounds, a cart on cobblestones, voices carrying up from a lower street, the distant sound of something being celebrated in a tavern two blocks over.

"No," Elira said, after a moment. "There are not."

She said it looking at Snaxx, which Snaxx noticed, and then she looked away at the city, which Snaxx also noticed, and there was a beat of something in the space between those two things that neither of them reached for.

The kitchen staff returned, the same young man, still focused and still careful, and exchanged the courses with practiced invisibility. Snaxx caught him glancing between them with the very slightly too-interested expression of someone who

had clearly been discussing this dinner with the rest of the kitchen and was gathering evidence. She said nothing and let him gather.

“Can I ask you something?” Snaxx said.

“You may.”

“The balcony.” She tilted her head toward the railing. “You could have done this anywhere. There’s a dining room in this building, probably several, rooms specifically designed for eating in. And you picked here.”

Elira was quiet for a moment, in the way that was not absence of thought but presence of it, something being considered and weighed and decided.

“You climbed that railing,” she said finally. “I thought it was appropriate that you should also sit beside it.”

“That’s a very neat answer.”

“I am told my answers often are.”

“It doesn’t tell me why, though.”

Elira set down her glass with the small precise movement that meant she was choosing her next words carefully, which meant the words mattered. “Because this is where the evening started,” she said. “And I thought it should end somewhere that acknowledged that.” A breath. “Whatever that means.”

Snaxx looked at her, at the careful arrangement of her expres-

sion and the candlelight and the thing she had just almost said. "Whatever that means," Snaxx repeated, lightly.

"Yes."

"Okay."

She smiled and looked at the city, and let the moment be what it was without pushing it into something it wasn't ready to be yet. Elira picked up her glass again. The candles did not go out.

They stayed another hour. The conversation moved through lighter things, easier things, the kind of conversation that built something without announcing it was building. When the kitchen staff came to clear the final course, he did so with a small smile he was clearly trying to suppress, which Snaxx caught and said nothing about.

When she finally stood to go, Elira walked her through the manor to the front door rather than back to the balcony, which felt like its own kind of statement, and they said goodnight in the composed way of two people who were being very controlled about the fact that neither of them wanted to.

"Thank you," Snaxx said, at the door. "For the dinner. And the ward-salve. And all of it."

"You earned it," Elira said, which was true and also not quite the whole answer, and they both knew that.

Neither of them moved immediately.

That was the thing. That was the part that Snaxx turned over on the walk home, that she kept returning to. Not the

balcony or the flowers or the carefully done hair. The pause at the door. The way Elira had stood there, composed and still and not leaving, and Snaxx had stood there too, and the evening had stretched a moment longer than a professional courtesy had any business stretching.

Elira had been the one to speak first, in the end. "Goodnight, Snaxx."

"Goodnight, Lady Varnis."

The door closed. And Snaxx stood on the front step and thought: that was not nothing. Whatever just happened at that door, it was not nothing. Elira Varnis did not linger. She did not let silences run past their purpose. She was precise about endings the way she was precise about everything.

That pause had not been precise.

She had known Elira Varnis for perhaps a week. She had spent six, maybe eight hours in her company, a significant portion of which had involved ward-sealed passages and injured shoulders and a disc held against a stone wall. That was not very much time. It was, in fact, almost no time at all. And somehow, despite that, despite all reasonable evidence that this was not something that happened in her life, that this was not a category of thing available to someone like her, she was in it. Had been in it, she suspected, since that first evening. Since the note on the desk and the wardrobe left slightly open and the mirror that had shown her something she hadn't asked to see. Completely and inconveniently in it, with no apparent exit, and this was the part she was only just letting herself look at, not entirely sure she wanted one.

“Damn,” she said, to the night air of Pamerial.
The city had no useful advice. She kept walking.

Lampours

Word moved through Pamerial the way word always did, in pieces, arriving from different directions, assembling itself into a shape before anyone had decided to send it.

By the time Snaxx's shoulder had forgiven her enough to be called functional, three separate people had mentioned House Varnis to her unprompted. A guild contact who had heard something from someone who had been at the masquerade. A merchant who worked the same docks as a man who knew one of the footmen. A woman at the bar who had simply connected the name to the goblin sitting two stools down from her, and said so.

Snaxx received each version with the same mild interest she gave most things that were about her. Grateful, noncommittal, already moving on. The story had grown in the retelling, as stories did, but the shape of it was consistent: a rogue had gone into House Varnis and come out the other side, and the work had been exceptional. That was enough. That was, in fact, exactly what Elira had said it would be.

She thought about that sometimes. Briefly. She set it back down before it became a conversation she wasn't ready to have.

The jobs came quickly once word was properly out.

She took three in the first week back. A lockbox retrieval for a merchant who had misplaced his key and couldn't afford the locksmith's wait time. That job paid fifteen crowns, and it was clean work, only lasting forty minutes including the walk. A document recovery from an office whose previous tenant had left in a hurry and taken things that weren't theirs, this paid twenty-five crowns, it was slightly more complicated, one interior lock that had been recently changed and required a different approach. A confirmation job for a minor guild that needed someone to verify discreetly whether a particular door had been opened recently and by whom which had paid thirty crowns, no locks involved, just patience and a good eye for disturbance patterns in dust.

Seventy crowns in a tenday. Added to the fifty from the manor job, that put her at a hundred and twenty crowns.

She didn't have a specific plan for the money. She never did, at this stage. The money was the point of itself, but rather it was a number that kept growing, that gave her options, that was the difference between leaving a town when she chose to and leaving when she had to. She had learned that distinction early and she had never stopped treating it as the most important one.

The shoulder held. The ribs had graduated from inconvenient to irrelevant. She was, by any reasonable measure, back.

She had also been in Pamerial longer than she usually stayed

anywhere.

This was the thought she kept not finishing. She would get halfway through it, recognize where it was going, and redirect to something else. The coin was good. The work was good. Those were reasons. Sufficient reasons. She had left towns for less cause and stayed in towns for worse. There was no particular reason to examine the specific shape of what was keeping her here rather than moving on.

Myrefall had taught her to keep moving. Not in any lesson anyone had sat her down to deliver, just in the fact of being what it was. A squalid, poor, suspicious place that had a very specific idea of what a goblin was and wasn't interested in revising it. The adventurers who raided the outskirts were treated as heroes in the town square regardless of what they left behind on their way through. She had been very young when she understood that no one in Myrefall was going to protect her, and not much older when she left with eight crowns she had accumulated through means she was not going to account for to anyone.

She had not stayed anywhere long enough to become known since.

Until, apparently, now.

Virok noticed. He didn't say anything, which was how she knew. He watched her with the patient attention he reserved for things that were in the process of resolving themselves, and he kept his glass polished and her glass full.

She appreciated it. She didn't say so. He already knew.

* * *

The suitor arrived on a Fourthday morning.

Fourthday at the Crooked Lantern was when the fish delivery came in from the docks and Virok always had something better than usual on the menu, and Snaxx had made a habit of being downstairs early enough to get it while it was hot. She was on her second cup of coffee, bad in the way coffee at the Crooked Lantern was always bad, in a way she had come to find familiar and almost affectionate, when the door opened and brought in the cold morning air and an Orc of considerable size holding a cluster of yellow laumpors, bright against the autumn grey and entirely wrong for the season.

He was well-dressed, which suggested money or effort or both. Out-of-season laumpors suggested optimism bordering on strategy. He carried them with the careful confidence of someone who had practiced the approach and was committing to it.

He found her immediately, which meant he had asked around or done his research, and he crossed the room with a smile that was doing a great deal of work.

“Snaxx,” he said. “I’ve heard a great deal about you. The name’s Kurz. I work out of Pamerial, mercenary contracts mostly.” He set the flowers on the bar beside her coffee with a small deliberate gesture that was meant to be charming and mostly was. “I thought I might offer you some company. Breakfast, perhaps, or a walk if the morning clears.”

Snaxx looked at the laumpors. Looked at him. He was watching her with the easy confidence of someone who had done this

before and had it go well. Attentive, prepared, with an honest face and a direct manner she found refreshing. Out-of-season laumpors in the middle of autumn represented either optimism or commitment. Possibly both. The intention was clear enough.

She opened her mouth.

The door opened again.

The room did the thing it did when Elira walked into it. The subtle reorganization, the slight drop in ambient noise, the collective sense of something arriving that knew exactly where it was going. Snaxx had seen it at the masquerade, in the gallery, in every room Elira entered with intention. She had not expected to see it happen at the Crooked Lantern on a Fourthday morning, but she was learning that Elira Varnis had a way of appearing in contexts she had not been prepared for.

Elira stepped inside. Her gaze moved across the room in its usual efficient sweep and landed on the bar. It first landed on the flowers, then on Kurz standing beside them with his charming smile, and lastly on Snaxx.

A pause. Brief, measured, the kind of pause that revealed nothing to anyone who was not paying close attention.

Snaxx was paying close attention.

Something moved through Elira's expression, not loudly, not in any way she would have acknowledged if asked, and then it was gone, replaced with the composed attention she wore in rooms where she was deciding something. She crossed to the bar. Not quickly. Just directly.

"Good morning," she said to Snaxx, as if Kurz were a piece of furniture.

“Morning,” Snaxx said.

Elira looked at Kurz then, fully, with the quality of attention that was not warmth but was not nothing. “Leave,” she said.

Not raised. Not sharpened. Simply certain, in the way a ward-lock was certain, not aggressive, just already decided.

Kurz straightened. He glanced at Snaxx, an instinct toward appeal that died when he read her expression, and then back at Elira, where it died for different reasons. He was not a foolish man. He picked up the flowers, reconsidered, left them on the bar, and walked out with the dignity of someone making the best of a situation that had moved past him.

The door closed.

The room resumed itself.

Snaxx looked at the flowers. Looked at Virok, who watched all of this with the expression of a man who found the world broadly consistent with his expectations of it. Then she looked at Elira, who had settled onto the stool beside her with the composure of someone who had corrected a minor error and moved on.

“That was a bit much,” Snaxx said.

“He was not invited,” Elira said.

“He was not not invited either.”

Elira looked at her. “Did you want him to stay?”

Snaxx considered this honestly. Kurz had been prepared and confident and genuinely not bad looking. He had an honest face and had done his research and, importantly, the effort had been there. She thought about all of this and found that none of it added up to the answer she might have expected.

“No,” she said.

Elira nodded once, as if this confirmed something, and then she picked up the laumpors from the bar, turned, and dropped them into the fire in the hearth.

Not dramatically. Not with any announcement. She simply did it and turned back, and the yellow petals caught quickly, and neither of them said anything about it.

Virok set a coffee in front of Elira without being asked. She looked at it, looked at him, said nothing, and he moved away without ceremony.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Snaxx said.

“No,” Elira agreed. “I did not have to.”

Which was not the same as saying she shouldn’t have, and they both knew it.

Elira was looking at the bar rather than at Snaxx, and the quality of her attention had shifted, less composed than usual, or composed in a different way, the kind of composure that was actively working rather than simply resting.

“You are not a place for people to practice confidence,” she said. “Especially not while you are under my roof.”

Snaxx raised an eyebrow. "I'm not under your roof. I'm at the Crooked Lantern."

"You know what I mean."

"I do." Snaxx turned her coffee cup in a slow circle on the bar. "For what it's worth, it was not unwelcoming. It was actually nice to know I was wanted."

Elira was quiet for a moment. Not the considering quiet but the other kind, the kind where something had landed and she was deciding how to respond rather than what to say next.

"Being wanted is not the same as being safe," she said finally.

Snaxx looked at her. "That's not really the concern I was expressing."

"I know." A pause. "I am expressing a different one."

The fire crackled in the hearth. The laumpors were ash now, or close to it. Somewhere behind them, someone at the corner table laughed at something. The ordinary morning sounds of the Crooked Lantern continued around them, indifferent to the conversation happening at the bar.

"He didn't know you," Elira said. It came out quieter than the rest. "He knew the name. The story that has been moving through Pamerial. He did not know you."

Snaxx was very still.

"I do," Elira added. Which was either an observation or a claim and she did not specify which, and Snaxx did not ask.

The silence that followed had weight to it. Neither of them was in a hurry to end it.

Elira looked at the hearth, where the flowers had been. Then at Snaxx. Something in her expression was doing something she had probably not given it permission to do.

"It is not wrong to feel pleased," she said carefully. "When someone notices you. That is not what I am saying."

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying do not build conclusions too quickly from it. Wanting is easy to give. Understanding what it costs is not."

Snaxx studied her. "That sounds like experience talking."

"It is."

"Okay." Snaxx held her gaze. "And what's the difference? Between someone who wants you and someone who actually sees you?"

Elira looked at her for a long moment.

"Someone who sees you," she said slowly, "does not need you to respond to them in order to continue paying attention. They are interested in what you are when you are not performing anything. When you are simply being." A breath. "That is rarer than wanting. And it is worth knowing the difference before you let someone close."

Snaxx was quiet for a moment. Outside, Pamerial went about its grey morning business.

"You are already wanted here," Elira said. She did not clarify

by whom, or in what sense, or what she meant by here exactly.

She did not need to.

Snaxx looked at all of it, the carefully chosen words and the not-quite-said things and the laumpors now ash in the hearth, and thought: now I want her even more. She kept that entirely to herself.

“What did you actually come here for?” Snaxx asked.

Elira held her gaze for a moment, something quiet and considered moving through her expression. “I heard about a job that would suit you,” she said. “A noble family in the Thorngate district. They need something retrieved from a former associate who is not inclined to return it voluntarily. Requires discretion and a certain kind of skill set rather than any ward knowledge.”

“How did you hear about it?”

“It came to my attention.” A pause that was just long enough to mean something. “I thought of you.”

Snaxx looked at her steadily. She thought: *she went looking*. She doesn’t say that but she went looking. She kept that to herself as well.

“What’s the pay?”

“Twenty-five crowns. The family is prepared to offer more if the return is clean and quiet.”

“And when?”

"Sixthday, if that suits you. I can make the introduction."

"It suits me," Snaxx said. "I'll be there."

Elira nodded. Something in her posture eased, just slightly, in the way it did when something she had been carrying resolved itself. Snaxx noticed. She was noticing a lot of things about Elira Varnis lately.

She had noticed them for some time, she realized. The way Elira had touched the ward-script in the passage below the manor, not clinically but with something closer to reverence, her fingertips reading it the way other people touched things they found beautiful. The way she had matched Snaxx's pace without comment on the walk back from the chamber, adjusting to her without announcement. The way a room shifted when she entered it, not because she commanded it but because something in her presence simply made space.

She had been noticing these things and setting them aside and now here she was with a hundred and twenty crowns and no particular plan and a very specific reason to still be in Pamerial.

* * *

The Sixthday job went well.

A townhouse in the Thorngate district, one locked study, one locked cabinet within it, and a ledger that had been sitting in the wrong hands for three months while the noble family's lawyers argued over how to proceed. Snaxx had the study open in under a minute. The cabinet took slightly longer because someone had replaced the original lock with a newer mechanism that suggested they had been expecting this visit eventually.

Twenty-five crowns, and an additional five from the family's eldest daughter who pressed it into her hand at the door with the slightly overwrought gratitude of someone for whom this had clearly been a long three months.

She was at a hundred and fifty crowns when she met Elira outside the townhouse afterward. The afternoon had gone grey and cold, the kind of cold that suggested the evening would be worse.

"Clean?" Elira asked.

"Clean. The newer lock on the cabinet was a nice touch. Slowed me down by about four minutes."

"I will note that for the family's future reference."

"Tell them not to bother. Anyone who knows what they're doing can read a replaced lock."

Elira looked at her with the expression she used when she was filing something away. "I will not pass that particular detail along."

"Probably wise."

They walked in the direction of neither of their destinations for a few minutes, in the comfortable way they had developed of simply continuing to be in the same place without requiring a reason for it. The Thorngate district was quieter than the central wards, older stonework and narrower streets, the kind of neighborhood that had been wealthy long enough to stop

trying to look it.

“Virok does something good with warm spiced wine when the weather turns,” Snaxx said. “You look like someone who has been reading correspondence all morning.”

Elira glanced at her. “I have been reading correspondence all morning.”

“Then you could probably use something warm. One drink.”

A pause. “One drink,” Elira agreed.

The Crooked Lantern was three streets over. They walked it in the cold, past a man on the corner who was attempting to sell what he was calling “genuine Enn stonework” from a cart that was visibly sinking into the cobblestones under the weight of it.

“That’s not from Enn,” Snaxx said.

“No,” Elira agreed. “The quarry marks are from the south district. Someone has painted them.”

“Badly.”

“Quite badly.”

Snaxx glanced at her. “You just know that.”

“I know most things about stone in this city,” Elira said, in the

tone of someone who found this unremarkable. "It is relevant to ward architecture."

"Everything is relevant to ward architecture with you."

"Most things are," Elira said simply.

The tavern windows were amber in the grey evening. Virok looked up when they came in, registered Elira with the same single eyebrow he had used the first time she walked through his door, and reached for the wine without being asked.

Elira wrapped both hands around the cup and said nothing for a moment, just let the warmth settle in. Snaxx watched her do it and thought that she had now seen Elira Varnis in more states than most people probably had. The composed public version. The operations-room version. The corridor-before-dawn version. The quietly-falling-apart-in-a-sealed-chamber version. And this version, which was simply tired and cold and sitting at a bar with her hands around a warm cup, and that each version had the same person in it.

"Can I ask you something?" Snaxx said.

"You may."

"Why Pamerial? You studied abroad for eleven years. You could have gone anywhere when you came back."

Elira considered this. "House Varnis is here."

"That's a reason to come back. It's not a reason to stay."

"No," she agreed. "It is not."

She looked at the wine. "I stayed because there was work to do. The estate required attention. My father's affairs required managing. There were systems that needed rebuilding." She paused. "I am aware that is not the full answer."

"What's the full answer?"

Elira looked at her with the expression that sometimes appeared when Snaxx asked something she had not given herself permission to ask. "I stayed because I am better here than I am elsewhere," she said. "Because this is where I understand the shape of things. What I am. What I am capable of." A beat. "Not everyone needs to keep moving to feel like themselves."

Snaxx looked at her wine. "No," she said. "Not everyone does."

She thought about Myrefall. The particular quality of small and known it had, the way it pressed in from every direction. She thought about being very young and understanding that no one was going to protect her, that the adventurers who killed her parents were the same ones the townspeople bought drinks for the next morning, that a goblin in that town was something to be tolerated at best and blamed at worst. She had left with eight crowns and she had not looked back.

She thought about Pamerial, which was large enough that she could be anyone in it. Which had not, in all the time she had been here, pressed in.

"I grew up in a place called Myrefall," she said. It came out more straightforwardly than she intended. "Small. Poor. The

kind of place that had a very specific idea of what a goblin was and wasn't interested in revising it." A pause. "I left when I was young. I haven't stayed anywhere long enough to find out if that happens again."

Elira was quiet, in the way she was quiet when she was paying full attention. "Does Pamerial feel like that?" she asked.

Snaxx thought about it honestly. "No," she said. "It doesn't."

"Then perhaps," Elira said carefully, "it is worth considering that not all places are Myrefall."

Snaxx looked at her. At the careful phrasing, the deliberate gentleness of it, the way Elira had managed to say something real without pushing.

"Yeah," she said. "Maybe."

The wine was good. The fire was warm. Virok was behind the bar being large and quiet and unbothered. Outside, Pamerial did what it did in the evening.

They stayed for a second drink, which neither of them had agreed to out loud. The conversation moved through lighter things after that, easier territory, the kind of talking that didn't ask anything of either of them. Snaxx made Elira laugh twice, and it surprised her both times, that unguarded laugh that arrived without permission. Elira said something dry about a meeting she had attended that morning that was both precise and devastating, and Snaxx laughed in turn.

At some point Elira looked at the hour candle on the bar and

something in her expression shifted, the almost-imperceptible recalibration of someone who had noticed they had gone further into an evening than they had planned. Snaxx saw it happen and recognized it for what it was. Elira Varnis was a noble of Pamerial. She had composure to maintain, a position that required a certain kind of careful management, a life that could not be seen to be getting untidy around the edges. A goblin rogue at the Crooked Lantern, however the evening felt, was not something she could simply stay in without consequence.

Snaxx understood that. She understood it in a way that was specific to her, to knowing what it meant to have people decide what you were before you opened your mouth.

"I should go," Elira said.

Snaxx looked at her directly. "I know," she said. "I don't want you to."

She said it simply, without strategy, without the usual layer of banter between the feeling and the words. Just the fact of it, offered plainly.

Elira looked at her for a moment. Something moved in her expression, something real and unmanaged, and then she composed it again, gently, the way you composed something you were going to carry carefully.

"If you are open to more work," Elira said, "I can send things your way. There are often requests that come to the manor that would suit your particular skills."

"I'm open to it," Snaxx said.

“Then come by tomorrow morning,” Elira said. “We can go through what is available.”

A pause, longer than it needed to be. Elira looked at her once more, briefly, then picked up her coat and left.

The door closed behind her. Virok removed the empty wine cups without comment.

Snaxx sat for a moment. The fire had burned down to something quieter, the kind of low heat that didn’t demand attention but stayed anyway. The Crooked Lantern was doing its late-evening thing around her. There were still a few tables left that were occupied, someone in the corner working through a problem with a quill and a lot of crossed-out lines, the general sound of a place that kept going.

“She heard you,” Virok said. He wasn’t looking at her. He was wiping down the far end of the bar with the same steady attention he gave everything.

Snaxx looked at him.

“She heard you,” he said again. “She just doesn’t know what to do with it yet.”

He moved on to the next section of bar. He didn’t add anything else.

Snaxx looked at the fire for a long time after that. Not thinking about leaving Pamerial. Not thinking about the eight crowns she’d left Myrefall with, or the towns she hadn’t stayed in, or the particular way her life had arranged itself around motion rather than stillness.

She was thinking about the way Elira had composed herself before she spoke. The way you composed something you were

going to carry carefully.

That was not nothing.

She stayed until Virok called last rounds, and then she went upstairs, and she thought about it all the way to sleep.

Pushing Back

The manor in the morning was a different thing from the manor at night.

Snaxx had only ever seen it in the dark, or close to it. It was during the night of the masquerade, the passage, the corridor before dawn. She had not seen it like this: ordinary light through tall windows, staff moving through the corridors with the unhurried efficiency of people who had done this every day for years, the smell of something being prepared in the kitchens below.

A gnome woman met her at the door. Small and compact, brown-skinned, dark hair pinned back with the kind of practicality that suggested she had once tried more elaborate styles and quietly decided none of them were worth the time. The lines of her clothing were simple, well-worn in the places that mattered, stitched for movement rather than impression, like everything about her had been chosen to survive repeated use rather than be admired once.

She moved with the kind of economy Snaxx recognized

immediately, there were no wasted motions, no hesitation at thresholds, the habits of someone who'd learned early that doors don't open any faster just because you want them to.

She looked at Snaxx the way Snaxx looked at her with a quick, instinctive account, eyes flicking over details without giving them the courtesy of lingering, reading weight, trouble, and usefulness in the same breath.

"Snaxx?" she said. "I'm Maret. Lady Varnis asked me to show you through."

"Thanks," Snaxx said, falling into step beside her. They moved at the same pace without discussing it, like neither of them saw a reason to be the one adjusting first.

Maret showed her to a small receiving room off the east hall where there were two chairs, a writing desk, a window onto a garden put to bed for the season. Maret then told her coffee was coming. When it arrived, Snaxx caught Maret on her way back out.

"Good coffee," Snaxx said. "Thanks for the escort."

Maret gave her the brief nod of someone who took a thank-you at face value. "She won't be long," she said, and left.

Snaxx sat with the coffee and looked at the room. Functional, carefully maintained, nothing unnecessary. She was starting to read Elira through the spaces she kept.

Elira arrived seven minutes later. Snaxx had counted.

"You came," Elira said.

“Said I would.”

Elira sat across from her and opened the folio. Two jobs had come to the manor in the past few days. A shipping manifest that needed verifying as genuine or forged. A locked room in a recently inherited property whose new owner wanted it opened before the lawyers arrived.

“Twenty crowns each,” Elira said. “I thought *we* could do both this morning.”

Snaxx looked at the list. Looked at Elira. “These are very small jobs.”

“They are well within your capabilities,” Elira said.

Snaxx tilted her head. “Is that supposed to make them sound bigger?”

Elira closed the folio, ignoring her comment. “We should get started.”

* * *

The merchant who needed the manifest verified kept his counting house near the docks, where the buildings leaned close together and every window seemed permanently filmed with salt.

The place smelled like old paper, lamp oil, damp wood, and the kind of anxiety that came from people trying to keep numbers from turning into accusations.

Shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, crowded with ledgers thick enough to stop a crossbow bolt. Stacks of bundled shipping records occupied nearly every flat surface that wasn't already holding ink bottles, seal presses, or cups of tea gone cold hours ago. Somewhere in the back room, someone was arguing quietly about tariffs.

The merchant himself looked like he hadn't slept correctly in several days.

He ushered them to a long table near the window and immediately began speaking before either of them had fully sat down.

"The discrepancy was first noticed three months ago," he explained, spreading the document flat with careful hands. "The claim concerns a spice shipment transferred through the southern harbor offices during the reform period. They're insisting the cargo declaration was altered after filing, which would invalidate the original ownership assessment—"

Snaxx leaned against the edge of the table while he continued.

The dispute.

The rival merchant family involved.

The value of the shipment.

The legal implications.

The history stretching back several years.

The particular significance of the seal in the bottom right corner.

The man spoke like if he stopped moving through details too quickly, the entire situation might finally notice him and

become worse. Snaxx picked up the manifest mostly to give her hands something to do while he spiraled.

Dense columns of cargo names, quantities, dates, shipping routes. Ink faded unevenly with age. Fold lines worn soft from handling.

She turned it over once. It felt like it was handled by enough people over enough years that the paper had stopped resisted being touched. That part she understood.

But whether the seals meant what the merchant claimed they meant, that was different work entirely. The kind involving education, archives, and people who voluntarily memorized notation systems for pleasure.

Snaxx was already aware that was not her skillset, so she set the document back down. Elira reached past her and picked it up. The motion itself was elegant in a way Snaxx was beginning to suspect Elira did not know how to stop being.

The merchant immediately stopped talking.

Elira read the manifest the way she read everything that genuinely interested her: completely, and without any visible need to prove she was doing it well. Her eyes moved steadily across the page.

Bottom seal.

Middle column.

Margin notation.

Back to the seal again.

One finger shifted slightly beneath the paper, tilting it toward the light from the window.

Silence settled over the room while she examined it. Even the distant tariff argument in the back seemed quieter now. Snaxx

watched the merchant instead. The man looked like he was waiting for sentencing.

“Genuine,” Elira said at last. The merchant inhaled so sharply it was almost a cough. Elira set the manifest back onto the table with precise care. “The authentication seals are consistent with the port registry notation from this period,” she said. “The ink distribution on the secondary mark is characteristic of the issuing office.”

Her fingertip touched one section near the center of the page. “Someone attempted to make the cargo listing appear altered after filing, but the original entries remain intact beneath the surface work. If you angle the document toward the light, you can still see the pressure variation from the first inscription.”

The merchant leaned forward immediately, doing exactly that.

And there it was. Faint. Almost invisible. But present.

His expression shifted rapidly through relief, vindication, confusion, and the dawning realization that his legal battle had just become substantially more complicated instead of less.

Elira looked back at him calmly. “Your dispute concerns interpretation of the manifest,” she said. “Not its authenticity.”

The merchant opened his mouth. Closed it again. Then slowly nodded like someone realizing they would now have to survive an entirely different category of problem.

Elira rose smoothly from her seat.

“Thank you for your time,” she said with the clean efficiency of someone who had already concluded the interaction several

sentences ago.

Snaxx pushed herself off the table and followed her toward the door while the merchant still looked halfway caught between gratitude and fresh panic. Once they reached outside, Snaxx said: "You did the job."

"The job was to verify the manifest."

"My job was to verify the manifest."

"You assessed it," Elira said. "You determined it required a different approach. That is also part of the work."

"That's a very generous recount of what happened in there."

"It is accurate." A beat. "Also, I wanted to look at it."

Snaxx stopped walking. "You came on this job to look at a shipping manifest."

"I came on this job to ensure the work was completed correctly. The authentication seals are from a specific period of port registry reform. I have been curious about the notation variation for some time."

"You are telling me," Snaxx said, "that you, *an archmage and warden of a noble house*, came out this morning to look at a seal."

"I am telling you the work was completed correctly."

“Right,” Snaxx said. She started walking again. “Very professional.”

“Quite,” Elira said with bright eyes, falling back into step. Snaxx was unsure if she caught a wink from the elven woman.

The morning stretched around them after that.

Pamerial had fully woken by the time they left the counting house behind. The harbor streets churned with movement now, dock workers hauling rope-thick cargo lines over their shoulders, fishmongers shouting beneath striped awnings, couriers weaving through the crowd with satchels held tight against their sides like the paperwork inside might try to escape.

Snaxx walked beside Elira without much urgency. The first job was finished. The second could wait long enough for the city to exist around them. She caught people staring occasionally, mostly at Elira. That seemed unavoidable.

The Lady of House Varnis moved through the street with the kind of ease that made space reorganize around her without anyone realizing they were doing it. Conversations dipped as she passed. Shopkeepers straightened unconsciously. A few people bowed their heads just slightly too late, caught off guard by her presence before remembering themselves. What drew longer looks, though, was the goblin walking beside her like she belonged there. Snaxx noticed that too.

“You know,” she said lightly, “people keep looking at me like they’re trying to figure out whether you lost a bet.”

Elira glanced toward her. “And what conclusion have they reached?”

“Haven’t decided yet.” Snaxx’s mouth curved faintly. “Think some of them are hoping I’m a scandal.”

“That would disappoint them.”

“Would it?”

Elira’s eyes shifted toward her then, measured in that precise way she had when deciding whether something was becoming dangerous on purpose. “Yes,” she said calmly. “A proper scandal requires planning.”

Snaxx barked out a quiet laugh. “Oh, that’s worse than what I said.”

“I am aware.”

They crossed one of the canal bridges as the morning crowd shifted around them. Sunlight caught briefly against the silver threading on Elira’s sleeves, drawing another round of stares from nearby pedestrians. Snaxx noticed one younger merchant woman nearly walk directly into a flower cart while watching Elira pass.

“...you know,” Snaxx said, lowering her voice slightly, “I think half this city’s a little in love with you.”

Elira didn’t miss a step. “That seems statistically unlikely.”

“Nah. I’m good at reading crowds.”

“And what does the crowd say about you?”

Snaxx grinned. “That I’m clearly the interesting one.”

This time the amusement reached Elira’s eyes before she managed to smooth it away. “I am beginning to understand,” Elira said carefully, “why people allow you into rooms you absolutely should not be entering.”

“Careful, Lady Varnis.” Snaxx looked sideways at her. “Starting to sound impressed.”

A faint pause. “...observant,” Elira corrected. Which was not the same thing, but wasn’t entirely different either.

The Westmark district slowly changed around them as they walked. The harbor noise thinned first, replaced by quieter streets and taller windows. Pamerial’s wealth shifted strangely depending on where you stood in it. Near the docks, money moved loudly. In Westmark, it barely moved at all. It sat behind polished doors and immaculate stonework pretending it had always belonged there. Snaxx noticed the quiet before she noticed the house.

A narrow townhouse stood halfway down the lane beneath dark trimmed windows and polished brass fixtures that looked maintained out of habit rather than pride. Before they reached the steps, the front door opened.

A steward waited there in dark formalwear, posture straight enough to imply long practice rather than comfort. “Lady

Varnis," he greeted carefully. His eyes flicked once toward Snaxx, uncertain what category to place her in. "Thank you for coming."

Elira inclined her head politely. "You mentioned a locked room."

"Yes, my Lady. Upstairs. We have avoided trying to pry it open further."

"Good," Elira said.

The steward stepped aside to let them enter. Snaxx crossed the threshold behind Elira, already looking toward the upper floor before the door had fully shut behind them. The steward and Elira both stood at a respectful distance while Snaxx crouched in front of the lock.

It felt wrong before she understood why. Not broken, not cheap, but something was off in the mechanism, a resistance in the wrong place, like a step that was an inch higher than expected. The keyhole was standard. The plate was standard. But the feel of it when she applied the faintest pressure said something else entirely.

She spent longer looking than opening. Seven minutes crouched in front of it, hands barely touching, reading it by feel and the quality of what pushed back. Then barely a minute of actual work. The door swung open.

Inside: a stack of correspondence, a box of old account ledgers, and a portrait of someone who looked like the new owner's late uncle, covered with a cloth in the way of something kept rather than forgotten.

She came back into the hall. "Tell your employer," she said to the steward, "that their relative was careful about appearances but not particularly careful about what they were protecting. Whatever's in that room, it's not a legal problem. It's a family one."

The steward's expression suggested he was still deciding if that was good news.

Elira was waiting by the door. "Eight minutes," she said.

"Seven of those were looking."

"You spent more time looking than opening."

"The looking is the work," Snaxx said. "The opening is just what happens at the end of it."

They stepped back into the street. The afternoon had gone colder while they were inside, the flat grey cold that came in off the stone.

Elira looked at her with the expression she wore when something was confirmed rather than surprising, a stillness like a theory settling into place. She didn't say anything about it. She didn't need to.

"The manor is that direction," Snaxx said. "Unless you've got somewhere else to be."

"The manor," Elira said. "Obviously."

“Come on then.”

* * *

Across town was a proper walk, not a quick cut through familiar streets but all the way across the city, through the commercial quarter and the older residential streets and the long market road and the guild halls and the stretch rebuilt after a fire some decades back that still looked slightly newer than everything around it. The city did what cities did around them, indifferent and continuous.

“Can I say something that might sound ungrateful?” Snaxx said.

“You may attempt it.”

“Those jobs this morning. Clean, they paid, you thought about what suited me.” She kept her hands in her pockets. “They’re also the kind of work I was doing when I was very young and needed coin fast. I did both without really having to think.”

“I know,” Elira said.

Snaxx looked at her. “You know?”

“I watched you this morning. Like with the manifest, you read it in under a minute and knew what it was before I took it. The lock? It only took seven minutes looking, and barely a minute to open it. You are not challenged by what I have found for you.” A pause. “I should have asked what you actually needed instead of assuming.”

"I want something that pushes back," Snaxx said. "Where I don't know what I'm dealing with before I start."

"I will find that," Elira said. "Properly this time."

They walked past the guild hall. Past a vendor selling something that smelled like it had been cooked over the wrong kind of wood. Past two pigeons on a windowsill conducting what appeared to be an ongoing dispute.

"The Choir has been quiet," Elira said. It came out like something held too long without announcement, simply present when released. Snaxx waited.

"Since the passage sealed. Since she left." Elira kept her pace even. "I expected something by now. Some indication of where she went. What she intends. There has been nothing. No word from any of my contacts, no reports from Blackhollow, nothing from the city guard." She paused. "I have been going through everything I remember from the journal. Making notes. Trying to build a picture of her from what I know."

"How much do you know?"

"That she was four years old when my father sealed the passage. That she spent thirty years improving ward architecture from the inside. That she built an organization while she was underground, which means she had contact with the outside world through the gaps, which means she planned this." A breath. "And that she left the journal deliberately. She wanted me to find it. She wanted me to close the seal and free her." She looked at the middle distance. "Which means she wants something from me. I do not know what."

“You’re afraid it’s something you can’t give her,” Snaxx said.

Elira was quiet for a moment. “I am afraid,” she said carefully, “that what she wants is thirty years back. And that when she realizes she cannot have them, she will decide I owe her something else instead.”

Snaxx didn’t have an answer for that. She thought about being very young and understanding that certain debts couldn’t be paid. That sometimes the person who owed you couldn’t give you what you actually needed, and what happened after that depended entirely on what kind of person they were.

“You freed her,” Snaxx said. “That’s not nothing.”

“No,” Elira said. “It is not nothing. I am just not certain it is enough.”

They walked for a moment in silence. The city carried on around them.

“Something will come up,” Snaxx said. “It usually does with us.”

Elira glanced at her sidelong. “That is either reassurance or a warning.”

“Little of both,” Snaxx said. “Seems to be how we work.”

* * *

The next job came to her at the Crooked Lantern two days later, slipped under her room door overnight. A minor noble needed

certain personal items retrieved from an address he described in terms that made the actual situation perfectly clear without quite stating it. The items were a letter and a pair of trousers.

Snaxx took the job, decided not to spend any time thinking about the trousers or the noble's wife, and went. The house was in the southern ward district. She spent forty minutes waiting on a nearby rooftop in the early afternoon cold, got in through a window, and retrieved the items once the building's occupant stepped out. Clean work. Straightforward.

The noble met her at his door in the early evening with the look of a man who had been composing a version of himself that was more dignified than the situation warranted. He pressed thirty crowns into her hand and said something about being grateful for her discretion, and then added quietly, with the particular confidence of a man who believed he was charming, that if she ever found herself in need of company for an evening, she had only to send word.

Snaxx looked at him for a moment. In her head: *gods, you absolute prick, thinking with your dick all while your trousers were on someone else's floor.*

Out loud: nothing. She pocketed the crowns and left.

Two hundred and ten crowns now bounced in that same red velvet bag that Elira gave her so many moons ago.

She stopped at the Crooked Lantern on the way back, sat at the bar, and let Virok pour her something without being asked. The evening crowd was settling in around her and it filled with familiar faces, familiar noise, the particular warmth of a place that kept going regardless. She drank and let the job finish

processing, the way jobs did when you gave them a few minutes of nothing afterward.

It was out of the corner of her eye that she noticed it. A new posting on the board beside the door, the ink still looking fresh against the older notices around it. She finished her drink first, then crossed the room and stood in front of it.

Two caravans reported missing on the southern run to Black-hollow. Last seen entering the forest stretch twenty miles south of Pamerial on this last Firstday. No reports of attack on the road. No wreckage found. No indication of what had happened. They had simply gone into the trees and stopped arriving.

She read it twice. Stood there for a moment with her hand on the board.

No obvious shape to it. Could be bandits who knew how to clean a scene. Could be something went wrong in the forest, like old paths, wrong turns, a dozen things that twenty miles of dense trees could swallow. Could be something stranger. Whatever it was, it wasn't answering itself from Pamerial.

She tore the posting from the board, pocketed it, and she went to the manor.

* * *

Maret opened the door.

"Lady Varnis in?" Snaxx asked as she was barging in past the gnome.

"Her suite, but—"

Snaxx was already moving. She heard Maret make the sound of someone deciding whether to object and arriving at the sensible answer.

She knocked on the suite door and opened it. The suite was not what she expected.

Elira was standing at the far wall, not at her desk. The wall itself had been cleared of its usual arrangement and replaced with something else entirely. Lined everywhere were papers pinned at intervals, lines of string running between them, notes in Elira's architectural handwriting covering sheets that had been added in layers. A map of some kind at the center, with markings Snaxx couldn't read from the doorway. A reconstruction. Everything Elira could remember from the journal, assembled on a wall because that was apparently the only way she knew how to sit with something she couldn't solve yet.

Elira turned when she heard the door. She looked at Snaxx. Then at the wall. Then back at Snaxx, with the expression of someone who had been caught doing something they weren't embarrassed about but hadn't planned to explain.

"Working something out?" Snaxx said.

"Attempting to," Elira said.

Snaxx crossed the room and set the posting on the desk in front of her. "Two caravans. Missing on the Blackhollow run. Twenty miles south, into the forest. No sign of attack, no wreckage, nothing. Just gone." She pulled the chair from beside the desk and sat in it. "It's Ninthday today. If we leave Firstday, we've

got two days to get supplies and get on the road.”

Elira picked up the posting and read it. When she finished she set it down and looked at the board on the wall for a moment, then back at Snaxx.

“It could be anything,” Snaxx said. “That’s the problem. We’d go in without a clear picture because there isn’t one yet. Twenty miles each way, camp on the road, and no guarantee of what we find.” She looked at Elira directly. “We’ve been doing this for a few weeks. Jobs around the city, working out how the other person moves. I know how you think. You know how I work.” A pause. “It’d be strange to do this one without you.”

Elira looked at her. That particular look, the one that had several things in it at once.

“Strange is one word for it,” she said.

“I’ve got others,” Snaxx said. “Wrong. Wasteful. A shame, given the rhythm we’ve got going.”

“A rhythm,” Elira said.

“This would be professional. Obviously.”

Elira looked at the posting again. Something shifted in her expression with decision settling, and underneath it, something that had been waiting for permission.

“Yes,” she said. “I will come.” The tips of her ears had already said so, warming to something between gold and rose. She didn’t address them. Snaxx didn’t mention them.

“Firstday,” Snaxx said. “Two days. I’ll sort the supplies.”

“I will put things in order here,” Elira said. She was already looking at the board on the wall with the expression of someone filing something away rather than setting it down. “Maret can manage the correspondence while we’re away.”

Snaxx stood. At the door she paused.

“See you in two days,” she said. Then: “Maybe take the board down before the staff sees it. They’ll worry.”

Elira turned to look at the wall. Then at Snaxx. “They aren’t the worrying kind.”

“Perhaps not,” Snaxx agreed. “But you might be. And you’ve got twenty miles of road to do that on instead.”

Something moved in Elira’s expression, a softening in her eyes as something landed and she let it. “Two days, Snaxx.”

“Two days,” Snaxx said, and left.

* * *

The Crooked Lantern was quiet when she got back. Not empty, it was never empty, but the evening crowd had thinned to its late-night shape, the committed few who had made their decisions about the night and were seeing them through.

Virok looked up when she came in. She went straight past the bar and up the stairs.

Her room was small and she had kept it that way deliberately,

which was the habit of someone who had always needed to be able to leave quickly, who had never accumulated things that didn't fit in a pack. She pulled the pack out from under the bed and started going through it. What she had. What she'd need. Twenty miles south, forest terrain, unknown situation at the end of it.

Bedroll. Change of clothes. The good lock tools, not the everyday ones. Rope, because there was always a moment you needed rope. Her dagger, obviously. A second one, smaller, for the boot. Food for three days on the road each way — she'd need to pick that up tomorrow, along with whatever Elira's idea of camp supplies looked like, which was probably more organized than her own.

She sat on the edge of the bed with the half-packed bag in front of her and thought about twenty miles of road and what came after it.

She thought about the board on the wall of the suite. The strings and the notes and the handwriting that didn't stop being careful even when it was covering an entire wall. Elira trying to build a picture of a sister she had never met from fragments, because that was the only way she knew how to sit with something she couldn't solve.

Snaxx understood that. The difference between them was that Snaxx's version of the same instinct looked like a posting board and thirty crowns and a window latch on a rooftop in the afternoon cold. Same impulse. Different tools.

She finished packing. Turned off the lamp. Lay back on the bed

in the dark and listened to the sounds of the Crooked Lantern
doing its usual thing below her.

Firstday. Two days.

She was already looking forward to it.

Intertwined

They left Pamerial on Firstday morning, in the hour before the city had decided to be awake.

The south gate district was the quietest part of Pamerial at that hour, it was quieter even than the pre-dawn streets Snaxx had walked after the masquerade, because at least then there had been the last stragglers of the night crowd finding their way home. This was different. This was the city in the space between, the streets belonging to nobody in particular, the stone still holding the cold of the night and the sky not yet committed to morning. A cat watched them from a windowsill. A cart horse stood motionless outside a shuttered grain merchant's, patient in the way of animals that had learned to wait. Somewhere in the distance, a bell marked the hour.

Elira was, Snaxx noticed, not at her best.

Not visibly, as she was still composed, still upright, still wearing the practical traveling coat with the same deliberate care she wore everything. But there was a quality to her silence that was different from her usual silence, not there

was something slightly delayed around the edges of her this morning, as though she was arriving fully one step behind herself, and when she had looked at the south gate as they approached it, she had looked at it the way a person looked at something they were required to deal with before they were ready.

Snaxx reached into her pack and produced the travel vessel.

Virok had given it to her the night before without being asked, setting it on the bar beside her with a look that communicated everything and said nothing. It was good coffee, somehow better than the Crooked Lantern's usual, which meant he had made it specifically for this, and it was still warm.

She held it out.

Elira looked at it. Looked at Snaxx. Amusement touched her expression, a look that she didn't have the morning resources to fully compose away.

"Virok," Snaxx said simply.

Elira took it with both hands, the way she always took warm things, and said nothing for a moment. When she finally spoke, it was quiet. "Please thank him for me."

"He knows," Snaxx said.

They passed through the south gate as the city began, distantly, to stir.

The trade road south unrolled ahead of them into the grey morning, wide enough at first, the stone surface worn smooth

by generations of merchant traffic. Pamerial contracted behind them the way cities did, not all at once but in stages, the noise thinning first, then the smell, then the particular weight of being inside something large. After a mile the city was a sound at their backs. After two it was a shape against the sky. After three it was just the road ahead and the cold and the two of them moving through it.

Elira had finished the coffee by then. She was more herself.

“How much do you have in that pack?” she said.

Snaxx glanced at it. “Everything I own.”

A beat. “Everything?”

“Bedroll, change of clothes, tools, rope, daggers, food for the road.” Snaxx shrugged. “That’s it. That’s the whole of it.”

Elira was quiet for a moment. “You’ve always traveled this way?”

“Since I left Myrefall.” Snaxx looked at the road ahead. “Hard to carry more than you can run with. And I’ve always needed to be able to run.”

“And now?”

“Still traveling light,” Snaxx said. “Working on the running part.”

Elira looked at her sidelong, the particular look she used when something had said more than its surface. She didn’t push it. Snaxx appreciated that.

The morning opened around them as they walked. The road was wide enough to be comfortable, the stone giving way to packed earth as they left the city's maintained borders, the fields on either side grey and bare in the autumn light. A farmstead appeared through a stand of leafless trees, there was smoke rising from its chimney, a dog watching them from the gate without much interest. Further on, a cluster of waymarkers at a crossroads pointed south in three different directions with no explanation of what distinguished them.

"Three roads," Snaxx said.

"The middle one," Elira said, without breaking stride.

"How do you know?"

"The stones at the edge are spaced differently. Cart traffic, heavy loads. The merchant road."

Snaxx looked. She could see it, now that it had been pointed out. "Right."

They took the middle road.

By midmorning the maintained surface had fully given way to packed earth, and the fields had given way to scrubland, and the scrubland had given way to the first real trees, not the neat-edged copses of farmland but proper old growth, the kind that had been there long before the road and would be there long after. The trunks were thick and dark, the branches bare and crossing overhead like arguments. The sky narrowed to a stripe of pale autumn grey between them.

A waymarker at a junction confirmed they were heading the right direction. Snaxx pointed out that it implied a straight route while the road ahead curved significantly around a hill.

"That is either a surveying error," Elira said, "or deliberate misdirection."

"I know which one I'd bet on."

"The road still arrives at its destination."

"Eventually," Snaxx said. "After the hill."

They ate lunch walking. Elira managed it with considerably more dignity than Snaxx had expected, which she mentioned.

"You're good at this," Snaxx said.

"At eating while walking?"

"At being outside a room. I had you down as a recluse."

Elira looked at her with mild offense. "I spent eleven years traveling between institutions of higher warding across three regions of the continent. I am not unfamiliar with roads."

"You seem very contained," Snaxx said. "Like you belong somewhere with tall shelves and controlled lighting."

"That description applies to most people who maintain an estate."

“Most people who maintain an estate don’t make it feel like a deliberate choice,” Snaxx said.

Elira was quiet for a moment. Then: “It has been, on occasion, a deliberate choice.” She said it plainly, without elaboration, and looked ahead at the road.

Snaxx let it rest. That was something she had learned about Elira. When she offered a true thing plainly, you received it plainly. You didn’t pick at it.

The afternoon deepened around them. The road kept narrowing, the trees pressing closer, the sky between the branches thinning to almost nothing in places. Their footsteps sounded different here than they had on the open road, they were quieter, absorbed by the ground and the trees, the sound not carrying the way it did in open air. Twice Snaxx heard something move in the undergrowth off to the side, some animal going about its own business and uninterested in them. The cold had a different quality here too, stiller, as if the wind had been left behind somewhere back on the open road and what remained was just the temperature of the earth itself.

They walked in comfortable quiet for a long stretch. The kind of quiet that didn’t need filling, that was, Snaxx had come to understand, one of the better things about Elira. She did not perform conversation. When there was something to say, she said it. When there wasn’t, she didn’t reach for something just to fill the air.

It was mid-afternoon when Elira said: "I was thinking about the night I hired you."

"Oh?" Snaxx said.

"I had your name from three separate people before I walked into the Crooked Lantern. All of them said the same thing. They all said that you were the best in Pamerial and that you were careful about what you took on." Elira kept her eyes on the road. "I found you immediately. You were at the furthest table from the door, back against the wall, with a clear line of sight to the whole room."

"Standard. I'm able to watch over my surroundings," Snaxx said.

"Perhaps. But you weren't performing it. Most people who want to seem watchful look watchful. You just were." A pause. "I put the coin pouch on the table and you didn't reach for it. You looked at me instead."

"I always look at the person before the coin," Snaxx said.

"I know that now." Elira glanced at her. "It surprised me then. I was not accustomed to being looked at like that."

Snaxx had looked at her, she remembered, because of the way she had come into the room. The particular quality of moving through a space. Elira had been certain, unhurried, already knowing where she was going. There had been other things too, things Snaxx had noticed the way she noticed everything, and she had decided fairly quickly that the job was going to

be complicated for reasons that had nothing to do with ward architecture. She did not say any of this.

"I was thinking about the passage," Elira continued. "More specifically, my father's journal. I had spent years maintaining those wards without fully understanding what I was maintaining them for. His notes were incomplete... he kept things in the journal he didn't put anywhere else."

She was quiet for a moment. The road curved gently. A crow lifted from a branch above them and was gone.

"About Syvis," Elira said.

The name arrived in the air between them and held there.

"I had been reading it in the chamber, the final section, the parts my father kept only there. I set it down to begin the sealing process. To remove the blood-key. To free her." A breath. "It was a choice. I made it knowing what it would cost. The passage sealed, and the journal was on the wrong side of it, and that is the end of the story." She said it evenly, the way she said things that were final. "I would make the same choice again. That doesn't make the loss smaller."

"You remember more than most people would," Snaxx said.

"That is not particularly comforting."

"It wasn't meant to be," Snaxx said. "It's just true."

Elira's composure shifted for half a second..

"My mother died when I was four," Elira said. The way it

came out, without announcement, just present, told Snaxx it had been waiting for the right moment rather than being held back. "My father raised me himself when he was present, which wasn't often. He was a diplomat. He traveled. I was raised largely by the staff." A pause. "I didn't know about Syvis. I was already gone when he sealed the passage. I was only just seventeen, studying abroad. He never told me. By the time I came home it had been done for years, and then he died, and I went on maintaining what he had built without understanding what I was maintaining."

"And she was there the whole time," Snaxx said.

"Two floors below me," Elira said quietly. "For most of my life. And I didn't know." A beat. "I could have been something to her. If anyone had told me. I could have at least been present."

Snaxx walked for a moment without speaking. She thought about what it meant to want to have been there for someone and to have simply not known they existed. The particular quality of that grief, she was not guilt exactly, but something adjacent to it, the weight of a door you didn't know was there until it was already closed.

"You would have," Snaxx said. "Been there for her. If you'd known."

"I would have tried," Elira said quietly. "I cannot know if I would have been enough."

"Nobody knows that until they're in it," Snaxx said. "The trying is the part that counts."

She let that sit for a moment. Then, “My parents were killed when I was young,” Snaxx said. “Adventurers raiding the outskirts of Myrefall. It wasn’t unusual as Myrefall had nothing worth protecting, so nobody protected it.” She kept her eyes on the road. “I know what it’s like to have people who should have been there and weren’t. What it does to you. How long it sits.” She looked at Elira sidelong. “What I’m saying is, the not knowing isn’t something you did. And the wanting to have been there is the part that matters. That doesn’t go away just because the chance did.”

Elira looked at her. Not with pity. With the quality of attention that meant something was being received, not just heard.

“How old?” Elira said.

“Young enough that eight crowns and the road made more sense than staying.”

“I’m sorry,” Elira said. Quietly and without qualification.

“I know,” Snaxx said. “Same.”

They walked in silence for a while after that. Not the silence of two people who had run out of things to say but the silence of two people who had said something real and were giving it room. The road curved again and the trees grew older, the light shifting as the afternoon turned amber at the edges. Through a gap in the canopy, Snaxx caught the first sight of what was waiting just ahead of them: the forest proper, darker and closer, old growth pressing in on either side. Above the tree line, the moon rose full and bright into the early evening sky.

The wolves announced themselves before they reached the tree line.

A long howl from deep in the forest, carrying clearly on the cold air. Then another, closer. Then, from the left side of the road, the sound of something moving through dry undergrowth — steady and deliberate, aware of them. The moon was up and full and the road ahead disappeared into dark under the old canopy.

Both of them slowed without discussing it.

“Full moon,” Snaxx said, scanning the tree line.

“I noticed,” Elira said. She had gone still beside Snaxx, her eyes moving through the dark between the trees with the focused attention she gave things she was trying to read. “The wolves will circle but they won’t come through if we have a fire. We have that much.”

“We’ll camp here then,” Snaxx said.

Snaxx looked at the clearing on their left. It had flat ground, sheltered beneath the trees, wide enough. “Here,” she said. “Before we lose the light entirely.”

“Yes,” Elira said. “Here.”

She set it on the ground and began assembling it with the calm efficiency of someone who had thought this through before leaving.

Snaxx stared at it. “You packed a tent.”

"I did."

"That's—" Snaxx shook her head. "You're brilliant, you know that?"

Elira glanced at her with the expression she used when a compliment had arrived and she wasn't certain what to do with it. "One of us had to think of it," she said, and went back to the pegs.

Snaxx crouched beside her and held the first pole in place while Elira drove the pegs. Neither of them said anything about it. It went up in under ten minutes.

The fire took quickly after that. By the time the last light had left the sky they had it going properly and it had become a good fire, large enough to matter, positioned between the tent and the tree line. The tent opening faced the fire and the forest beyond. Inside: two bedrolls laid close together, close enough that the cold between them would have no room.

The wolves called again as the dark fell fully. They were not close, the fire held them back, but present, their voices carrying through the trees from different directions, circling in the patient way of animals that were in no hurry. The full moon silvered the road behind them and laid long shadows from the trees ahead, and the forest was a wall of dark with a quality to it that Snaxx had been reading since they arrived, it appeared not threatening, exactly. Just waiting.

They settled at the tent's opening, side by side, their backs against their packs, the fire before them.

It was warm like that. The fire put out good heat and Elira was close and the cold that remained was the manageable kind, the kind that reminded you you were outside without making demands about it. Snaxx stretched her legs toward the fire. Elira did the same. Their arms were touching at the sleeve and neither of them moved away from it.

“What do you think is in there?” Snaxx said, looking at the tree line.

“I have a theory,” Elira said. “I want to see it in daylight before I say.”

“Fair.”

A wolf called from somewhere off to the left, closer than before, and Elira shifted slightly toward the fire. The shift brought her closer to Snaxx. Neither of them addressed it.

“What was it like,” Elira said, “the first time you were really alone? After Myrefall.”

“Terrifying,” Snaxx said. “And then fine. And I figured out pretty quickly that the terrifying and the fine were the same thing. That being alone just means there’s nobody to disappoint but yourself. Once I got that, it got easier.”

“Did it stop being terrifying entirely?”

“Mostly.” Snaxx looked at the fire. “There are still things that scare me.”

Elira looked at her sidelong. She didn't ask. Snaxx didn't offer. The fire held between them and the wolves circled at a distance.

The conversation moved on, circling into other things: Elira describing the most difficult ward construct she had ever built, three anchor points and a miscalculation she had spent a week tracking down; Snaxx describing the most complicated lock she had ever opened, in a building that turned out to belong to someone considerably more important than the job had suggested. They talked and the fire burned lower and the night deepened and the full moon moved overhead, bright and indifferent and making the shadows from the tree line long and sharp.

At some point the talking slowed. The silences grew longer and more comfortable. They were both still watching the fire and the tree line, and their arms were still touching, and at some point Snaxx became aware that their hands were close on the ground beside them, not yet touching, not quite, but close in the way that was its own kind of statement. The warmth coming off Elira was real and present and Snaxx was very aware of it and of the distance that remained between their hands and of the fact that she was not going to be the one to close it, not here, not like this.

This deserved better than a campfire at the edge of an unknown forest.

But she did not move away from it either.

"We should sleep," Elira said eventually. Quietly, in the tone of someone who was aware the suggestion applied equally to herself.

"Yeah," Snaxx agreed.

They moved into the tent.

* * *

In the dark, side by side in their bedrolls, the fire's glow warm and orange through the tent wall and the wolves distant and the forest ahead unknown and waiting, Snaxx lay on her back and looked at nothing.

She thought about the pack that held everything she owned. About traveling light for years because she had always needed to be able to run. About lying still in the dark next to someone and not wanting to be anywhere else, which was not a feeling she had a lot of experience with and which was, she had come to understand, exactly the kind of thing that scared her.

"Elira," she said.

"Yes," Elira said, her voice quiet and awake in the dark.

Snaxx looked at the orange glow on the tent wall. The questions were sitting right there, fully formed, patient. Whether *any of this was what she thought it was*. Whether *she was reading it right or building something out of nothing*, whether *the ears and the careful expressions and the way Elira moved toward the fire when the wolf called and then didn't move back*, whether *all of it meant what she thought it meant*. Whether *she was the kind of thing Elira stayed for*.

She had never been afraid to ask a direct question in her life.

"Nothing," she said. "Just making sure you were still there."

Then Elira's hand found hers in the dark, moving toward something she had already decided on. Her fingers slid between Snaxx's and held there, and Snaxx's heart did something she didn't have a controlled word for, something that started in her chest and went all the way down to her hands, which suddenly felt like the most important part of her body. Every question she had been too afraid to ask dissolved at once into the simple fact of Elira's fingers between hers, deliberate and quiet and sure in the dark, with the forest ahead and the whole long road behind them, as if everything she had been holding apart in herself finally stopped resisting being together.

Snaxx felt everything she had wanted to ask answer itself.

"I'm still here," Elira said.

Outside the fire burned low and the wolves had gone quiet and the moon moved across the sky. Inside the tent their fingers stayed intertwined as the night deepened, as one of them slept and then the other, as the forest waited ahead of them with whatever it was holding, patient as the trees themselves.

Just Past the Treeline

Snaxx woke first.

The tent was dim, the fire outside long since burned to cold ash, the light coming through the canvas, the particular flat grey of early morning in autumn. For a moment she lay still and looked at the ceiling and thought about the night before with the fire, the wolves, the conversation that had gone somewhere real, and the warmth of their hands in the dark, which had settled something in her she didn't quite know how to name. Something restless in her had finally gone quiet.

She turned her head. Elira was asleep beside her, without the composed attention she brought to every waking moment, her hair come loose from however she'd pinned it, one hand curled near her face, ears their normal pale color. Snaxx noted the ears specifically with some satisfaction.

She let herself look for a moment longer than was strictly necessary. Then she got up.

The air outside was sharp and cold, the kind that got into the

lungs on the first breath and reminded you that the season meant business. The sky was still more grey than blue, the sun not yet committed to arriving, the forest ahead of her holding its quality of silence. She stood outside the tent for a moment and listened, hearing the distant sound of the stream, the faint movement of the highest branches in the wind, and the absence of everything else that would be present in a city like Pamerial, before she moved.

She gathered deadfall along the tree line, working by feel in the low light. The wood there was dry, sheltered under the dense canopy from the frost that had settled over the rest of the ground, and she found enough within ten minutes to build something worthwhile. Her hands worked automatically, stacking and sorting the way she'd done a hundred times in a hundred different places, while her mind stayed somewhere in the warmth of the previous evening: the sound of the fire, the wolves circling at a distance, Elira's voice in the dark saying things quietly that she had been carrying ever since.

She built the fire from nothing, the way she always built fires: small dry kindling at the center, larger pieces arranged around it at angles to encourage the draw, patience with the flint until the spark caught and held. The flame was small and serious at first, the way good fires started, and then it found its footing and spread, and by the time it was putting out real heat the sky had lightened enough to call it morning.

Travel bread, dried fruit, the last of Virok's vessel. She arranged everything at the fire's edge, the coffee warming against the coals without quite reaching hot. The smell of it reached her even cold and she decided that close enough was good enough.

Elira emerged from the tent with the slightly delayed composure of someone reassembling themselves from scratch, which took slightly longer than usual and was all the more endearing for it.

“Morning,” Snaxx said.

Elira looked at the fire. At the arranged breakfast. At Snaxx. “You’ve been busy.”

“Couldn’t sleep much longer.” Snaxx handed her the vessel. “Fair warning, it’s cold. I tried but it didn’t quite get there.”

Elira looked at the vessel. Looked at Snaxx. Took it, drank, and made the specific expression of someone enduring something deeply unpleasant for reasons she had committed to before the full information was available.

“That,” she said, with great composure, “is genuinely awful.”

“Virok’s is better hot,” Snaxx agreed.

“All coffee is better hot. Cold coffee is an affront to all coffee in general.”

“And yet.”

Elira looked down at the vessel like it had personally betrayed her. “And yet,” she agreed, before taking another drink anyway.

Snaxx watched her finish it and found it enormously endearing and was not going to say so. The morning settled around

them; The fire was doing its job properly now, the cold air kept at a manageable distance, the forest ahead looking considerably less threatening in pale daylight than it had the night before.

"You snore," Snaxx said, after a while.

Elira looked at her. "I do not."

"Just a little. Very quiet. Very dignified about it. Almost like a purr, honestly—"

"Snaxx! I have never snored in my life."

"Sure."

"You talk in your sleep," Elira said, with the tone of someone producing evidence.

"I do not."

"Mm."

"That sounded fake."

"You spent several minutes arguing with something about stairs."

Snaxx stared at her. "...was I winning?"

"Decisively."

“Good. Lovely night, really.”

Elira looked at her for a long moment and then, despite herself, smiled. Not the careful almost-smile she kept on a short leash, but a real one, brief and unguarded, that came before she could arrange anything about it.

“Lovely night,” she agreed, quietly.

The morning was very pleasant.

They ate and agreed that the travel bread was better than it had any right to be after a night in a pack, that the dried fruit was just sweet enough, and then broke camp with the efficiency of two people who had done it before. Tent down, bedrolls packed, the site left as they had found it. Snaxx stamped out the fire’s remains and stood for a moment watching the last of the smoke curl away into the cold morning air. The forest ahead was waiting. The road behind them was clear.

“Ready?” Snaxx said.

“Ready,” Elira confirmed.

They turned toward the forest.

* * *

In the morning light the wrongness of it was fully visible, and somehow worse for being fully visible.

The trees themselves were ordinary and had old growth, but they were bare-branched, the kind of dense autumn canopy that filtered the light to something grey and flat and made the ground between the trunks look like it had been there since

before anyone was keeping track. Dead leaves thick on the ground, frost-rimed roots, the occasional fallen trunk half-dissolved into the soil. A stream ran somewhere nearby, the sound of it reaching them clearly in the cold air, and under normal circumstances it would have been a pleasant enough autumn forest.

But ten yards into the tree line, everything stopped being true at once.

The stream's sound cut off at an invisible point as sharply as if a door had been shut. The wind that moved the uppermost branches on their side of the line did not move the branches on the other side. Those instances were still, absolutely still, in a way that had nothing to do with shelter or terrain. And the smell was the worst of it, reaching them in the air from somewhere ahead: too sweet, too preserved, the particular wrongness of something that had been held in place past the point where holding was natural.

Snaxx stopped a few paces back from the tree line and looked at it. Something about the quality of the light in there was wrong too, she realized was flat in a way that had nothing to do with cloud cover, as if the light had simply stopped moving at some point and was sitting where it had been left.

"There," Elira said, stopping about ten feet from the boundary. She was looking at it with her ward-reading expression, the one that meant she was seeing something the rest of the world couldn't. Standing here in the morning light, in her traveling coat with her hair still slightly looser than usual from sleep, reading invisible architecture with her eyes. Snaxx looked at

her and thought, not for the first time, that she was remarkable. "The shadows stop falling correctly past that point. The light has no movement. There is a seam in the air at approximately six feet, you can see it if you look at where the frost on the ground stops."

Snaxx looked. She could see now that it had been named. There was a place where the frost simply ended, not melted, just stopped, as though the ground on the other side had forgotten autumn was happening.

"So, we definitely don't step past that," Snaxx said.

"Correct. The boundary architecture should tell me what we're dealing with. If I can examine the seam properly—"

"Hang on," Snaxx said, drifting a few steps sideways to get a different angle. "Does it go all the way around? Like a full perimeter? Because if it just cuts across the road that's one problem, but if it wraps the whole section of forest then you'd need to approach it differently, right?"

Elira looked at her. "You're asking about containment geometry?"

"I'm asking if it goes around or just across."

"It's a meaningful distinction. A linear ward and a contained perimeter require entirely different approaches." Elira moved slightly to her left, reading the seam from the new angle. "In this case the frost line suggests a closed perimeter. You can see it curves here. Do you see where the dead leaves stop moving

on the right side? That's the boundary continuing into the undergrowth."

Snaxx looked. She couldn't quite see it. "How do you anchor something like that in a forest? The trees move. Wind, growth... Doesn't that mess with the structure?"

"Ward anchors don't require static objects. They can be keyed to the ground itself, the root level, which is far more stable than the canopy. If you set the primary anchors at root depth you could sustain a perimeter through significant surface movement."

"So, you'd need one anchor per — what, per tree? Per section?"

"Per section, with sufficient coverage that no gap exceeds the ward's coherence threshold. The mathematics of it depends on the specific construct, but generally—"

"What's a coherence threshold? Is that like a ratio?"

"It's a function of the anchor density relative to the perimeter length and the—" Elira stopped. She looked at Snaxx. "Are you actually asking because you want to know or are you asking because you find something about this entertaining?"

"Both," Snaxx said honestly.

Elira looked at her for one more moment and then she laughed, one with that unguarded sound, the one that arrived without permission and surprised her every time, and Snaxx laughed too at the sheer pleasure of having caused it, and she stepped

back without thinking and the world closed around her.

No drama. No sensation worth describing. One moment she was outside laughing, and the next she was inside a stopped forest with the laugh still on her face and no sound reaching her at all.

She spun around.

The forest was frozen.

Two caravans stood on the road, mid-motion. The oxen with their great heads turned slightly as if startled by something, their legs caught mid-step, their breath visible as small white clouds that had not moved, had not dispersed, had simply stopped where the air had left their nostrils and stayed. The first caravan was loaded with bolts of cloth, several of them half-unrolled as if being inspected at the moment of freezing, the fabric hanging at an angle that made no physical sense. The second had barrels and crates and tucked among the cargo against the back board, two children who had clearly been laughing at something had their mouths open, hands raised, bodies caught in the full physical expression of delight, every line of them saying joy that had simply been stopped mid-arrival.

Birds hung motionless between the branches. Three of them, at different heights, their wings at different stages of the downstroke. A single leaf that had been falling was frozen at knee height, perfectly horizontal, tilted slightly as if the air that had been carrying it still was.

On the driver's bench of the first caravan sat a lizardborn man in a wide-brimmed hat, a pipe clamped between his teeth, a thin thread of smoke rising from the bowl and stopping perfectly still about six inches above it, a small frozen curl of blue grey.

He was turned three-quarters toward the back of his caravan, mid-sentence, one hand raised with two fingers extended as if he'd been making a point. On the bench of the second caravan, a young blond man had been frozen in the middle of saying something back, his expression bright and animated, his hand gripping the seat edge.

Everything stopped. Everything except Snaxx.

The silence was unlike anything she had experienced. It was not the quiet of an empty room or a deserted street, but the total absence of ambient sound, the kind that pressed against the ears because ears were built to expect something and were getting nothing. No wind. No birds. No insects. No creak of wood or shuffle of animal. Just her own breathing, very loud in the stopped air.

“Elira!”

Her voice hit the stopped air and died immediately, as if the word had been swallowed the moment it left her mouth. No echo, no carry, nothing.

She ran toward where she had entered, arms out, and found the resistance. The boundary wall was not solid, it was more like pressing into still water, a surface tension that gave slightly and then held, but she pushed harder and felt it give no further and pushed with her whole weight and it did not move.

She could not see through it. From the inside it looked like ordinary forest, the boundary invisible.

She stepped back and made herself think.

She moved to the nearest frozen person, a woman near the

back of the second caravan, and reached out and touched her arm. Solid. Warm at body temperature, as if frozen at the precise moment of living rather than dead. She tried to move her. Immovable, like trying to shift stone.

She tried the oxen. Same. She tried the children, gently, and felt the same solid immovability. She looked at their expressions, and they remained unchanged, their frozen laughter held perfectly in place.

She walked the full boundary as best she could determine it, pressing at different heights, looking for any point where the resistance thinned or gave. There was none. She walked it again from the other direction. Still none.

She backed up and ran at it full speed. She felt the impact of the resistance through her whole body and bounced back, and the boundary had not moved at all.

She pressed a coin flat against it and held it there for a full minute, feeling for any vibration or response. Nothing.

She stood in the middle of the stopped forest and looked at the frozen scene and read it the way she read any space she found herself unexpectedly inside: properly, methodically, the way she'd been trained by nothing except necessity.

The oxen had been calm at the moment of freezing, their weight balanced, no signs of having startled or shied. The cargo was undisturbed. The children's faces held no fear, no warning, no awareness of anything wrong. Nobody was reaching for anything, nobody was braced. Whatever had happened had come without any warning at all, and it had come gently, this was not against them, not at them, just around them. Like a jar sealed from the outside with the contents still perfectly intact.

She found the pipe then. The frozen smoke had caught her eye before, but now she crouched close and looked at the pipe itself. It had old silver fittings worn smooth with years of handling, the bowl carved into a shape she couldn't quite identify from this angle, the stem curved in a particular way. Well-traveled. Well-loved. The kind of object that had been carried a long way for a long time and had meant something to someone the whole way.

The shape of the stem. The weight it suggested. Something about it tugged at the back of her mind and she pushed it away and chose not to follow it.

She stood up. She went back to the boundary and tried everything again. She tried talking at the seam slowly, pressing each word against it, in case vibration carried through even if sound did not. She tried making as much noise as she could, jumping, striking her boot against the frozen ground. She tried pressing both palms flat against the resistance and holding them there and thinking very hard at Elira, which she was aware was not a real strategy but felt worth attempting.

Nothing worked. Nothing was going to work from the inside, and she had known that since the third attempt, but she kept working because standing still felt worse.

Eventually she went back to where she'd entered and waited, and slowly the air began to glow.

Faintly at first, a warmth at the seam that had no light source she could identify, building gradually like something being turned up from a distance. Then brighter, more focused, the glow concentrating at the boundary with the intensity of something

extremely deliberate happening on the other side. It built and built until the seam was bright enough to cast a faint shadow from her hand when she held it up, and then the world split open with a sound like a mirror cracking from the center outward. There was one sharp report that rang through the stopped air, then a cascade of smaller fractures, each one distinct, ringing and ringing in the space between the trees.

* * *

Sound flooded back all at once.

Birdsong from everywhere, the stream rushing back into audibility, the wind in the branches, the creak of caravan wheels completing the motion they had started a moment or a very long time ago. The leaf that had been hanging at knee height dropped to the ground. The frozen clouds of the oxen's breath dissipated instantly. The birds in the branches finished their wingbeats and were gone.

The children's laughter completed itself and then stopped, because the children were looking around at a forest that was not the forest they had been laughing in a moment ago.

The smell arrived, fruit gone soft in the barrels, the sweet wrongness of things that had been preserved past their limit and were now catching up all at once. Bread that had crossed into something worse. Something in the back of the second caravan that had been fresh and was decidedly not anymore.

The lizardborn finished his sentence, "— an-oth-er three hours to the way-point, and then we make camp, yes-s?" and stopped. He looked at his pipe. The bowl had gone cold. He pressed a

thumb to the ash.

He looked at the road. The shadows were entirely the wrong angle for the time of day he remembered. He looked at the sky, checking the sun's position, and the sun was not where it should have been by a significant margin. He looked at his cargo, and he could smell it from where he sat.

From the second caravan bench, the young blond man had stood up. "What — okay, the time is wrong. The light outside is very wrong! Nico?"

"I see it," the lizardborn said, calmly.

"The cargo smells, like it smells really bad, like... something has gone off, like several things have gone off—"

"I know."

"What the fuck, Nico." His voice had left its starting register entirely. "What happened? Were we just — were we just sitting there? Were we *frozen*? Like fish?" He grabbed the side of the caravan and looked over at the first caravan and then at the forest and then at his own hands. "Oh fuck. Oh fuck, this is genuinely bad, we are so screwed, the cargo is ruined and we don't know what day it is and—"

"Breathe," the lizardborn said, in that warm rolling cadence, every syllable landing with its own even weight.

"I am breathing!"

“Breathe slower.”

The young man sat back down. He was visibly, deliberately breathing.

The lizardborn looked at his cold pipe for a moment. He looked at the road, at the angle of shadows, at the position of the sun. He looked at the back of his own caravan and began counting: his wife, his two children, the other passengers. His eyes were moving through each face methodically. Then his gaze moved to the space beside his wife where someone had been sitting.

“Hey,” he said, in that same unhurried cadence. “Where did the woman go?”

His wife looked to her right, then to her left, genuinely uncertain. “She was literally right here—”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“I turned my head for one second and she just—” She made a gesture that communicated the whole problem.

The lizardborn nodded slowly, as if this told him something he had half-expected. He began refilling the pipe from his leather pouch, fingers working from long habit.

Then he looked up and saw Snaxx and Elira standing at the tree line, and for the first time, something shifted in his expression, there was a genuine moment of surprise, the look of a man absorbing something that had no existing category to go into. He looked at them. He looked at the forest behind them. He looked back at them.

“How long,” he said, with that even measured cadence, “has it been?”

“Several days at minimum,” Elira said, walking toward the caravans. Her voice was composed but her pace was quick, already in the mode of things needing to be managed. “The caravans were reported missing and a posting went up. We found the posting the day it appeared and came as quickly as we could.”

He absorbed this with the equanimity of a man who had decided the situation was what it was and the next practical question was what to do about it.

“The cargo,” he said.

“Spoiled. I’m sorry... It will need to be left here.”

He looked at his cargo. He looked at the road ahead toward Blackhollow, and then at the road back toward Pamerial. He got the pipe going again, and as thin curl of smoke rose into the morning air, he exhaled slowly.

“That’s a loss,” he said.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

He gestured with the pipe toward the women.

“No thanks, I prefer the bottle, honestly,” Snaxx said.

“Ah, different medicine,” he agreed, every syllable its own weight. He looked at the young man on the second bench, who was

still working through something internally. "We leave the bad cargo. We go home."

"THANK YOU," the young man said, with the feeling of someone who had been waiting for an adult to make a decision.

* * *

They unloaded the spoiled cargo at the road's edge. The lizardborn directed his family with the calm of a man who had made peace with the situation, the young man channeling his remaining agitation into moving things quickly and efficiently, which was the productive version of it. Snaxx and Elira took the heavier crates together, working in the near silence of people who had worked enough jobs together to not need commentary.

The children had stopped crying and were watching everything with the wide-eyed attention of people for whom this was the most interesting day of their lives so far.

When both caravans were cleared and ready, Elira turned to the lizardborn.

"We'll escort you back to Pamerial," she said. "Take the road ahead, and we'll follow directly behind you. We'll stay with you until the city."

He nodded, satisfied with this.

"Give us a few minutes first," Elira said.

The lizardborn looked between them with the serene attention of a man who noticed things and did not comment on them unless the moment called for it, and this moment apparently did not. "Take your time," he said, in those even syllables, and

clucked to the oxen.

The caravans began to move. Snaxx watched them go and felt the sensation of an impending conversation arriving.

She turned to Elira.

She knew what was coming. She'd backed into... whatever just happened, while laughing, and Elira had watched her disappear. Now they were alone on the road and Elira had asked for a minute, and yeah, this was going to be a lecture. Snaxx ran through it in her head once more: she'd been fine, she'd worked the problem the whole time, it had all turned out just fine, and it wasn't like she'd done it on purpose—

Elira crossed the distance between them, took her face in both hands, and kissed her fully, immediately, without composure and without apology. She was arriving at something she had been building toward for longer than either of them had named it, and she was expressing it in the only language that felt adequate for the occasion.

Snaxx's world narrowed to a single point.

Everything went soft at the edges. The road, the trees, the distant sound of the oxen moving away, all of it reduced to peripheral, while this, specifically *this*, filled the entire center of everything she was aware of. The tunnel of it was complete and warm and certain, and when Elira stepped back the world expanded again like surfacing from deep water into bright air, sudden and full and very real.

Elira's hands dropped to her sides. Her ears were deeply rose-gold. Her expression had the quality of someone who had done a completely necessary thing and was now aware of the road,

the trees, and the possibility that a lizardborn caravan driver had been watching from the bench before the road curved.

She straightened her coat.

“That,” she said, with admirable composure, “was not entirely professional.”

“Elira.” Snaxx’s voice came out differently than usual. “I have never been so happy to be unprofessional in my life.”

Elira looked at her directly. “Do not back into unsafe boundaries again. I would rather not repeat any part of the last hour under circumstances that are even less dignified than these.”

“Yes, my lady,” Snaxx said, in the singsong of someone entirely in love with the situation and not even slightly trying to sound serious.

Elira’s expression changed, it was not quite a smile and absolutely not not one.

“We should catch up,” Snaxx said.

“Yes,” Elira said. “We should.”

They walked. The forest thinned around them, the trees giving way to scrubland and then to the broader road, and the quality of the light changed as the canopy opened, and the autumn sky came back in full. The caravans were visible ahead, moving at a steady pace, the oxen having found their footing on familiar ground.

Snaxx caught up to the lizardborn's bench as the trees opened out properly. He was smoking, relaxed, watching the road with the unhurried attention of a man who had decided to be philosophical about the day.

"That pipe," Snaxx said. "Where'd you get it?"

He looked at it. Turned it once in his hand, looking at it the way you looked at something when someone else's attention had made it briefly new again. Then he held it out to her.

"Take it," he said. "You got us out. That's worth something."

Snaxx looked at the pipe resting in his palm with the old silver fittings, the carved bowl, the particular curve of the stem.

She took it.

"I am Nico," he said. "Nico Gontaxu. From Padicdot, far to the south. You know it?"

"Padicdot." Something clicked in her chest, unexpected and specific. "I passed through there once. First stop after Myrefall, when I was young. Haven't been that far south in years." She looked at him. "Long time ago."

He looked at her with new attention. "Long way from home."

"Yeah," she said. "It is."

She walked beside the caravan with the pipe in her hands and let herself follow the thought this time, just briefly. Her father had smoked a pipe. Not this one, nothing this well-traveled, nothing with silver fittings worn smooth like this, but the same

general shape of it, the same weight, the same smell when the bowl was warm. She hadn't let herself think about that in years. She turned the pipe once more in her hands, tucked it into her coat pocket, and kept walking. Behind her she could hear Elira's voice, steady and practical, talking to the family in the second caravan about what to expect when they reached Pamerial, and the road north stretched ahead of them all the way home.

Shared Weight

The forest gave way to scrubland around midmorning, the old growth thinning and releasing them onto the open road, and the sky came back in full. Wide and grey and flat, the kind of sky that had decided on a temperature and committed to it, without the canopy to filter it into something dimmer. The caravans moved ahead at the pace of oxen who had found their footing on familiar ground, and Snaxx and Elira fell into the distance behind them that had established itself naturally.

Snaxx was, if she was being honest with herself, over the moon.

Not in a way she was going to announce. But the road was good and the cold air was honest and Elira was walking beside her and something had happened that morning that had not unhappened, and all of that together made her feel like a person who had gotten away with something enormous and was only just beginning to appreciate the scale of it.

She reached over and took Elira's hand.

Elira looked at their hands. Then at Snaxx. "We are escorting

two caravans," she said.

"We are," Snaxx agreed. "Very professionally."

"This is not particularly professional."

"No," Snaxx said. "It's not." She did not let go.

Elira looked at their hands again. A faint colour had risen in the tips of her ears, the particular gold-rose that arrived before anything else did. She did not pull away.

"You are impossible," she said, with very little force behind it.

"Probably," Snaxx said cheerfully.

She had been in Pamerial for the better part of three tendays. She had taken a handful of jobs in that time, had learned which streets moved faster in the morning and which market stalls were worth the detour. She had stayed in places longer than this before, but none of them had felt like staying. This one did, and the reason for it was currently walking next to her with rose-gold ears and a dignified expression that was not convincing anyone.

They walked like that for a while. Elira did not comment further, which Snaxx chose to interpret as acceptance. Eventually Elira's hand stopped being held stiffly and simply held back, which was better.

Ahead on the road, one of the children in Nico's caravan had climbed up onto the cargo and was standing with her arms out for balance, apparently conducting some kind of

experiment with the moving platform. Nico, from the bench, said something without turning around, every syllable landing at the same unhurried weight. The child sat back down with the dignity of someone who had decided this was her own choice.

“Do you think he ever yells?” Snaxx said.

“I think he follows a philosophy,” Elira said, watching the caravan ahead. “One that decides beforehand how much importance anything is allowed to have.”

“Like a religion?”

“Like a very relaxed one.”

Snaxx considered this. “Either way I want whatever he’s smoking.”

“You said you prefer the bottle.”

“I do. Doesn’t mean I’m not curious.”

Elira glanced at her with something that was almost a smile. Snaxx squeezed her hand once. The tips of her ears, already rose-gold, went a shade deeper as Snaxx caught her eye. Elira looked away at the road ahead, which did not fool either of them.

The road curved north-east as it opened out properly, the scrubland giving way to the first proper farmland. Fields on either side held the remnants of the harvest, dried corn stalks

stripped and pale, standing in rows that cast thin shadows across the frost-dusted earth. Further out, a dog was working the edge of a field with purpose, herding a small cluster of sheep toward a distant pen, its whole body concentrated on the task. The sheep disagreed with the direction but were going anyway.

“What do you think she wants?” Snaxx said. Not about the dog.

Elira understood. “I have been thinking about that since the passage.” She kept her voice even, the way she did with things she had been carrying. “She planned all of it. The journal was deliberate. Freeing her was what she needed from me. But what she wanted and what she needed are not the same thing, and I still don’t know what the first one is.”

“You freed her,” Snaxx said. “That was real.”

“I know. I just don’t know if it’s enough on its own.”

“Maybe it’s the first part,” Snaxx said. “You didn’t know she existed. Now you do. That’s not nothing. The rest you figure out when you’re in the same room.”

Elira was quiet for a moment. The dog had succeeded. The sheep were in the pen. The farm sat in the pale cold light looking entirely unconcerned with the problems of noble houses.

“She may not want to be in the same room with me,” Elira said.

“She might surprise you.”

“She might,” Elira said. Something that wasn’t quite hope but was close enough to its shape to matter.

Snaxx squeezed her hand. Elira let her.

The city began assembling itself against the grey sky ahead of them as the afternoon wore on, the outer buildings of Pamerial’s southern approach thickening as they walked. The air had sharpened further, the kind of cold that carried the smell of dead leaves and turned earth, the last of something burning itself out before the season closed entirely. Lanterns were already lit in some of the closer windows, a sign that the day was farther along than the flat light suggested.

They reached the city gates in the early evening, the light low and flat across the trade road, other merchants and travelers funneling through in the ordinary press of end-of-day movement. Nico brought his caravan to a halt just inside the gate and climbed down from the bench with the unhurried ease of a man for whom dismounting had a right pace and he had found it years ago. He stood before them, rolling Sataru leaves in paper, his fingers working from long habit, sealing the end with a practiced twist.

“My fam-ily is grate-ful,” he said, in that warm rolling cadence, every syllable landing with its own unhurried weight. “What you did back there — get-ting us out — that was no small thing.”

“We’re glad you’re back,” Snaxx said.

He nodded. He lit the paper roll, took a long pull, and looked at the city around him with the expression of a man reacquainting

himself with a familiar smell. Then he looked at Snaxx. "You still have the pipe, yes-s?"

She patted her coat pocket. "Right here."

"Good." He turned the paper roll in his fingers once. "You take care of it, it takes care of you. That's how it works with things that mat-ter."

He gave a satisfied nod and turned back to the caravan. Darek, from the second bench, gave them a wave that had a lot in it. Then Nico moved to the back of his caravan, where his wife and children were still sitting with the slightly dazed quality of people whose afternoon had gone very differently than expected, and he said something in that same even cadence, unhurried and steady, and his wife's shoulders dropped from where they had been held. One of the children climbed into his arms. He stood there a moment, just holding her, before setting her gently back down and beginning to talk through what needed doing.

Snaxx watched him do it. There was something in the way he moved through it — not minimizing, not rushing past — that she found she wanted to remember.

After a few minutes he looked back at them, gave a single nod that covered everything, and turned toward the market district with the purposeful stride of a man with a supply list and the philosophical energy to work through it. The caravans and their families followed, the crowd closing around them, and that was that.

"He'll be back this way," Snaxx said.

“Probably,” Elira said. “The Blackhollow run doesn’t stop for any current events.”

Snaxx thought about that. About Nico heading south toward the same road they had just come up, toward Blackhollow where things were not the same as they had been a tenday ago. “Should we warn him?”

“He’ll hear when he gets there,” Elira said. “I expect everyone will, eventually.”

Something in her voice. Not dread exactly. Awareness. Snaxx let it rest and turned toward the market road, where the guild hall sat waiting with its ledgers and its managed expectations.

Pamerial received them the way it always received Elira Varnis, which was to say it noticed her. Conversations dipped as they passed. A merchant straightened without deciding to. Two men outside a wine merchant’s both looked up at once, and a woman at a fabric stall who had been mid-transaction let her eyes follow the tall half-elf moving through her street with the unhurried certainty of someone who belonged wherever she happened to be standing.

Snaxx had seen it before. She saw it every time. The city had a particular relationship with Lady Varnis and always had, the kind that came from years of presence and reputation and the specific quality of someone who moved through a space and made the space aware of itself.

She thought, walking beside her, that she was probably the luckiest person in Pamerial.

* * *

The Adventurers' Guild hall sat on the lower market road, a practical building that smelled of old ledgers and managed expectation. Still open at this hour, light in the windows, a clerk visible through the glass at the intake desk. Snaxx pushed the door.

The clerk was a middle-aged human man with ink on three fingers and the expression of someone who had professionally managed the gap between what people expected and what they were going to receive. He looked up when they entered.

"Hi," Snaxx said. "We're here for the bounty on the caravan recovery. Southern run, two caravans, posted a couple of days ago."

The clerk consulted his ledger. He turned several pages with the deliberate pace of someone establishing that he was doing his job carefully. "The posting," he said, "specifies recovery of the caravans and their cargo."

"The caravans are recovered. We walked them through the gate a few moments ago."

"The cargo is listed as partially unrecovered."

Snaxx stared at him. "The cargo rotted inside a temporal bubble... thing. For the better part of a tenday! That's not unrecovered, that's spoiled. That's not on us."

"The posting specifies cargo as part of the deliverable."

“The posting was for missing caravans,” Snaxx said, her voice climbing. “The caravans were missing. They are not missing anymore. A lizardborn named Nico Gontaxu drove one of them through your gate tonight. You can go find him at the market right now and ask.”

The clerk’s expression did not change. He named a number. Ninety-five crowns.

“Eesht kahl fucking kidding ran?” Snaxx said.

Elira stepped forward, not in front of Snaxx but beside her. When she spoke it was without raising her voice, which made it considerably more effective than raising it would have been. “The posting rate for two recovered caravans is one hundred and fifty crowns,” she said. “You are proposing ninety-five. That is a thirty-seven percent reduction applied retroactively to a deliverable your guild defined, for circumstances that predated our involvement entirely. The caravans are in the city. The people inside them are alive. I would strongly encourage you to reconsider.”

The clerk looked at her for a long moment.

Elira looked back.

He recalculated. The final number was one hundred and fifteen crowns. Not the full rate, but close enough that the remaining gap would cost more in time than it was worth. Snaxx took the coins with less grace than she might have managed, and they left.

On the street outside, Snaxx turned the coins over in her palm,

angrily. "A hundred and fifteen. Ar'ekoon ö fucking joke tis payment kesh."

"It was the best outcome available," Elira said.

"Thirty-five short of what we were owed."

"Yes."

Snaxx divided the coins in her hand and held out half toward Elira. "Your cut."

Elira looked at the coins. "I don't need it."

"I know you don't. That's not the point. You worked the job."

"Snaxx," Elira said, with the particular tone she used when she had already decided something and was waiting for the other person to catch up.

"Elira," Snaxx said, with the particular tone she used when she knew she was losing but hadn't admitted it yet.

Elira looked at the coins in Snaxx's palm for a moment, then back at her. "Keep it," she said. "Consider it a contribution to whatever you're saving for."

Snaxx looked at her for a moment. Then she pocketed the full amount. "Fine," she said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Elira said, with the slight air of someone who

had won something and was being polite about it.

They found somewhere to eat on the market road, a place warm enough and doing sensible things with late harvest vegetables. The bread had been made that morning. The stew was what stew should be. Snaxx ate with the appetite of someone who had been on the road for two days and found civilization restored in the form of a hot bowl and a table that didn't move.

The conversation moved through lighter things. Snaxx told a story about a job she'd taken years ago in a city she'd been passing through that had gone wrong in a way that was still funny from sufficient distance. Elira listened with the quality of attention that meant she was actually there, not managing the conversation from behind glass. At one point she laughed, properly, the unguarded kind, and looked briefly surprised by it in the way she sometimes did when something arrived before she had decided to allow it.

Snaxx decided she was going to make that happen as often as possible.

The evening had fully settled by the time they paid and stepped back onto the street, the cold sharpened since sunset, the kind that found the gaps in a coat and reminded you it was there. They walked toward the canal crossroads without discussing it, the way they had started moving through the city together without needing to negotiate direction.

They parted at the canal bridge, the lanterns doing their amber work on the water below.

"Tomorrow,?" Elira said.

"Tomorrow," Snaxx agreed. "We talk about what comes next."

"Yes."

Snaxx held out her hand. Elira looked at it, then took it, and they stood there in the lamplight for a moment that belonged entirely to them. Then Elira squeezed once, held a moment longer than a goodbye strictly required, and let go. She turned toward the manor.

Snaxx held onto the warmth of it for the walk back. The canal bridge behind her, the lamplight still on the water, the particular cold carrying the smell of dead leaves and frost and the last of the season. She had stood on a lot of bridges in a lot of cities at the end of a lot of days and most of them had not felt like much. This one did.

The Crooked Lantern was in its evening shape when she pushed the door, the particular noise of a place that had made its peace with what it was and seen no reason to change. Warm air, low conversation, the smell of something being cooked better than it needed to be for the price. Virok looked up from behind the bar and said nothing, which was his way of saying several things.

Snaxx climbed onto a stool. "The usual."

He poured without comment and set it in front of her. She drank and let the day decompress, the road and the forest and the kiss and the guild office and Elira's hand on the bridge all settling into the background noise of an evening well earned.

"I need the room again," she said.

"Knew you would," Virok said. He refilled her glass without being asked. "People have been asking about House Varnis."

Snaxx looked at him. "What kind of asking?"

"The kind where they already know something and want to see if you do too."

She thought about that. About the merchant who had straightened when Elira walked past. About the city noticing her in the way it always did, and whether that noticing had felt different today, and whether she had been too busy being happy to read it properly.

She set the coins for the room on the bar. "Thanks, Virok."

He nodded once, which covered everything.

She went upstairs, unpacked what needed unpacking, and lay back on the bed with the particular ease of someone who was exactly where they were supposed to be and knew it. The Lantern did its thing below. Outside, the cold pressed at the window and did not get in.

She was thinking about tomorrow when she fell asleep.

* * *

The knock came in the early evening, the Lantern's noise unchanged below. Snaxx was on her feet with her dagger in hand before she had decided to be.

"It's me," said Elira's voice.

Snaxx lowered the dagger and opened the door.

Elira was not composed. That was the first thing, the thing that hit before anything else, before context or explanation. Elira was always composed. Controlled. Even frightened she had been controlled. This was something else entirely. This was Elira with the architecture of composure simply gone, standing in the corridor with her coat still on and a folded letter held in both hands that had clearly been read more than once, and something in her eyes that Snaxx had not seen there before.

Fear. Real fear. The kind that lives underneath everything and almost never comes up.

“Come in,” Snaxx said.

Elira stepped inside. Snaxx shut the door.

For a moment Elira just stood there. She held the letter at her sides and breathed and looked at the middle distance the way people looked at things they were still processing.

“Sit down,” Snaxx said quietly, the way she said things to people she wasn’t performing around.

Elira sat on the edge of the bed. She held out the letter.

Snaxx took it and unfolded it. The paper had been handled many times, the edges soft with it, and in two places the ink had run slightly in the way ink ran when something wet had touched it and dried. She read it.

It was not long. It did not need to be. Written in the language of public declaration rather than private correspondence, the kind of document designed to be read aloud in a square

or posted on a guild board rather than sealed and sent — but someone had sealed it anyway, and addressed it, and placed it in her suite among the letters that were waiting for her. Lord Adrien's actions laid out plainly: the child sealed underground, the blood-key, thirty years. The claim of Syvis Varnis-Grimmsworn as legitimate heir to both House Varnis and House Grimmsworn, and through that claim, a right to governance over Blackhollow and its standing with Pamerial. House Grimmsworn backing the claim. Blackhollow receiving her. The implication running through every line that Pamerial should draw its own conclusions about who held authority and why.

Snaxx set the letter down carefully on the bed between them.

Elira spoke first. "The board is gone." Her voice was level. The rest of her was not. "Everything on it. The notes, the strings, the map, all of it stripped clean. And some of the staff are gone. Three that I can account for, possibly more. Their rooms are cleared. No word, no letter, nothing — they simply left while we were away." A breath. "I don't know why. I don't know if they left because they were afraid, or because they were warned, or for some other reason entirely. I don't know if the board was taken deliberately or cleared by someone who didn't understand what it was. I don't know what any of it means yet."

"But it's all gone?" Snaxx asked.

"It's gone. Days of reconstruction. Whether someone took it deliberately or not, it's gone."

She thought about the board. The strings and the careful handwriting and the map at the center, everything Elira had rebuilt from an hour of reading under the ground with the

ceiling coming down. The days of work that had lived on that wall. She thought about what it meant to have built something from almost nothing and come back to find it simply absent. "The letter is what it is," Snaxx said. "Your father did what he did and people know it now and that is not something you caused, as for the staff who left — maybe they were scared. People leave when they're scared. That doesn't make them against you."

"I know," Elira said quieter.

"And whoever stayed, stayed for a reason. You don't know the shape of it yet. But it's there."

Elira looked at the letter on the bed for a long time. Then she looked at Snaxx.

"I don't want to go back tonight," she said. The plainness of it was the most honest thing Snaxx had heard her say. "I know I have to tomorrow. The manor is mine and walking away from it would suit certain people enormously and I am not going to do that. But tonight I cannot be in that house alone."

Snaxx looked at her for a moment. At the real fear, still present, and the real exhaustion behind it, and the real person who had walked across the city to a tavern corridor because she needed somewhere to land.

"Stay here," Snaxx said. "It may not fit both of us but we've shared a tent. How bad can this be?"

Something moved in Elira's expression. The thing underneath the fear, the thing that had been there since the treeline and before it.

“That is a very small bed,” Elira said.

“It is,” Snaxx agreed.

Elira looked at the small bed, then at Snaxx, then at the letter on the table by the window. The fear was still there, and the exhaustion behind it, and underneath both of those something that had been true since the treeline and wasn’t going anywhere. “All right,” she said.

She stayed. The letter sat on the small table by the window, folded, handled, read more than once. Outside, the city did what it always did, carrying whatever had happened inside it today without comment. The Lantern’s noise rose and fell below them like breathing. The cold pressed at the window and did not get in. In the morning they would go to the manor together. They would figure out the shape of what came next. None of that needed to be tonight.

Things that Matter

Snaxx woke to find Elira already sitting up on the edge of the small bed in the dark, fully dressed, hands in her lap, looking at nothing in particular. The lamp was unlit. The window showed the particular grey of early morning that had not yet committed to being day. Whatever Elira had been doing in the time before Snaxx opened her eyes, she had been doing it quietly and alone.

Snaxx watched her for a moment without saying anything.

“How long have you been up?” Snaxx said.

“Since before there was light outside,” Elira said.

Snaxx sat up and looked at the window. Outside, Pamerial was beginning its pre-dawn routines, the distant sounds of a city waking up at the edges while the centre still held. Elira did not move from the edge of the bed. Which meant Elira had been sitting in the dark for hours, dressed and waiting, gathering herself for a day she was not looking forward to.

“We don’t have to go today,” Snaxx said.

“Yes we do,” Elira said, simply, the way she said things that were final.

Snaxx did not argue with that, because Elira was right. They got up, and they went.

The walk to the manor was quiet, but not the kind of quiet that needed filling, it was the kind that sat between two people who had something large between them and had agreed, without discussion, to let it rest until they arrived.

The streets of Pamerial at that hour belonged to fishermen and couriers and no one else, people with somewhere specific to be before the city decided to wake up, moving with the purposeful efficiency of those who had long since made their peace with early mornings. A fisherman with a crate balanced on his shoulder cut across the canal bridge without looking up. Two couriers moved past in opposite directions, heads down, satchels held close. The city going about its pre-dawn business, indifferent and continuous.

Snaxx walked beside Elira and watched the streets and let the quiet be what it was. She thought about reaching for her hand. She did not. This was not a hand-holding morning. This was a getting-through-it morning, and the best thing she could do was be present without demanding anything from that presence. As she looked ahead, she thought of the manor with Elira’s stripped board and its reduced staff and the pile of correspondence that must’ve accumulated while they were away. The proclamation from Blackhollow already in circulation, with the knowledge

of the noble houses of either town already deciding which way to face.

The manor gate was unlocked. Someone had been watching for Elira. They went in without being ushered in by a door attendant.

The entrance hall was quieter than Snaxx had ever seen it. She had been inside this house twice before. First the masquerade and the job she was hired to do, and then the dinner, to which she had earned. Both times the house had been full of something, tension or purpose or the particular noise of people doing things. Now it was just a hall. Clean, maintained, the morning light beginning to come through the tall windows at the front, and the particular feeling of space where people used to be.

From somewhere ahead, the kitchens had already started. The smell of bread reaching up through the floor, and the sound of something on a fire, and the low voices of people who had decided to get on with it regardless.

Elira stood in the entrance hall for a moment after they came in. Just stood there, looking at the space. Snaxx watched her take it in and watched her make the decision that Elira always made, which was to carry what needed carrying quietly and present what needed presenting clearly, and then she straightened as she went to work and Snaxx followed.

Elira moved through it with the composure she had assembled on the walk over, and Snaxx watched her do it and thought about the dark of the Crooked Lantern room and the hours Elira had spent sitting dressed and waiting, gathering herself for exactly this. The composure was not effortless. It was built,

and it was holding, and that was not a small thing.

The morning was introductions. Elira moved through the remaining staff and she introduced Snaxx to each of them as contracted security, which was not entirely correct, but sufficient and had the professional distance of someone who was not able to be anything other than professional right now. The staff received this with the careful courtesy of people who understood what was happening in Blackhollow and were watching their lady's face for information about what it meant.

The housekeeper, named Jack Evans, a compact grey-haired woman who had been running this house longer than anyone currently in it and had long since made her peace with the fact that houses went through things, gave Snaxx a look that was perceptive without being unfriendly, "Miss Snaxx," she said, with the courtesy of someone who was going to do this correctly regardless of her opinions about it. "Will you be staying with us?"

"For now," Elira said, before Snaxx could answer. "She'll be assisting with security while we assess the situation."

"Of course, my Lady." The housekeeper's eyes moved briefly between them. "I'll have a room prepared on the second floor." Jack then took Snaxx's pack from her without being asked, the efficient gesture of someone for whom the handling of guests' belongings was simply part of the order of things, and disappeared with it up the stairs.

Next was the head of the guard rotation, who was a broad-

shouldered man named Corrin who took one look at Snaxx and began his briefing without waiting to be asked, which she respected immediately. He had the coiled energy of someone quietly furious about what had happened to his house and expressing all of it through extreme competence. He walked her through the schedule with the thoroughness of someone who had recently rebuilt it from scratch after losing people he had relied on, and he wanted her to understand exactly how much thought had gone into what remained.

The kitchens were last. Snaxx heard them before she reached the door. The particular noise of people who knew exactly what they were doing and were doing it at pace, pots and voices and the sound of something hitting a board in the steady rhythm of someone who had done that particular task so many times it had its own music. Elira pushed the door open and the warmth of it met them immediately, heat and bread and something on the fire that smelled like it had been going since before dawn. Four people looked up.

“Hollander, Muriel, Kolia, Poli,” Elira said. “This is Snaxx. She’ll be staying with us for the time being.”

Four faces looked at Snaxx with varying degrees of curiosity and reserved judgment. Hollander, the tallest, gave a nod that was professionally neutral. Muriel, small and quick, looked at her with the frank assessment of someone who had seen a lot of people come through this kitchen and had opinions about most of them. Kolia and Poli were younger, both watching to see what happened next.

“Good morning, it’s good to meet you all.” Snaxx looked at the coffee pot on the fire. “Any chance of a cup while it’s hot?”

Hollander looked at the pot, then looked at her. Hollander then took a cup from the shelf and poured coffee and handed to it both Elira and Snaxx. They both took it with both hands and drank.

It was good. Properly good, the kind that made Virok’s vessel-coffee taste like cowshit. There was something in it, something faintly sweet that she couldn’t immediately place.

“Honey,” Muriel said, from across the kitchen, before Snaxx could ask. “Lady Varnis takes it that way. We make it the same for everyone.”

Snaxx looked at the cup, and murmured, “Smart,” as she drank the rest of it standing at the counter while the kitchen moved around her. She looked at Elira, who was speaking quietly with Hollander about something practical back at the fire and Muriel doing three things at once and Kolia and Poli working the far end in the easy tandem of people who had shared a workspace long enough to stop narrating it.

Snaxx thought about cold coffee in a travel vessel on the road two days ago, Elira drinking it anyway with the expression of someone enduring an affront.

“Virok’s is never going to forgive me for cursing his coffee,” she said.

The kitchen had a warmth to it that the rest of the manor was still finding its way back to. Not forced warmth, the kind

that came from people who did the same work together every day and had built something in the doing of it. Whatever had happened with Maret and the others who had left, these four had apparently looked at each other and decided that the kitchens were still going to run. Snaxx found that she respected them for it.

Kolia made a sound that was almost a laugh. Muriel pressed her lips together in the way of someone being professional about finding something funny. Hollander handed her a piece of bread on her way out without comment. She counted that as warmth.

Elira left her with Corrin after that, which was the right call. What Snaxx needed to do next was not something that required Elira present.

She had broken into this house. Seventeen days ago, give or take, she had stood in the dark outside and read the building the way she read all buildings she intended to enter without permission. She had noted the window with the imperfect latch. She had noted the angle of approach that gave maximum cover before the wall. She had noted the patrol timing because patrol timing was always the thing worth noting, the heartbeat of a building's security, the place where the gap always lived.

She walked the perimeter with Corrin and showed him what she saw.

The north gate had a stone propped at its base, holding it open. Not forced. Just habit. She crouched and looked at how far the stone had settled into the ground.

"That's been there a while," she said.

"Longer than it should have been," Corrin said.

"I'm not criticizing. I'm saying someone who knew it was there could count on it being there." She stood up. "That's the problem."

He understood. She could see it in the way his jaw set.

The second-floor east window she found by memory, not by testing. She pointed at it from the ground.

"That latch doesn't seat," she said. "I know because I used it." Corrin looked at her.

"A few tendays ago," she said. "During the masquerade party, the one where someone got past your perimeter." She kept her voice neutral, because it was not about blame, it was about information. "Your external coverage was solid that night. The window was the gap. Still is."

Corrin was quiet for a moment. Then: "I'll have it re-seated today."

"Good."

The north approach gap she had identified before the walk even started, from the way the guard positions sat on the schedule. She showed Corrin on the ground, and stood in the specific spot where coverage from both the east and west positions fell short, then watched him look at it and understand it.

"Second and fourth hour," she said. "That's when you're longest blind here."

He looked at the position of his guard posts. Looked back at her. "You've done this kind of work before," Corrin said.

"The opposite of this work," Snaxx said. "Which means I know exactly what someone like me would look for."

Something in Corrin's expression shifted into something she recognised: the evaluation completing, the conclusion reached. "I'll adjust the patrol by this afternoon," he said.

They worked well together after that, she and Corrin. He was the kind of professional who respected competence over everything else, and she was the kind of professional who produced it, and that was enough.

* * *

Elira found her when the morning's work was done and walked her to the small dining room, the practical room where she ate without ceremony. Poli brought lunch out and set it down with care. The food was better than the situation required.

Elira looked up when Poli left. "She's been here four years," she said. The particular tone of someone reporting a fact they had only recently confirmed. "I did not know that until this morning. Hollander told me again this morning, and I realized I should have known it already."

"You know it now," Snaxx said.

"Yes." Elira was quiet for a moment. "I suppose I do."

They ate. The silence between them was not the dreading silence of the morning walk. Something in Elira had settled slightly from the work of the day, the way people settled when they had gotten their hands on something concrete and found they could manage it.

It was over the remains of lunch that Snaxx said it. "I want to talk about us. Not right now, I know the timing is bad. But it should go on the list."

Elira set down her fork. She looked at Snaxx, and the look was not the careful composed look she used most of the time. It was something harder and more tired.

"There is no list," she said. "There is the situation in Blackhollow, which is a political emergency. There is my name, which is currently in the mouths of people I cannot afford to ignore. There is my house, which is reduced and compromised and requires my full attention to hold together." She pressed her lips together. "I cannot afford to be distracted by personal matters right now. I cannot afford to be seen to be distracted."

Snaxx looked at her across the small table. She could see it clearly: not coldness, not indifference, but the panic of someone who had too many things to hold and was gripping each of them so tightly she could not open her hands for anything else. Elira was not shutting her out because she wanted to. She was shutting her out because she did not know how not to right now.

That did not make it hurt less. It just made it something Snaxx could understand.

"All right," she said. "Professional capacity, for now. You need

security, you need eyes on the perimeter, you need someone who knows how to read a house that's been compromised. That's me. I'm good at it... Standard contracted rate, I'll earn it."

She kept her voice even. She watched Elira receive the fact that Snaxx had just handed her the framing she needed without making her ask for it.

"That is a reasonable arrangement," Elira said and then stayed at the table, she did not get up immediately, and looked at Snaxx with the expression of someone who had said something adequate, knowing full well that adequate was not the same as right. Her hands were flat on the table. Her ears had not cooled.

Snaxx picked up her fork and finished her lunch and let her sit with it.

The afternoon passed in work. Corrin implemented the patrol adjustment by the third hour. The gate latch was replaced with something that would hold. The east window was re-seated by a member of the remaining staff who said nothing about who had identified the problem, which Snaxx appreciated. She did a second pass of the exterior in the late afternoon to confirm the changes had held and found everything solid. Then she wrote up the full assessment in the shorthand she used for jobs that mattered, every gap found, every gap addressed, so that Corrin had a record and Elira had a record and no one needed to rely on memory.

She had not expected to find the work satisfying. She had expected it to feel like cover. But Corrin had taken everything she had identified and acted on it without drama, and the house

was meaningfully more secure than it had been that morning, and that was real. Professional capacity, as it turned out, was still capacity.

Jack, the housekeeper, found her in the corridor near the end of the day. "Miss Snaxx," she said. "Is the room satisfactory?"

"More than," Snaxx said. "Thank you."

The housekeeper looked at her with the perceptiveness of someone who had watched people move through this house for many years. "Lady Varnis has not had people stay here," she said carefully. "Not like this. I mention it so you understand that we are adjusting."

"I know," Snaxx said. "So am I."

The housekeeper gave a nod that held more than a nod usually did, and continued down the corridor.

Elira found her in the sitting room off the east hall near the end of the day, the written assessment on the desk in front of her. She stood in the doorway. She did not come in immediately.

"Corrin told me you were worth listening to," she said from the doorway.

"He's good," Snaxx said. "He'd identified most of it already. I gave him a second angle."

"He seemed to find it useful." Something in her voice that was

more direct than the careful register she had held all day. She looked at the assessment. Then at Snaxx. "Thank you," and then she added, "For today."

"That's what you're paying me for," Snaxx said. She said it easily, without the edge from lunch, and Elira heard the difference.

Elira stayed in the doorway longer than the situation required. She looked at Snaxx in the amber light of the late afternoon and she was doing the thing she did when something was sitting with her that she had not yet worked out how to say. Her ears, at the tips, had gone the faintest rose-gold. Then she turned and walked back down the corridor, and Snaxx listened to her footsteps until they reached the operations room and the sound of papers beginning again.

She sat in the sitting room for a while after that, looking at nothing in particular, letting the day decompress the way days needed to after a certain amount of them. Then she gathered the assessment, made sure it was legible, left it on the desk where Corrin could find it in the morning, and went upstairs.

The guest room was clean and slightly too formal, the kind of room that had been prepared with care but by someone who did not yet know her. Her pack was already there, set on the chair beside the wardrobe. She looked at it for a moment, there was the particular small strangeness of someone having handled her things without her, and then started unpacking.

The lock tools went in the desk drawer. The clothes into the wardrobe.

At the bottom of the pack, caught in the corner where small

things settled, were two things she had forgotten about. The first was a ring. It had a plain band, black metal, a crest inscribed on the outside in dark gray. Small, precise, the kind of mark that meant something to someone. The letters PK were worked into the base of the crest. She turned it over in her fingers.

Right. The bodies in the passage. The second one had this on him. She had pocketed it without looking twice and not thought about it since. She slid it onto her finger. It fit well enough.

The second was a folded slip of paper, sealed with plain wax, no crest. She worked the seal loose. The paper was destroyed. Weeks at the bottom of a pack through rain and forest had reduced it to something barely holding its shape, the ink smeared beyond any hope of reading, the fold lines cracked through. She could make out perhaps three words in the middle that might have been anything. She turned it over. Nothing on the back. She crumpled it and dropped it in the small bin beside the desk. Whatever it had said, it was gone now.

The pipe she set on the windowsill, but picked it up once again and inspected it. She stood there looking at it. The old silver fittings worn smooth. The carved bowl. The curve of the stem that had tugged at something in the forest and was tugging at it again now, in the quiet of the evening with the garden dark outside the window.

The smell of it was what came first. Not from the pipe itself, which was cold and unlit, but from somewhere in the part of her that kept certain things regardless of whether she wanted them. The smell of burnt sataru petals on a winter evening in the caves outside of Myrefall that was too small and not warm

enough and full of goblins getting ready.

She had been small. Too small to go with them, which was the only reason she was still here. Her father had been checking his weapons by the fire, his pipe clamped between his teeth, the smoke rising in the particular unhurried way of someone who was not afraid of what was coming. Her mother had been beside him, and they had been talking in the low easy way of two people who had been talking to each other for so long that the conversation did not need volume to carry weight.

Goblins did not love like that. Everyone in the clan knew it, but everyone was wrong, at least about her family. Her parents loved each other in a way that was so specific to them it had never looked like anything she had seen anywhere else. Warm and ordinary and entirely theirs.

The raid had gone badly. The adventurers were better armed, better prepared, had come in numbers. Most of the raiding party had not come back. Her parents had not come back. She had waited, and waited, and understood in the particular way a child understood things that waiting was not going to change what had already happened.

Eight coins. That was what she had found in the small box her father kept on the shelf, after the waiting was done, after it was clear that waiting was not going to change what had already happened. Eight coins and a small town that had celebrated the adventurers and a cave opening she could walk out of, *so she had walked.*

It was strange, the things that stayed. She could not reliably recall her mother's face anymore. Her father's was a blur with specific features that stood out, the breadth of his hands, the angle of his jaw. But the pipe she remembered clearly. The smell of it on an evening when she had been too young to go and had not known yet to be grateful for that.

She had been chasing enough for so long that she had forgotten what it felt like. Enough was that room, that fire, those two people talking quietly. She had not recognized it for what it was until much later, from a very long way away.

She looked at the pipe in her hands and thought Nico had understood something when he handed it over. *"You take care of it, it takes care of you. That's how it works with things that mat-ter."* She set it down where she could see it and turned back to the room.

Down the corridor, Elira was still working. The faint sounds of it carried through the quiet of the house, papers, the occasional soft movement, the particular sound of someone who was not going to stop until the thing in front of them was handled.

Snaxx sat on the edge of the bed and listened to it.

Elira was panicking in the way she panicked, controlled and internal and expressed entirely through work, and she needed time to get her hands on things and find them manageable before she could lift her head and look at anything else. Snaxx had known people like that. Had been one, in the years when she had kept moving because stillness meant having to look at things she was not ready to look at. She was not going to hold

it against Elira that she needed to manage before she could feel. She recognized the shape of it.

She was going to be here while it happened.

She had decided to stay. Not because the professional framing was satisfying, not because the sting from lunch had fully faded, but because she had made up her mind about this sometime ago and a difficult day was not going to change it. She had left places for less. This time, she was staying for more. Those were different decisions entirely.

Down the corridor, the sounds of Elira working continued for a long time before they finally stopped. A long day, by any measure. A day that had been gotten through.

Snaxx was asleep before they did.

Burnt Frost

The manor was quiet at that hour, which was not the dreading quiet of the morning Snaxx had walked into with Elira, when the silence carried the weight of something being braced against. This was just morning quiet, the house in the space before it committed to being awake, the kind of quiet that belonged to no one and asked nothing.

Snaxx had been up for half an hour already. She did that sometimes, woke before dawn with her mind already moving, and on those mornings she either lay still and waited for the light or got up and did something useful with her hands. Today she had a reason to get up.

The kitchens were empty at that hour. She had counted on that. The fire was banked but not dead and she coaxed it back up without much trouble, and then she stood in front of the coffee things and thought carefully about what she had watched Hollander do every morning for the past several days. She had paid attention.

She was confident she had paid enough attention, but clearly

she had not paid enough attention.

The smell told her before anything visible did. Not the good coffee smell, the rich dark one that had been revising her opinion of mornings since her first cup in this kitchen. This was something sharper and more final, the particular smell of something going from cooked to ruined while you were thinking about something else entirely.

She pulled the pot from the fire. Looked at what was in it. It was not coffee. It was the memory of coffee, scorched past the point of argument.

She was standing there with the pot still in her hand, trying to decide whether the situation was salvageable, when footsteps came down the corridor.

Elira appeared in the kitchen doorway. Already dressed, upright, the composure that she assembled before she allowed herself to be seen already fully in place. She took in the scene without comment: the pot, the smell, Snaxx's expression and crossed the kitchen. She took the pot from Snaxx's hand, looked into it with the focus of a woman conducting an honest assessment, and poured herself a cup anyway.

She held it with both hands and drank.

Snaxx watched her do it. Elira's expression did not change significantly. She drank the coffee with the composure of someone who had decided the experience was going to happen and had chosen to be present for it without editorial comment. When she set the cup down she looked at Snaxx with the particular quality she had when something had been received and processed and filed under things that mattered without

being spoken about.

"Thank you," she said.

It landed differently than Snaxx had expected. Not forgiveness, not performance. Just truth, offered plainly, and behind it the specific weight of what it cost Elira to receive something imperfect and choose to receive it anyway. The frost from the dining room had not disappeared. But something in it had cracked, quietly, in the time it took Elira to drink a bad cup of coffee without saying a word about it.

Neither of them spoke about any of it. The kitchen held the morning around them, and that was enough.

It was perhaps twenty minutes later, when the smell had reached its full development, that Hollander arrived.

He stopped in the doorway. He looked at the pot. He looked at the kitchen around it, taking stock the way a man took stock of a room that had been altered in his absence. Then he set down what he was carrying and crossed to the fire without hurry and dealt with the situation in silence. When the ruined pot had been removed and the kettle set on properly, he turned to Snaxx.

"Och," he said. It covered a great deal.

"I was trying to make coffee," Snaxx said.

"Aye, I can see what ye were trying." He looked at her with the expression of a man deciding something. Not unkind. Just weighing. "Come back the morrow. Before the others are up. Dinnae touch anything till I get here."

“To apologize?”

“To learn,” he said. “If ye’re goin’ to be in my kitchen, ye’ll ken how to use it properly. I’ll not have the smell of burnt coffee in here every mornin’. It’s a muckle waste and it upsets the bread.” He said this with the gravity of someone for whom the bread’s feelings were a legitimate consideration. “Can ye be here before the fifth hour?”

“Yes,” Snaxx said.

“Good,” he said. And that was that.

She was back before the fifth hour the next morning.

Hollander was already there. He did not greet her. He handed her an empty pot and pointed at the fire and said: “Watch first. Dinnae touch till I say.”

She watched.

He moved through the process with the efficiency of someone who had done it so many times the sequence had become its own kind of knowledge, hands moving without consultation from his mind. But he narrated it as he went, not for performance, just because she was there and needed to understand it. The water temperature. The grind, and why the grind mattered, and what happened to the result when the grind was wrong in either direction. The timing, which was less forgiving than it appeared.

“The coffee kens when ye’re rushing it,” he said, at one point. “Ye cannae fool it.”

"Can't you just do it faster?"

He looked at her the way he looked at things that did not merit a full answer. "Faster," he said, "is how ye got yesterday."

She did not argue with that.

The tenday that followed had a different texture than the one before it. The frost was still present in certain rooms at certain hours, Elira working through the correspondence with the focused quiet of someone who had not fully set down her burdens, but it was thawing at the edges, and the kitchen was where it thawed fastest.

Hollander taught her the coffee properly. Not as a favor and not as warmth, but as the specific practical transmission of knowledge from someone who held standards to someone who needed to be brought up to them. She came back every morning before the fifth hour and he was always already there, and he taught her by showing and by correcting and occasionally by saying things like "och, no, that's not it at all" with the particular tone of a man who found imprecision personally offensive.

She was a good student. She could see him revising his preliminary assessment of her over the course of the first few days, the way his corrections became more specific as he realised she was actually absorbing them rather than just enduring them.

"Ye paid attention," he said, on the third morning, when she got the timing right without being reminded.

"You made it easy to," she said.

He considered this. "Come back the morrow," he said. "There are things about the grind ye're still doing wrong."

She came back the next morning. And the morning after that.

She learned correct by the fifth morning. Hollander did not make a production of it. He tasted the result and was quiet for a moment and then said: "Aye. That's it." Which was, she had come to understand, Hollander's version of a standing ovation.

The rest of the kitchen staff warmed in their own ways and at their own pace. Muriel watched her with the frank assessment she brought to everything, revising her opinion in real time without announcing the revision. Snaxx could tell by the way her instructions became shorter, which meant she had stopped assuming Snaxx would need them spelled out. Kolia laughed more easily than she had in the first few days. And Poli, who brought Elira's breakfast tray up every morning without fail, began explaining things to Snaxx without being asked.

It started on the sixth day. Snaxx was watching the coffee and Poli came to stand beside her with the tray already assembled: salted trout arranged alongside a bowl of porridge made with almond milk, a selection of hard cheeses on a small board, the honey pot on the side.

"She doesn't like it cold," Poli said, nodding at the porridge. "If it sits too long she'll eat it anyway but she'll be in a mood about it."

Snaxx looked at the tray. "Does she eat all of it?"

"When she's not working, yes. When she is—" Poli tilted her

head. "The cheese. She'll always eat the cheese. And the coffee. The rest depends on how bad the letters are."

"What if they're good?"

Poli smiled, small and warm. "She forgets to eat when things are good too. Gets excited, starts writing responses, lets the tray go cold." She paused. "So you remind her. That's all. You set it down where she can see it and you remind her."

Snaxx stored all of it.

The morning of the ninth day she assembled the tray herself for the first time. Trout from the cold larder, porridge set on the fire early enough that it would be properly warm by the time she carried it up. The cheeses arranged the way Poli had shown her, the honey alongside, the coffee made correctly. She carried it up and went in without knocking, because Elira had stopped expecting her to, and set it down where Elira could see it.

Elira looked at the tray, then at Snaxx, surprised, "You assembled this?" she said.

"Poli supervised," Snaxx said. "From downstairs. Via instructions."

Elira picked up the coffee first. Held it with both hands. Drank. Something in her expression shifted slightly, the way it shifted when something confirmed rather than surprised, like it was the stillness of a theory settling into place.

"You're learning," she said.

"I have good teachers," Snaxx said.

Elira looked at her for a moment with the expression she used when something had landed and she was letting it. Then she picked up the porridge, which was still warm, and ate.

That, Snaxx thought, was a kind of answer on its own.

The correspondence kept coming throughout the tenday, and Elira kept working through it, and the pile that had been overwhelming slowly became manageable. On the third day of the tenday, Hollander mentioned that Elira had been smiling in the east corridor that morning, reading a letter.

"Which letter?" Snaxx asked.

"Dinnae ken the name," Hollander said. "Sealed with a crest. Green and silver."

She took the morning tray up earlier than usual and found Elira at the operations desk, a letter in her hand and the particular quality of attention on her face that meant something had landed better than expected.

"House Heldenslaw," Elira said, when Snaxx set the tray down.

"Good news?"

Elira set the letter carefully on the desk. "They write that the House Heldenslaw has noted the strength of Lady Varnis's continued service to Pamerial and wishes to express its ongoing confidence in the Varnis wardenship." She looked at the window. "It is carefully worded. It commits to nothing beyond

watching. But it is in writing, with their seal, and it will be known that it was sent."

"That matters," Snaxx said.

"It matters significantly," Elira said. "It is the first house to put anything in writing since the proclamation. Others will notice that Heldenslaw moved first." She picked up the coffee. Drank. "The city is watching to see what I do. Heldenslaw has just told them there is something worth watching."

Over the following days, two more letters arrived in a similar register. House Caveth, small and measured, expressing a wish to continue existing arrangements, which in political language was nearly warm. And a merchant consortium that had been withholding shipments to the manor sent a letter that read as a business inquiry but was structured as an apology.

Elira read each one twice. Snaxx watched her do it sometimes, from across the room, and what she saw was someone who had decided to be exactly what the situation required and was executing that decision with quiet, accumulated competence. She was not running. She was not hiding. She was present, doing the work, letting the quality of her presence speak for her because it was the only argument that would hold.

Pamerial was watching. And what it was seeing, day by day, was Elira.

* * *

She went back to her room after that. The morning had been good; the tray had been assembled correctly, the coffee drunk,

the porridge eaten while it was still warm — and she wanted to sit with it for a while before anything else needed doing. She had things she could do. There were always things she could do. But she sat on the edge of the bed with the pipe on the windowsill in front of her and let herself just be in the room for a bit, in the quiet of a morning that had gone well.

She was sharpening one of her daggers, which was a thing she did when she wanted to do something with her hands without having to think about it, when the knock came.

Not the housekeeper's knock, brisk and purposeful. Not Corrin's, which was two short raps in quick succession. This was a single knock, measured and deliberate, the kind that announced itself without demanding anything.

She set the dagger down. "Come in."

Elira opened the door. She was still in her working clothes, the day's correspondence visible in the faint ink-shadow on her right hand, but something in her face had settled from the focused tension it had carried all tenday into something quieter. She stood in the doorway of Snaxx's room and looked at her, "Follow me."

Snaxx put the dagger away and went.

It was mid-afternoon by the time they reached the garden, the light already going amber the way it did at this hour in Uktar, the shadows long across the stone paths.

It was cold — Uktar had settled in fully, the kind of cold that was honest about itself rather than apologetic, but the garden had a particular quality in the late afternoon light, the bare-branched hedges casting long shadows across the stone paths,

the whole of it spare and quiet and entirely itself. Elira walked without the purposeful direction she had carried all tenday. She was simply walking, beside Snaxx, in a garden, because she had chosen to.

Snaxx let her walk for a bit before she said anything.

"How are you?" she said. Not about the letters. Not about the houses. Just Elira.

Elira was quiet for a moment. "Better than I was," she said. "The letters help. The work helps." She paused. "You help."

Snaxx looked at her sideways. "Me?"

"You are here," Elira said simply. "Every morning the coffee is correct and the tray is there and you are here. That is not a small thing."

"It's just coffee," Snaxx said.

"It is not just coffee," Elira said, leaving it at that.

They walked further. The path curved past a dormant rose bed, the canes stripped bare, the soil dark with frost. Snaxx thought about how to ask what she actually wanted to ask, which was not a small question, and decided the only way was plainly.

"What did you want to do?" she said. "Before your father died and the house needed you. What were you actually going to do?"

Elira stopped walking.

Not dramatically. Just stopped, the way she stopped when something required her full attention and she did not want to divide it. She looked at the garden around her for a moment, at the bare hedges and the stone and the manor rising behind them.

"I was going to stay in the field," she said. "After my studies. There were institutions that would have taken me... They had proper research posts, not just practitioner work. Ward theory, warding architecture, the intersection of the two." She paused. "My father died in my second year abroad. I came home because the house needed managing and there was no one else. And that was—" She stopped. "That was seventeen years ago."

Snaxx said nothing. She let it sit.

"I do not regret coming home," Elira said carefully. "I want to be clear about that. The house is mine and the work is real and I have done it well, I think. But." She exhaled. "There is a difference between choosing something and having it be the only thing available to choose."

"Yes," Snaxx said. "There is." They started walking again, slower. "What would you build," Snaxx said, "if you could build anything? Not what the name requires. What you actually want."

Elira looked at the path ahead. "A ward repair service," she said. "Practical enchantments for people who cannot access noble channels. The everyday work that gets treated as beneath serious practitioners but matters most because ordinary people actually need it." She paused. "A scholarship for mages without patron houses. There is extraordinary talent that never develops because the person carrying it cannot afford

access.” Another pause. “A repair hall for degraded enchantments. Things that should not require political permission to maintain.”

She said these things like she was slightly annoyed they mattered to her as much as they did, which meant they mattered very much.

“Those sound like things you actually want,” Snaxx said.

“Yes,” Elira said. “They do.”

“So what if we built something like that?” Snaxx said. “Not today, not before everything resolves. But as the thing we’re working toward. A place to land when all of this is done.”

Elira looked at her. “Such as?”

“An adventurers’ guild. Or a ward shop. Something unexpected.” Snaxx kept her voice easy, because this was not a pitch, it was a conversation. “You handle the ward work. I handle the contracts, the clients, the jobs that need someone small and unnoticeable going places you can’t. Our desks would be side by side. You could keep your eyes on me.” She paused. “Professionally.”

“You were doing well,” Elira said, “and then you said that.”

“The implication was professional,” Snaxx said.

“The implication,” Elira said, with great composure, “was absolutely not professional. But I will allow it this once because

you were otherwise making sense.”

Snaxx grinned. Elira did not fully suppress what happened to her expression in response.

They reached the far end of the garden where the hedges opened and the lower grounds spread out below them, the estate in the amber light. Elira stood at the edge of it and looked at everything that had been requiring things of her for seventeen years.

“I am a noble of House Varnis,” she said. “The practical obstacles are real. My name is still recovering. Starting something new while the proclamation is still in circulation would invite scrutiny I cannot currently afford.”

“I know,” Snaxx said. “I’m not saying tomorrow. I’m saying after. As the reason to get through everything else.” Elira was quiet.

“A place that helps people,” Snaxx said, more quietly now. “Not because it’s appropriate. Because it’s what you actually want to do. Because your father died and you came home and you have spent seventeen years being what the name required, and you are very good at it, and it has cost you something.” She looked at Elira. “I’m not asking you to drop anything. I’m asking you to let there be a thing on the other side of all of this that is yours.”

Elira looked at her for a long moment. The composed face with something underneath it that was not composed at all.

“That is,” she said carefully, “not a terrible idea.”

“From you,” Snaxx said, “that’s practically a yes.”

"It is not a yes," Elira said. "It is a not-a-no. Those are meaningfully different."

"I'll take it," Snaxx said.

The light continued its slow movement across the estate. A bird adjusted itself somewhere in the hedges. Neither of them moved toward the manor.

"I have spent a great deal of time," Elira said, "being what the name required."

"I know," Snaxx said.

"My studies were the last time I chose something purely because I wanted it," Elira said. "Eleven years of traveling because the work interested me, because I was good at it and it mattered and those two things were enough." She looked at the estate below. "And then I came home and I provided what was required, because that is what you do."

"It doesn't have to be," Snaxx said.

"No," Elira said. Like something that had been true for a long time without being spoken. "It does not."

Snaxx reached out and took her hand, because the moment called for it. Elira's fingers closed around hers without hesitation.

"I am not opening up to the idea of you," Elira said quietly. "I am opening up to you. There is a difference, and I want you to understand that I mean the second one."

"I know," Snaxx said. "I know you do."

They stood at the edge of the garden as the light faded and the cold deepened and Snaxx thought about all of it. The eight coins. The road out of Myrefall. Every city after that, every room unpacked into with the intention of leaving. The cave on a winter evening, her father's pipe, her parents' voices at the same low easy frequency they always used with each other. The warmth of that she had not known was warmth until she was standing outside it a long way away.

She said it before she could stop herself, in Ghukliak, quiet and involuntary and entirely true:

"Kahl eesht home."

Elira went still. Not with surprise. With the quality of stillness that came from receiving something carefully.

"What does that mean?" she said quietly.

"You are home," Snaxx said. In Common this time. Plain and without armor.

Elira was quiet for a long time. When she spoke, her voice was lower than usual. "I do not become more real by becoming more intense," she said. "I become more real by staying here long enough that I stop treating everything as temporary. Which is what I am doing. I want you to know that."

She turned toward Snaxx properly, not just walking beside her but standing with her, the estate behind her and the garden around them.

"You will miss the one who is already choosing you," she said, "if you spend too much time waiting for a future version of me

to arrive. There is no future version. There is this one, who has been choosing you for longer than I have been comfortable admitting.”

Snaxx pulled her close then, gently. Elira allowed it without stiffening, the way she had started to allow things, not with resignation, but with the particular quality of someone who had decided this was where they wanted to be and was no longer arguing with themselves about it.

“Gods,” Snaxx said quietly. Then, softer, the word coming from somewhere she hadn’t opened in a very long time: “*Raír kami’sá.*”

Her father’s word. Her mother’s word. The word she had heard in the cave in Myrefall on the evening before the raid, when her father had looked at her mother with the particular expression that everyone in the clan had called strange and that Snaxx had understood, even as a child, was simply love that had stopped apologising for existing.

She had not said it to anyone. Not once, in all the years and all the cities and all the rooms unpacked with the intention of leaving.

Elira did not ask what it meant. She stood in the embrace and was still, and after a moment Snaxx felt the last of the held tension release from her shoulders, the breath that came out slower than the one before it.

“It is less isolated than it was,” Elira said eventually. Quiet and unadorned, like a fact she was reporting rather than a feeling she was performing. “My life. I want you to know that I am aware of what you have done for that.”

"I haven't done anything," Snaxx said.

"You stayed," Elira said. "When I gave you every reason not to." She did not look at Snaxx when she said it, just kept her eyes on the horizon where the last of the light was going. "That is not nothing."

The garden held them there a while longer. Neither of them moved toward the manor. Elira had said once that she would leave when it was time, not when the feeling peaked or resolved, and it was not time yet. There was still the faintest band of light at the horizon and the cold was present but manageable and they were here, together, at the edge of everything that was still waiting to be built.

Reservations

Three days had passed since the garden. It was three full days of the manor continuing its routines. Correspondence arriving, Corrin running his rotations, Hollander's kitchen producing things that had no business tasting as good as they did. Three days of Elira working through the political aftermath with the focused competence she brought to everything, and Snaxx doing the security work and being present, moving through the house with the ease of someone who had stopped looking for reasons to be wherever she happened to be.

It was different. Not dramatically. Just in the small ways that mattered more: Elira looking up when Snaxx entered a room, the quiet disappearance of professional distance, the ease of simply existing together. Three days had settled something the garden had cracked open, and what it had settled into felt less like a beginning and more like a middle. Like they had skipped the fragile part and landed somewhere with more weight to it.

On the third day Snaxx went to the market.

She had Poli's list, which she had learned to read without

asking questions because questions led to explanations that went considerably longer than the list itself, always ending with Poli looking at her as though she had said something bewildering about how food worked. She got everything on it. She added a small jar of something she had seen Hollander look at twice without buying, because twice without buying meant wanting without admitting, and tucked it into the basket.

The market in late Uktar had thinned to the vendors who had decided the season was not a sufficient reason to stop. She moved through them, picking up what she needed, the cold carrying the smell of frost and turned earth.

She finished the last stall and turned north, taking the long way back along the canal road without deciding to. The water on her left caught the flat afternoon light and held it without drama. The road was quiet at this hour, a few people moving with the purposeful efficiency of people who had somewhere to be, the city doing its mid-afternoon business without any particular urgency. She walked and passed through the city, unhurried.

The Crooked Lantern was there when she looked up. Same sign. Same door. The smell of wood smoke and something being cooked better than it needed to be came through the gap underneath it, the smell of three tendays of evenings, the smell of coming back to the same place when everything else was uncertain.

She stood there with Poli's basket and looked at the door. Then she went in.

The interior was the same. Low ceiling, familiar tables, the fire

doing its work in the corner. Virok behind the bar, unhurried, looking up when she came in with the expression of a man who noticed things and did not make performances of noticing them.

She climbed onto the stool. He set a cup in front of her without being asked, amber ale, thick and strong, the kind with a flavor that stayed with you. She wrapped both hands around it and drank.

It tasted like uncertainty. Like not knowing how things were going to go. Like sitting at this bar with a job offer and nowhere else to be and no particular plan for what came next. She drank it anyway.

"Haven't seen you in a while," Virok said.

"No," she said. "You haven't."

He poured a second when the first was done and went back to what he had been doing, which was his way of saying everything that needed saying. She sat with it. The fire. The low conversation at the far end of the room. The Crooked Lantern existed without requiring anything from her, the way it always had.

She was going to miss it. She already did, a little, sitting in it.

She had been thinking, in the weeks she had been at the manor, about what it meant to be looking for the next thing, as she had always been looking for the next thing. The next city, the next job, the next door to go through. But she was not looking for an exit right now. She was looking for work because she was good at something, and being good at something meant using

it. There was a difference between those two kinds of looking, and she had only recently learned to tell them apart.

She set down the cup, stood up, and walked to the board near the door.

There were the usual postings. Someone in the lower ward wanted rats cleared from a grain store, five crowns, not worth the smell. A merchant needed a parcel delivered to Enn, ten crowns, straightforward enough that it was barely worth the boots. A locksmith on the east road was looking for an apprentice, which made her smile briefly. And near the middle, pinned with more care than the others, was a bandit notice. Five miles northwest towards Enn, Bandits had started disrupting the trade route. It was clear on the bounty posted: bring them alive for the full rate. Dead for half.

She read it twice. She took it off the board, folded it, tucked it into her coat pocket, and picked up the basket. She did not look back at the room when she left. She had already said goodbye and doing it twice would have been sentimental.

The walk back to the manor took her north through the city, the afternoon light going flat and grey as the clouds thickened overhead. The streets smelled of chimney smoke and the dampness of stone that had absorbed a season of cold and was beginning to hold it. She passed the canal bridge, the lower market road, the long stretch of the commercial quarter that was still busy at this hour with people finishing their working day. She did not rush. She let the city move around her and thought about the posting in her pocket and what she was going to say about it and when.

The manor gate was unlocked when she arrived. She left the

basket in the kitchen with Poli's note and went to find Elira.

She found her in the operations room, standing at the window with a letter in her hand. Not the careful expression she wore when managing correspondence. Something tighter, more controlled in the way things went more controlled when they were being held at a distance.

"I received a raven earlier," Elira said, without turning. "It is distressing. I would like you to read it." She held out the letter.

Snaxx took it and sat down.

The paper was good quality, the handwriting small and precise:

Lady Varnis,

I am sorry for the way that I left. Lady Syvis's offer was something I found impossible to refuse, and I told myself the work she described mattered more than the method of my leaving. I am not certain that was true. I am writing because I believe you deserve to know certain things, and because I find I cannot hold them without the weight becoming something I cannot manage.

Lord Percival Kiolran recommended Diabolus Malum for the diplomatic advisor position in your house. Lord Kiolran and Diabolus had a prior arrangement that I was not fully aware of until recently. Both are now absent from Pamerial, as you know. I do not know where Lord Kiolran is. I am telling you this because I believe his recommendation was not made in good faith, and because you should know the shape of what was placed

inside your house and why.

There are people in Pamerial who you believe are loyal to you who have been in correspondence with the V.C. I do not know all of them. I am not naming the ones I do know, because I find I have already done enough damage and I do not know if naming them protects you or simply moves the problem.

Be careful who you trust inside the house.

I do not expect forgiveness. I am not asking for it. I am asking only that you be careful.
Maret

Snaxx set the letter down on the desk. She looked at it for a moment. Then she looked at her hand, which on it was the ring. Black metal, dark gray crest, the letters PK worked into the base. Percival Kiolran. She held her hand out toward Elira. "Look at this."

Elira turned from the window. She looked at the ring, crossed to the desk, and took Snaxx's hand gently, tilting it toward the light. The crest in the gray. The initials at the base. She was quiet for a long moment.

"Where did you get this?" she said.

"Off a body in the passage," Snaxx said. "One of the three Choir members that I had taken out. I had pocketed it without looking twice and It's been on my hand since I unpacked in the guest room."

Elira set her hand down carefully. She looked at the ring, then at the letter on the desk, then at nothing, doing arithmetic in her head and arriving at a number.

"Lord Percival Kiolran," she said quietly, "has been dead since the night you went into that passage."

Snaxx looked at her. "So, the inside threat that Maret is warning you about?"

"Has been lying under the rubble in the passage since before we came back from the caravan job," Elira said. Something moved across her face that was not quite relief and not quite amusement and sat somewhere between the two, a complicated thing. "You have been wearing his ring for the better part of a tenday. The man who compromised my house, placed an agent inside it, and fed information to the Choir." She looked at Snaxx with the expression she used when something had genuinely surprised her, and she was deciding how to hold it. "Dead. Because you went into the passage when I asked you to, and did not know who he was, and took his ring because it fit."

"I didn't know," Snaxx said.

"No," Elira said. "You did not." She picked up the letter and set it aside with the deliberate precision of someone choosing to put something down. "Which makes it considerably more extraordinary." She looked at Snaxx for a moment longer. "The rest of the letter still stands. The unnamed contacts, the warning. But the shape of what I was afraid of is considerably smaller than it was ten minutes ago."

“Good,” Snaxx said.

Elira looked at her steadily. “It is good, considerably, because we have plans to go out tonight. We have a reservation at sunset.”

Snaxx opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again. “You made a reservation? For us?”

“I made reservations,” Elira said, with the slight air of someone noting that the sun rose in the morning. “That is what one does when one wishes to dine somewhere that requires one.”

No one had ever made a reservation for her. No one had offered to take her somewhere that required one. The closest she had come was a balcony dinner she had negotiated as hazard pay. She thought about that for a moment, about what it meant that this was simply a thing Elira had done on an ordinary afternoon, and decided not to make a production of it.

“Then I’d better get ready,” she said.

The look Elira gave her then was warm enough to be felt.

* * *

The Silent Deer was on the upper market road, in the part of Pamerial where the buildings had been designed to impress and had been doing it long enough, they had stopped trying. Stone facades, clean lines, a street where noise had been quietly discouraged for generations. A carved deer above the door, silver-painted antlers catching the lamplight.

Snaxx had been in expensive places before. She had been in

them the wrong way, through a window or a service entrance disguised as a person who was there to take something and leave. Walking through the front door on the arm of Elira Varnis was a different experience, and she was aware of it in the way you were aware of wearing something that had not quite decided what to do with you yet.

A woman near the entrance introduced herself to Elira as Noelene, the *maître d'*, with the smooth competence of someone who had been managing this floor for years. She was composed, precise, her warmth genuine but carefully rationed. She looked at Elira with recognition, and then she looked at Snaxx.

The look lasted less than a second and communicated a great deal in that time. She smiled at Elira and led them to a table near the back. Near the service area. Not the worst table in the room. Close enough to it to make a point.

Snaxx sat down, and as she did, she unfolded the napkin in front of her and laid it in her lap. She picked up the menu and read it with the deliberate attention of someone who had learned that the best way to be in a room that did not want you was to be better at being there than anyone expected. She was good at this. She had been practicing since she was old enough to understand what a certain kind of look meant and to decide that giving people the satisfaction of landing it was not something she did.

From somewhere near the service area, low enough to be deniable, she heard it.

“Look, over there. The greenskinned Worg fucker.” A muffled laugh quickly covered, the kitchen staff all looked over at their

table.

It landed the way those things always landed, specific and precise, finding the nerve it had been aimed at. The sting of someone who knew exactly which truth to exaggerate, who had looked at her and found the version of her they already expected and decided to say it out loud. She had heard it her whole life, in Myrefall and every city after it, the specific register of people who needed her to be smaller because her existing at full size made them uncomfortable.

She set the menu down. Looked at it. Did not look toward the service area.

This is a date, she thought. Elira brought me here. I have sat in worse rooms with worse people, and I have never once given them satisfaction, and I'm not starting tonight.

She picked the menu back up.

The server came. He was attentive to Elira in the way servers were attentive to people who represented continued business. He was technically attentive to Snaxx in the way that someone could be technically attentive without seeing the person they were attending to, reading the specials toward the middle distance past her ear, addressing questions about wine to Elira's shoulder.

She ordered the lamb. She kept her voice easy. She looked at Elira across the table and found a smile she meant.

Elira was reading the room.

Snaxx could tell by the quality of her stillness. Not the stillness of composure but the stillness of someone taking very

careful stock of what was in front of them. Her wine glass had been set down with a precision that was slightly more deliberate than usual. Her eyes moved across the room, taking in Noelene near the entrance, the server, the service area at the back.

A man was making his way through the dining room. Tall, very handsome in the specific way of someone who had been told this often enough to organize his face around it. Large circular glasses. A chef's hat that was immaculately clean, the kind of clean that communicated this establishment had staff whose entire job was ensuring things like chef's hats looked a certain way. He moved through the room with ease of ownership, stopping at tables, with the deference of wanting to be noticed flowing toward him as he passed.

He stopped at their table.

"Lady Varnis." His accent clipped each word to its essentials, direct and certain. "Is good to see you here. I hope evening is to satisfaction." He looked at Snaxx with the practiced efficiency of a man who had looked at things he considered beneath his notice his entire life and had refined the look into something that took less than a second.

Then Elira said, quietly, "Hirvin."

Hirvin then looked back at Elira with a pleasant expression. "Lady Varnis, allow me to introduce myself to your companion." He said the word *companion* the way people said words they had chosen because they meant something other than what the word said.

Elira's expression did not change. "This is Snaxx," she said. "She

is with me.”

“Of course.” He smiled. “Is always interesting, the company one keeps, even the dangerous ones.” He let that sit exactly long enough, then nodded once at Elira with the nod of a man returning his attention to something worth his time and moved toward the next table.

Snaxx tried looking at her menu sheepishly.

Elira had gone very still, but it was not the stillness of composure. The stillness of someone who had finished counting and arrived at a number she did not like. Her wine glass sat on the table. Her hands were flat beside it. Her eyes followed Hirvin to the next table, where he was already smiling at a well-dressed man as though the last thirty seconds had not occurred.

Snaxx looked at her. She gave the small shrug that meant *‘it’s fine, I’ve handled worse, let it go.’* Elira looked at the shrug for a long moment. Then she set down her napkin, folded it precisely, and stood up.

“Elira,” Snaxx said quietly.

“I will be one moment,” Elira said, with the expression of someone who had decided what was happening next, and was not interested in revisiting it.

She crossed the dining room with a dignified quickness. The room did not notice her at first, the way rooms did not notice things that moved with that kind of certainty, but then it did, the way rooms always did with Elira Varnis. Conversations dipped. Attention shifted. The silence of a space that understood

something was happening.

Hirvin looked up from the table he had been working.

Elira stopped in front of him. She spoke at a volume that was not raised. It did not need to be. "She is with me. And I want to be very clear about what you have just done, because I think you have mistaken my name being in question for permission to act like this. Let me correct that. You have just shown every person in this room exactly what The Silent Deer is, what it has always been I suspect, and you have done it in front of the Warden of House Varnis on the worst possible evening to do so. My name is in every mouth in Pamerial right now. Every letter I send, every house that is watching me, every merchant reconsidering their position will hear about this. I will make sure of it. So, I want you to think very carefully about whether this Gods-damned shit establishment, and whatever in the hells you think you are protecting by turning away guests based on what they look like, is worth what comes next."

She did not wait for an answer. She walked back to the table, picked up her coat, and looked at Snaxx. Snaxx was already standing and watching Elira in awe.

They walked out. Elira did not look back. Snaxx did, briefly, because she was constitutionally unable not to. Hirvin was standing very still, Noelene was near the door with an expression she was managing with visible effort, and the server was staring at a fixed point with the quality of someone recalculating something important.

The door closed behind them.

The night air was sharp and clean. They stood on the street for

a moment, the upper market road quiet around them, lamplight steady on stone.

Elira was still angry. Snaxx could hear it in the quality of her breathing, see it in the set of her jaw, the way she held herself when she was containing something that had not finished with her yet.

Snaxx was something else. Not angry, exactly. More like the specific tired that came from absorbing something you had absorbed a hundred times before and knowing you were going to absorb it a hundred times more and still being exhausted by that knowledge in a way that had nothing to do with today and everything to do with every day before it.

They walked in silence for half a block.

"That should not have happened," Elira said. Her voice was level, but the evenness of it was the kind that came from effort. "Any of it. The table. The server. What those people said in the back of that room. What he said to your face. None of it."

"I know. It's okay, Elira." Snaxx said.

"You absorbed it," Elira said. "I watched you absorb it and say nothing and keep your face easy because you have been doing that your entire life and you have learned to make it look like it does not cost you anything."

Snaxx looked at the street ahead. "It doesn't always."

"It cost you something tonight," Elira said. "I watched it cost you something tonight and I am angry about that. I am angry

that anyone in that room felt they had the right to make you smaller. I am angry that you have learned to let them." She stopped walking.

Snaxx stopped too.

Elira turned to face her. Her jaw was still set. Her ears, at the very tips, had gone rose-gold. "No one gets to do that to my girlfriend," she said. "I want to be clear about that. No one."

The word landed between them on the empty street.

Snaxx looked at her. She was taken aback by it, by the plainness of it, by the fact that Elira had said it in anger, which was somehow more honest than if she had said it carefully. "Girlfriend?" she said.

"Yes," Elira said. She had not looked away.

Snaxx opened her mouth and then said the thing she had been half-thinking since the restaurant, the thing that came up every time something like this happened and she found herself looking at the distance between her life and someone else's. "We are not exactly what either of our backgrounds would have predicted," she said. "You know that, right? Half-elf noble from the capital city and a goblin thief from small, old Myrefall. That is not a combination that makes sense to anyone."

"It makes sense to me," Elira said.

"I'm serious. I have been in every city between here and the southern coast and I have never once been someone people assumed belonged in a room like that. I am not someone who

gets taken to places with reservations. That is not a complaint. That is just what I am.”

“What you are,” Elira said, with the precision she used when she had found the exact wrong thing someone was saying and intended to correct it, “is the person I am choosing. I am not choosing you because you fit a category or because you make sense against my background or because anyone looking at us from the outside would call it reasonable. I am choosing you because you are you. Specifically. With full awareness of exactly what you are and where you came from and who you have been.” She held Snaxx’s gaze without flinching. “And I am done letting either of us treat that as a qualification that needs defending.”

Snaxx looked at her for a long moment. Elira’s ears were still rose-gold, the anger still present in the set of her jaw, and she was still not looking away.

“You’re not taking it back,” Snaxx said.

“I am not taking it back,” Elira said.

Snaxx reached over and took her hand. Elira’s fingers closed around hers without hesitation. They stood there on the empty street for a moment, the lamplight from the canal bridge visible at the far end of the road, the night settled and quiet around them.

They went home.

* * *

Hollander was in the corridor when they came through the door. He looked at them with the perceptiveness of a man who ran a kitchen and had strong opinions about what people looked like when they needed feeding. He looked at the time. He looked back at them. "Och," he said. "Ye've not eaten."

Elira looked over at Snaxx. Something in her expression that was still the tail end of anger and, underneath it, something that was considerably warmer. "No," she said. "We have not."

"Sit ye down. Both of ye." He had already turned back toward the kitchen before he finished the sentence, which meant the discussion was over.

They sat in the small dining room, and the kitchen assembled itself around them with quiet efficiency. Muriel brought bread. Kolia came through with something from the fire that had been going on for hours. Poli set the table without ceremony, warm and brisk, the way she did things that she had decided needed doing. Hollander appeared briefly in the doorway, assessed the situation, and returned to the kitchen from which further good smells arrived shortly after.

Elira ate without being reminded. Snaxx watched that happen and felt something settle that had been slightly unsettled since the restaurant. The staff were moving around them, warm and without ceremony, the food doing what good food did when the people making it were paying attention to more than the recipe.

"Thank you," Elira said, when Poli came back through to collect the plates, and she said it with the specificity she had been

bringing to things like this since the tenday began.

Poli smiled, small and genuine. "Goodnight, my Lady. Miss Snaxx."

When the kitchen had gone quiet and the house had settled into its late evening, they were still at the table. The food was gone. The wine was mostly gone. The quality of an evening that had gone badly and then, through the specific intervention of people who had decided not to let it stay that way, had come back to something good.

"I want to say something," Elira said.

"Say it," Snaxx said.

"I do not tolerate distraction," Elira said. "I am not a person who is careless with her attention or her time or what she allows into her life. I select. Deliberately. With full awareness of what I am selecting." She looked at Snaxx across the small table, direct and clear. "I am selecting you. I want that to be plain in a way that leaves no room for doubt, not tonight and not after tonight."

Snaxx looked at her across the small table. The candlelight was low, the house quiet around them, and Elira's expression had the quality it had when she had finished performing composure and was simply being present. Snaxx thought about everything that had led to this room. The job offer in The Crooked Lantern. The balcony dinner. The passage. The professional framing and the dining room and the garden and three tendays of almost and then not almost. She thought about how much had been required of both of them to arrive at a small dining room with

empty plates and wine glasses and Elira Varnis looking at her like she was something worth selecting.

"That's plenty of room for me," she said.

Elira stood. Snaxx stood too. They looked at each other across the table for a moment and then Snaxx stepped around it and kissed her, right there in the small dining room, one hand on Elira's jaw the way she had wanted to since the entrance hall three days ago. Elira kissed her back with the same precision she brought to everything, deliberate and complete, her hands finding Snaxx's waist.

They made it to the foot of the stairs before Snaxx pulled back just enough to look at her. Elira's composure was somewhere else entirely. The rose-gold at her ears had deepened to something that was almost amber in the low light, and her eyes were very direct, and she was not pretending about anything.

Snaxx started up the stairs. Elira followed.

In the corridor outside the bedroom door Elira kissed her again, longer, one hand at the back of Snaxx's neck, and Snaxx laughed against her mouth because she could not help it, because it was good and warm and real and she was allowed to laugh when things were good. Elira pulled back with an expression that was equal parts composure and the complete absence of composure.

"What?" Elira said.

"Nothing," Snaxx said, still smiling. "Come on."

She pushed the bedroom door open. Elira followed her through

it. The door closed behind them, and then there was laughter and the sound of someone being gently but decisively pushed onto a bed, and then the laughter faded into something else, and the rest of the evening was entirely theirs.

Cold Stone

The morning came pale and even, the light the particular quality of a sky that had clouds but not drama, the kind of morning that arrived quietly and never apologized for it. Snaxx lay still for a moment, aware of it in the gradual way of someone with no reason to be anywhere quickly.

Elira was awake beside her. Not the sitting-in-the-dark-before-dawn kind of awake. This was different, still and easy, eyes on the ceiling with the expression of someone who had been thinking for a while about something that was not troubling them.

She was running her fingers slowly through Snaxx's hair. Not absently but deliberately, the way Elira did most things, Snaxx did not say anything. She lay still and let it happen and felt something warm and settled and entirely unlike the mornings she had woken up to for most of her life.

"You're thinking," she said eventually.

"I am always thinking," Elira said.

“About something good, this time.”

Elira turned her head. The expression shifted into something that was not quite a smile and was considerably better than one. “Yes,” she said. “I am.”

She shifted and pressed a kiss to Snaxx’s temple, the kind that was not a question but a statement. Snaxx turned toward her and they lay there for a while with the morning doing its patient work outside. Somewhere outside a shutter was banging loose in the wind. Someone down the road was arguing with their horse. The city finding its morning without any awareness of what had shifted inside this room.

Eventually Elira got up and made coffee.

Snaxx listened to her from the other room. She heard the sequence she had learned over five mornings with Hollander, and then heard it go slightly wrong somewhere in the middle and then heard the silence of someone recognizing they had gone wrong and correcting it without comment.

When Elira returned and offered Snaxx a mug, Snaxx took it, drank it, and said nothing about it being slightly off. She felt something adjacent to delight. Not because the coffee was good, but because Elira had burned hers first too, and there was apparently no such thing as effortless.

Elira sat on the edge of the bed with her own cup. The morning sat around them.

Snaxx looked around for her coat.

It was not immediately findable. She checked the chair. She checked the floor by the chair. She lifted what appeared to be her shirt and found Elira’s coat underneath it, then

found her own coat underneath that, at the bottom of a pile that represented a fairly comprehensive account of what had happened the previous evening. She pulled it free, found the pocket, and extracted the folded posting.

She held it out.

"I'm taking this job," she said. "Bandits on the Enn road, five miles northwest. Good bounty if we bring them alive. And I want you to come with me."

Elira took the posting and read it.

The reading took longer than the length of the document required. Snaxx watched her face and understood what she was thinking without needing to be told. The last time. The forest. The temporal prison and the time Snaxx had spent inside it alone while Elira had stood on the other side unable to do anything. The fear of watching someone you love go somewhere you cannot follow, now compounded by the specific knowledge of how bad it could go.

Snaxx let her sit with it. She did not rush it.

Elira set the posting down on the bed between them. She looked at it. She looked at Snaxx. The careful face, and beneath it something she no longer hid as thoroughly as she once had. Beneath even that: the fear of someone who had recently been given something they could not bear to lose.

"I need to say something," Elira said.

"Say it," Snaxx said.

"I am afraid," Elira said plainly. "Not of the job. Of watching you

get hurt and being unable to stop it. Of standing somewhere you are not and not knowing what is happening and having no way to change it." She paused. "That is the specific fear. I want you to know what it is."

Snaxx looked at her. "I know what it is," she said quietly. "And I want you to know that I am not going anywhere. I have too much left to say to you to go anywhere. I have a future I intend to be present for, and I am not signing off on that." She held Elira's gaze. "I am not going anywhere."

Elira was quiet for a moment. Then she said: "Promise me that coming back is included in your plan."

"Coming back is the plan," Snaxx said. "The job is how we fund it."

Elira looked at her for a long moment. The fear still present, acknowledged, and then set aside in favor of something steadier.

"Here is what I'm thinking," Snaxx said. "I go in first. I'm small, I'm quiet, I can find them and map their positions before anyone knows we're there. You stay close, ward yourself, and I come back to you before we engage. Once we're in, no solo actions from either of us."

Elira looked at the posting once more. Then she looked at Snaxx, and the look said everything the hesitation had been carrying, all of it at once, the last time and the fear and the cost of saying yes to something that could go wrong. She said it anyway.

"We go this afternoon," she said. "And you do not go far without me knowing where you are."

“Agreed,” Snaxx said.

“Then yes,” Elira said. “We take it.”

Snaxx finished her coffee. Outside, the city was finding its morning. A shutter somewhere still banging. The horse still being argued with. The city finding its morning, unaware of what had shifted inside this room.

She put down her empty cup and got ready. The preparation started after breakfast.

Snaxx found Hollander in the kitchen running his morning inventory with the focused efficiency of a man who held strong opinions about knowing exactly what he had.

“We’re heading out this afternoon,” she said. “Job, five miles northwest. Any chance you could put something together for the road?”

Hollander looked at her. He looked at the shelf. He looked back at her with the expression of a man who had been running a kitchen long enough to know exactly what heading out for a job meant and had already decided what it required.

“Aye,” he said. “Come back for it at noon.”

“Thank you,” she said. He had already turned back to his inventory.

She went to pack her kit.

She laid it out on the desk the way she always laid it out before a job: everything accounted for, everything in its place. The short

blade. The longer one. The close-work tools. The small wound kit she had carried since the first time she had gotten hurt badly enough to wish she had it. She worked through it with the efficient care of someone who knew exactly what mattered, because this was the kind of work where the difference between a good outcome and a bad one was usually something small and preventable.

Down the corridor she could hear Elira moving through her own preparations. She went to look.

Elira was in the guest room, not the operations room, which meant she had already been thinking about what the road required. She had a collection of spell research spread on the bed alongside her field pack, and she was working through it with a focused attention that was different from the correspondence-managing focus or the ward-working focus. Looser than either of those. She kept picking things up and considering them with the particular quality of someone who was genuinely engaged.

"You always travel as though shelter is someone else's problem," Elira said, without looking up, packing the tent in her pack.

"I've slept outside plenty of times," Snaxx said.

"In this weather?" Elira said. "On wet ground?" She added another folded document to the pile. "No, you haven't."

Snaxx looked at the stack of research documents. "Are you planning to ward the camp or write a paper?"

“Ward configurations I have been meaning to test in field conditions,” Elira said. “This is a reasonable opportunity.” Then, quieter: “I have not done this since my studies.”

“You’re excited, then?” Snaxx said.

Elira looked up. Something in her expression that was warmer than usual, less managed. “I have been managing correspondence and political fallout for the better part of a tenday,” she said. “Yes. I am looking forward to this considerably more than I expected.” She looked back at the pack. “Don’t make a thing of it.”

“I’m not making a thing of it,” Snaxx said. “I think it’s great.”

“Go finish your kit,” Elira said. But she was almost smiling.

Noon came with Hollander’s package: spiced bread wrapped carefully in cloth, hard cheeses, cured meat, the kind of provisions put together by someone who understood that people doing difficult work needed to eat properly. Snaxx packed it alongside her kit and went to find Elira.

* * *

They left in the mid-afternoon, the light already going flat the way late autumn light went flat by the third hour. The road northwest took them out through Pamerial’s outer edge and into the terrain between the city and Enn. The ground was rocky and uneven, wet from recent rain, frost still holding in the shaded places. The trees had shed most of what they were

going to shed and stood bare and dark against the low grey sky. The wind came in from the northwest carrying the smell of cold earth and distant rain.

Elira walked with the purposeful ease she brought to most things, her pack sitting neatly on her shoulders, her eyes moving over the landscape with the quiet attention of someone who was genuinely looking rather than simply moving through. She was wearing her field coat, something older and more practical than the manor coat, and it suited her in a way that said something about who she had been before seventeen years of being what the name required.

Snaxx moved with the natural attention of someone for whom unknown terrain was always something to read. Her eyes ran over the ground ahead without her deciding to. The footing, the outcroppings, the places where the path narrowed, the spots where someone with bad intentions could wait without being seen. She tested a stone before putting her weight on it. It held. She moved on.

"You read this terrain very well," Elira said, after they had been walking for a while, "Without it looking like work."

"You do the same thing," Snaxx said. "You walk into a room and know things before anyone else realizes there's anything there."

Elira was quiet for a moment. "I did not know that was visible."

"It's not, to most people."

The path curved around a rocky outcropping and the view opened on their left: bare fields, the last color stripped from them, the honesty of late autumn landscape. A crow moved in one of the bare-branched trees at the field's edge, settled, reconsidered, moved again. In the far distance, the faint suggestion of Enn's outer buildings against the flat grey sky.

"Tell me what a day looks like," Snaxx said. "In *our* shop. An ordinary one."

"We have discussed this," Elira said.

"You gave me the structure. I want the texture."

Elira considered this. "Not before coffee," she said. "Nothing functions before coffee, as you are now very much aware." Snaxx smiled. "After coffee: ward assessments. The practical work. Finding out what something is rather than what someone assumed it was. That is the morning."

"And the afternoon?"

"Consultations. People who cannot access the noble channels. Enchantments that need repair, wards that have degraded, things that have been ignored because they were not important enough for the guild halls but matter enormously to the person living with them." She paused. "I find I am looking forward to that part most."

"Because useful is not the same thing as meaningful," Snaxx said.

Elira looked at her. "Yes," she said. "Exactly that."

“What does my side of things look like to you?” Snaxx said.
“From where you’re standing.”

“Tell me,” Elira said. “I am curious how you see it.”

“Contracts,” Snaxx said. “The jobs that need someone who can go places without immediately becoming a political incident. Mercenary work, attached to something legitimate that gives it structure and a client base. Someone who can do what I do and have somewhere to bring the work back to.” She stepped over a wet patch of ground. “Your wards. My contracts. Mercenaries and Wards.”

“That is what we are,” Elira said, sounding quietly pleased in the way she did when she managed to say something exactly right.

“See, it sounds like something people walk through a door for,” Snaxx said.

“It sounds like something that requires considerable administrative organization,” Elira said. “Which I am prepared to provide.”

“You’re going to make intake forms?”

“Detailed ones,” Elira agreed. “With multiple sections.”

“That is extremely attractive,” Snaxx said.

Elira looked at her. “You find administrative infrastructure attractive?”

“Only when you’re the one signing them.”

Something in Elira’s expression shifted. Not suppressed amusement exactly, though that was part of it. Something warmer underneath. “Our desks,” she said, “will be on opposite sides of the room. Separated by a filing cabinet. For the first three months.”

“That is absolutely not fair,” Snaxx protested.

“It is a professional standard,” Elira calmly said back.

“That’s not a standard. That’s you pretending to have standards.”

Elira was quiet for a moment. “Three months,” she said, “is a reasonable professional standard.”

“Done,” Snaxx said. “Cabinet’s moving to your side by the second day. By the end of the week we stop pretending.”

“It will not,” Elira said. But the corner of her mouth betrayed her, and Snaxx counted it as a win.

The path climbed slightly and the terrain opened ahead of them. Snaxx could feel the job getting closer, the way attention sharpened when the work was near, but she was not there yet.

“When the shop has a reputation,” Elira said, after a while, “I want it to be the kind that comes from word of mouth. Not from proximity to the guild halls. From people telling other people that it worked.”

"That takes time," Snaxx said.

"Most things worth having do," Elira said. "I spent seventeen years building a reputation I inherited. I would like to spend the next portion of my life building one I chose. Something that belongs to what we actually are rather than what we were given."

"We'll build it," Snaxx said.

"Yes," Elira said simply. "We will."

They walked. The terrain roughened as the road aged, the maintained path giving way to something older, made by use rather than design. The wind moved through the bare branches of a tree line to their left. The cold was honest and present without being punishing.

"What does it feel like?" Snaxx said. "Choosing it. After everything."

"Like standing somewhere I have not stood before," Elira said. "Which is both uncomfortable and necessary." She paused. "I have been very good at managing what I had. I am less practiced at reaching for something I want. The two skills are related but not identical."

"You're doing it," Snaxx said.

"Slowly," Elira said. "With considerable effort." She glanced sideways. "You make it easier than I expected." She said it simply, without making a production of it, the way she said

things that had stopped needing armor.

Snaxx let that sit between them where it belonged.

* * *

At a quarter mile from where the woodsmoke smell began to reach them, Snaxx touched Elira's arm.

"Here," she said quietly. "Stay behind that outcropping. Start your ward configurations and give them time to settle. I'll find the camp and come back before we move."

Elira looked at her. Not the morning fear. That had settled into something steadier, something that had made its decision and was holding it. "I will be ready," she said.

Snaxx looked at her for one more moment. "*Watch lur ta'nti*," she said quietly.

Elira did not ask what it meant. She nodded once, her expression telling Snaxx she understood the shape of it even if not the words.

Snaxx went.

The terrain gave her what she needed. Broken ground, wet outcroppings, a landscape that rewarded small and patient. She moved through it low, reading each step before she took it.

The camp came into view through a gap in the rocks. It sat in a natural hollow below the ridge, sheltered from the wind, with a fire going in the center that had clearly been going for some time. The embers had the settled quality of something managed over hours, the ash built up around the base of the

logs in the way of a fire that had been fed and tended rather than simply lit. Three bedrolls were arranged around it in the casual disorder of people who had been here long enough to stop caring about organization. Weapons were stacked against a rock to one side with the ease of people who felt secure. A pot hung over the fire, something in it that had long since lost whatever ambition it had started with.

Four men. She counted carefully. Two talking near the fire, their voices a low murmur she could not make out from here. One sitting apart on a flat rock, eating something from his hands and paying attention to nothing in particular. One standing at the far edge of the hollow, watching the approach road with the posture of a man performing vigilance rather than practicing it. Weight on his back foot, gaze sweeping the road with the regularity of habit.

She counted again. Four.

She moved on.

She mapped their positions, their sightlines, the ground between her and each of them. She noted the stacked weapons. She noted the approach angles. She noted the watcher's blind spot.

She thought about the promise she had made that morning. About Elira's face when she had asked for it. About the future they were walking toward and the specific things she had not yet had time to say.

Then the man at the who watching the road, stretched and started to walk away. "Give me five, gotta piss," he said, as walked away toward a cluster of rocks uphill from the hollow.

Snaxx was already moving.

She reached the rocks before he did. She settled into the shadow of the largest one and waited, and when he arrived and turned his back to the wind she stepped out behind him and slit his throat. He did not get the chance to make a sound. She made sure of it.

That was the watcher handled.

She went back to Elira.

“Three at the fire,” she said quietly. “The watcher is down. I go in from the left. You come in from the right and do what you do. Stay where I can see you.”

Elira nodded once. Her ward configurations were settled around her with the particular quality of something complex held without visible effort.

“Ready,” she said.

They went in.

What happened next was not clean. It rarely was. The three men by the fire had roughly two seconds of understanding that something had gone wrong before the understanding became irrelevant.

Snaxx came in fast from the left. The first man was half-standing when she reached him and she used that: the awkward angle of his rising, the instability of someone not yet on their feet, the wet ground that worked against him and for her because she had anticipated it and he had not. He went down hard, his shoulder catching the rock at the edge of the fire circle. He did not get up.

From the right, Elira had arrived.

She had not been idle on her walk in from the outcropping. The man who had been sitting apart, the one eating from his hands with his attention on nothing, was no longer sitting. He was pinned flat to the ground by something that crackled faintly at its edges, the kind of ward work that held without requiring continued attention, the kind that said clearly this was done. The man was staring up at the sky with the expression of someone who had badly misread the situation.

The third man at the fire had seen Elira do this.

He took a step backward. He looked at what had just happened to his companion. He looked at Elira, who was already moving her attention toward something else with the focused calm of someone who had not yet run out of work. He took another step backward.

The step backward put him at the edge of the stacked weapons.

Snaxx crossed the distance between them before he could reach them. They struggled, briefly and urgently, on wet ground that neither of them had good footing on, and then she had him and he was down and it was over.

She was reaching for the binding cord when she heard it.

Not a shout. Not a footstep. The small specific sound of a bowstring under tension, the kind of sound that changed the quality of the air around it, that a person learned to recognize the hard way.

She looked up.

There had been a fifth. Sleeping in the shadow of the far outcropping, invisible in the angle she had used to scout, missed in two counts because the shadow was complete and she had been satisfied too quickly. He was on his feet now with an arrow nocked and drawn. He had watched Elira work. He had made his assessment.

His arrow was aimed at Elira's back.

Elira was focused on the man she had pinned, checking the ward configuration, her attention precisely placed. Her back was to the outcropping. She did not know.

The distance between Snaxx and Elira was not small, about 20 feet stood in between them.

It did not matter.

There was no thought. There was Elira. There was the arrow. There was the ground between them. Her body moved before her mind had time to ask permission. She moved. Across the wet rock, full speed, no hesitation, and she hit Elira with her shoulder and drove her clear and felt the arrow find her instead.

The impact arrived as pressure. Enormous. Specific. Somewhere between her shoulder and her side.

Then the pressure became pain.

Then the ground.

Cold stone against her face. The smell of rain and frost and turned earth and the fire's woodsmoke from somewhere above her, wrong angle now, the whole world at a wrong angle.

Elira's voice. The words arriving separately from their meaning, each one needing to be assembled and she did not have the

the cold was

something needed her attention and she could not

She tried to find the sentence.

“I love you, El-”

And then Elira’s face above her. Not the composed face. Not a careful face. Just Elira, fully present, all of it visible at once, the fear and the love and the absolute refusal to look away from what was in front of her. Her hands were on Snaxx’s face. Her mouth was moving.

That was the last thing that Snaxx saw before her vision went dark.

Stay with Me

The fifth bandit was already dead by the time Elira reached Snaxx.

She had turned when she heard the bowstring. She had seen the arrow in flight, and she had seen Snaxx move and she had understood what was happening and she had ended the man responsible before he had time to understand that he had failed. The ward configurations collapsed inward and redirected in the space of a breath, and then he was down and she was already moving toward Snaxx and the camp was quiet except for the fire.

Snaxx was on the ground.

There was a great deal of blood. More than Elira had expected, more than she had allowed herself to expect. The wet rock beneath Snaxx was dark with it, spreading in the way of something that had not been stopped and was not planning to stop on its own.

Elira dropped to her knees beside her.

Snaxx's skin, already the grey-green of a goblin in the cold, had gone several shades paler than that. The color Elira did not have a clinical name for but understood immediately. Her lips were slightly parted. Her eyes were closed.

"Snaxx." Elira's voice came out wrong, too tight, not the voice she used when she was managing things. "Snaxx, I need you to stay with me."

She reached for her own pack first, scattering the contents across the wet ground before she remembered and found Snaxx's wound kit instead. Her hands were shaking. She noticed this and told them to stop, and they did not entirely stop.

"I do not know how to do this," she said aloud, to no one, to herself, to the cold air. "I have read about this. That is not the same as knowing how to do this." She got the kit open. "Stay with me. I need you to stay with me while I figure this out."

She assessed the entry point. Below the right shoulder, she thought, above the lungs, if the angle had been what she hoped it had been. The wound was deep and the bleeding was fast and she had to stop the bleeding first, that was the first thing, that was the only thing right now.

She broke the arrow shaft close to the entry point. Her hands were steadier for it, the task narrowing everything else down. She would never forget the sound the shaft made, or the way the moment afterward seemed briefly wrong.

"I'm here," she said. "I know it hurts. I'm sorry. I'm here."

She packed the wound with what the kit provided, applying pressure with everything she had, leaning into it. Then she

brought the ward configurations up around her hands in a way she had never done before, had never trained to do on a living person, reconstructed from field texts she had read during her studies and was now pulling from memory with the desperation of someone who could not afford to be wrong.

“Come on,” she said, under her breath, to the ward work, to Snaxx, to herself. “Come on. Hold.”

The configurations settled. She felt them take hold against the resistance of living tissue that had not asked for this, and she held them there with every scrap of focus she had.

Snaxx’s eyes opened briefly. Not focused. Searching.

“Here,” Elira said. “I am right here. You are not going anywhere.”

Snaxx’s eyes closed again.

The bleeding slowed. Not stopped. Slowed enough that Elira could breathe without it feeling like a lie. She stood up.

The three men she and Snaxx had taken down were still unconscious, arranged as they had fallen. She looked at them. She looked at Snaxx on the ground behind her. She looked at the distance between here and Pamerial.

She brought the configurations up and woke them.

It was not gentle. The ward work that pulled someone back to consciousness was not a natural thing and she did not make it natural. All three came awake at once, gasping, disoriented, the confusion of people yanked from somewhere they had not chosen to leave.

One of them started to sit up. Another looked at his bound wrists and opened his mouth.

“Don’t,” Elira said.

They looked at her. She was covered in blood, most of it Snaxx’s. The ward configurations were still visible around her hands, running hotter than standard from the sustained use, casting faint light on her face. She was not composed. She was something that had been composed once and had set it down and was not going to pick it up again tonight.

“You,” said one of them, the one who had opened his mouth. He had a look to him like he was remembering something. “You’re the warden of House Varnis.”

“You are going to carry her to the Wandering Apothecary,” Elira said. “All five miles. You are going to do it carefully and you are not going to stop, and you are not going to let her touch the ground. If any one of you drops her, slows without my permission, or gives me any reason at all to think you are not fully committed to completing this task, I will reduce you to ash where you stand.” She looked at each of them in turn. “I want to be clear that this is not a figure of speech. I just killed your companion without breaking stride. Consider that information when you decide how to behave.”

The one who had been talking stopped.

“She needs a litter,” said the third one, quietly. He was looking at Snaxx with something that was not sympathy exactly but was not nothing either. “We can make one from the bedrolls.”

“Then do it,” Elira said.

They made it. They were not gentle, but they were fast, and fast mattered. When they lifted Snaxx onto it one of them moved wrong and Snaxx's head rolled and Elira said, very quietly, "careful," in a tone that made all three of them go very still for a moment before continuing.

They started walking.

Elira produced light without being asked, ward-work globes that floated ahead of them and lit the wet rocky ground, because a stumble meant Snaxx hitting the ground and that was not going to happen. The road was dark and the terrain was uneven and she walked beside the litter the entire way and did not stop talking.

Not to the bandits. To Snaxx.

"I knew this was a bad idea," she said, when they were half a mile out. "You said five miles, good bounty, I know what I'm doing. And I believed you because you do know what you're doing, and I was right to believe you, and that does not help at all right now." A pause. "I knew it was a bad idea. I said yes anyway. I want you to remember that I said yes anyway, because when you wake up, I intend to have a conversation about what that means and I will require you to be present for it."

One of the bandits glanced back at her. She did not acknowledge him.

"The ward work is holding," she said to Snaxx. "I do not know how much longer. I have never done this to a person. I have read about it, which is not the same thing. I am doing my best, and my best is going to have to be enough and I need you to help me by staying." She watched Snaxx's face in the light from

the globes. Pale. Still. Breathing. "Please stay."

The second mile. The third. The bandits did not slow. The one who had talked to Elira was walking with the concentration of someone who had understood their situation completely and had decided that compliance was the only sensible option. The one who had suggested the litter walked carefully, watching his footing, adjusting his grip when the ground shifted.

Around the fourth mile the one who had opened his mouth said, to no one in particular, "She ain't gonna make it."

Elira said, without looking at him, "She is going to make it. You are going to help her make it. And if you say something like that again, I will gag you with your own coat and you will carry her the rest of the way in silence. Do you understand me?"

He understood her.

They came through Pamerial's northwest gate as the last of the light left the sky. The Wandering Apothecary was on the lower market road, two streets from the gate, its lamp still lit. Elira had never been inside it. She knew it by reputation, which was the best in the city, which was what mattered.

The staff looked up when they came through the door.

They recognized Elira. This was evident from the way the woman at the front desk stood up immediately and said, "My Lady," and the way the two people behind her stopped what they were doing and looked at the litter and then looked at Elira and moved without being asked.

"Arrow wound," Elira said. "Below the right shoulder. I have been maintaining a ward configuration on the bleeding for approximately two hours. The shaft is broken at the surface, not removed. She is alive."

They took the litter from the bandits. Elira watched them carry Snaxx through a door at the back of the room and she stood very still while they did it, and then the door closed and the room was quiet and she was still standing there.

“My Lady.” The woman from the front desk was beside her. “Can I get you something?”

“I need the best healer for her.” Elira said.

A pause. “Mira is already here, my Lady. She’s the best in Pamerial.”

“Good,” Elira said. “Then I have something else to do. I will be back within the hour.”

She turned to the bandits.

They were standing near the door with the expressions of people who had not decided yet whether their obligation was complete. The one who had talked back looked like he was reconsidering his career choice.

“You three,” Elira said, “are going to walk with me to the guild hall and you are going to do it without incident, because you are already facing a bounty claim and I would very much prefer not to add resisting a warden to your list of problems tonight. Move.”

They moved.

* * *

The walk to the guild hall took less than ten minutes. Elira did

not speak to the bandits during it. She thought about Snaxx behind a closed door at the Wandering Apothecary and she walked and she did not let herself think about anything she could not control.

The guild hall clerk looked up when they came through the door. He had been there the night of the caravan job, and he recognized her. She could see it in his face, the recognition followed immediately by the assessment of what she looked like tonight, which was considerably different from the last time.

He did not comment on it. He was, she thought, a perceptive man.

“The bandit bounty,” she said. “Posted for the Enn road. I am delivering three of the five. Two are dead at the camp site. I require the full bounty for the three living, per the posted terms.”

She looked at the bandits.

“These three,” she said, and her voice came out with an edge she had not entirely planned for, “attacked travelers on the road northwest of Pamerial and in the course of doing so put an arrow through someone I love. I want them to be held. I want them to be tried. I want the full weight of whatever this city’s justice system considers appropriate applied to them, and I want you to note that I am the warden of this city and I am making that request formally and on record.”

The clerk was already writing.

She collected the four hundred and twenty crowns, tucked them into her coat without counting them, and walked back out.

She was back at the Wandering Apothecary in under the hour she had promised.

Mira Kess was waiting for her in the front room. She was shorter than Elira had expected, 5'2" with strawberry blonde hair pulled back from a face full of freckles, the kind of face that was easy to underestimate until you saw the quality of attention behind it. She was quiet. The specific quiet of someone who had learned that observation was more useful than announcement and had been practicing it for a long time.

"Lady Varnis," she said. "I am Mira Kess. My studying chiurgeon said you would be back." She paused. "The work you applied in the field was good. Better than good, given the circumstances. It held the bleed until we could address it properly."

"Will she survive?" Elira said.

Mira Kess looked at her with the expression of someone who had been asked this question many times and had a policy about how to answer it. "She will survive this," she said. "Probably. The wound did not take the lung. The immediate threat is infection and blood loss, both of which we are managing. If the wound does not turn in the next three days, her chances become considerably better than probably." She held Elira's gaze. "That is the honest assessment. I do not give other kinds."

The word, "*probably*", landed on Elira the way she had known it would. She had been bracing for it since the arrow, and it landed anyway.

"I am staying," Elira said.

"I expected as much," Mira Kess said. "I have had a chair brought in."

The chair was beside Snaxx's bed, close enough that Elira could reach her without standing. She sat in it and she did not get up again for the better part of the first day.

Jack, the Varnis housekeep, brought correspondence in the morning. She sat it on the small table beside Elira without comment and left, which felt right. Elira worked through it from the chair, writing responses with the hand that was not resting near Snaxx's, positioned so she could feel any change in Snaxx's breathing without looking up from the page.

She was still in the same coat with blood on it.

"I am going to talk to you," she said, when she had set the correspondence aside for a moment. "I am aware you cannot respond. I am going to do it anyway." She looked at Snaxx's face, the color still not right but less wrong than it had been on the road. "House Heldenslaw have confirmed their support formally. Same green and silver crest as before. The letter arrived this morning and it is the kind of letter that comes when people have decided which way things are going and want to be on record as having chosen correctly." She paused. "You have a word for that. The timing of people's convictions is relative to the direction of the wind. I cannot remember it. You will tell me when you wake up and you will be very annoying about it."

She picked up the next letter.

"House Caveth has written again as well," she said. "They are asking about the ward service contracts, which suggests

they have heard something about what we are planning and want to position themselves as early clients. I do not know how they have heard of us already, but I assume you have been talking around. I have not answered them yet. I wanted to think about whether we want noble houses as clients at all, or whether that creates the exact kind of entanglement we are trying to move away from.” She set the letter down. “I think we do not want them. I think we want the Crooked Lanterns and the lower market vendors and the people who have been managing degraded wards on their own because they have no other option. I think that is the point.” She looked at Snaxx. “Tell me if I am wrong. When you wake up.”

Poli arrived at noon with food and the warm directness of someone who had assessed the situation and decided what it required. Elira ate without tasting it because Poli had set it in front of her and looked at her in a way that made counterarguments feel beside the point. Muriel and Kolia came through in the afternoon, cycling through with the quiet efficiency of people who had divided up what needed doing and were doing it.

On the second day Hollander came.

He carried food rather than brought it, and he set it in front of Elira with the specific finality of a man who had decided something. Then he stood there. He did not say anything. He looked at Snaxx and he looked at Elira and he stood there.

Elira ate.

“Thank you, Hollander,” she said, when she had finished.

“Aye,” he said. Which meant several things at once and all of them were kind. He picked up the empty plate and left.

* * *

She talked to Snaxx across those days. Not always about letters or politics. Sometimes about smaller things.

“The second stair in the manor makes a noise,” she said, on the afternoon of the second day. “I have never had it repaired. I never noticed it until you pointed it out and now, I cannot stop noticing it, which is something you have done to several things I used to be able to ignore.” A pause. “I do not mean that as a complaint.”

On the second night Snaxx moved.

It was small. A shift, a sound. Elira was in the chair and at Snaxx’s side before the movement had finished.

Snaxx’s hand found hers. Not deliberately. The way hands found things in the dark.

“I am here,” Elira said quietly. “Rest. You do not have to come up yet.”

Snaxx’s hand tightened slightly. Then she went still once more.

Elira stayed where she was for the rest of the night.

Jack, arrived on the third morning with a clean change of clothes set over her arm and the quiet observation that Lady Varnis might find it useful. She set them on the chair by the window without making it a conversation.

Elira looked at the coat she was wearing. She had been aware of the blood for three days. She had decided it was not relevant.

Looking at it now was different from having it in her peripheral awareness.

She changed her clothes and then she sat back down.

"I have been thinking about the ward shop," she said. "Not in the abstract. In the specific." She looked at Snaxx. "The location I have been considering is on Middle Market Road, north-facing, which means better light in the morning and cooler in the summer. There is a ground floor space that has been empty for two tendays. It has a large front room that would serve as reception and consultation, and two smaller rooms behind it, one of which I would use as the ward workroom and one of which could serve as your office or as overflow consultation space, depending on how the work develops." She paused. "The front door faces the street directly. People walking past would be able to see inside. I think that matters. I think visible is better than tucked away when you are trying to be the kind of place that people find when they need to."

She was quiet for a moment.

"I have been the warden of House Varnis for seventeen years," she said. "I have been very good at it. It has required things of me in an endless succession of days that looked the same from the inside, and I have met those requirements, and I have been careful not to want anything too specifically because specific wanting was a vulnerability I had learned to manage." She looked at Snaxx's face. "And then you came through a window instead of my front door, and nothing has been careful since. And I find that I do not want it to be."

On the third night, late, when Mira Kess had gone and the

apothecary was quiet around her, Elira sat with Snaxx's hand in hers in the low lamp light and said the thing she had been carrying since the hillside.

"I love you," she said. Quietly, into the room, into the dark, into whatever part of Snaxx could hear her. "I heard what you said, and I want you to know that I love you too, and I am sorry I did not say it sooner, and I am going to say it properly when you wake up, but I am saying it now because I need you to know it and I am not certain waiting is something I am capable of anymore." She paused. "I have been careful about things for a very long time. I have been careful about what I wanted and careful about what I said and careful about what I allowed myself to feel because careful was a reasonable response to a life that required management." Another pause. "I want the ward shop. I want the desks that belongs to us. I want the flirtation that I told you was only occasionally welcome, which was not accurate, it is considerably more welcome than that, and I want you to wake up and be insufferable about having known that all along."

She waited.

Snaxx breathed. In and out. Steady and present.

"Wake up," Elira said. "Please. I need you."

On the fourth day Mira Kess arrived for her morning assessment and said that the wound was showing no signs of turning and that the fever that had come in the night was resolving.

"The word *probably*," Mira Kess said, "is beginning to look less like a condition and more like a formality."

Elira sat very still and breathed carefully and said thank you.

Mira Kess gave her a moment before continuing her assessment, which was something Elira had noticed she had done, the reading of what a room needed and the quiet provision of it. She had become, over four days, someone Elira trusted. Not quickly. But steadily, in the way people who showed up and did the thing they said they would do.

On the fourth afternoon Snaxx's eyes opened.

They found Elira immediately. She looked at her for a long moment, something moving across her face that was not quite recognition and was more than that. Then her eyes closed again. But the quality of the closing was different. Not the going-under quality. The sleeping quality, which Elira had not known she could tell apart until she found herself telling it apart.

She had been awake for most of four days. She put her head down on the edge of the bed beside Snaxx's hand and slept.

On the fifth day, Mira Kess arrived and assessed the wound. "She will recover," she said quietly, because she had read the room on day one and had not stopped reading it since. She understood that what this room needed was not announcement but certainty, delivered without ceremony.

Elira nodded. She did not trust herself to say anything immediately, so she did not say anything immediately, and Mira Kess continued her work without requiring her to.

She thought about the ward shop and about choosing something and not apologizing for wanting it. The north-facing space on Middle Market Road. The desk that was not a metaphor. The filing cabinet that was going to be on Elira's

side of the room by the second day regardless of what either of them said about professional standards.

She was sitting in the chair reading a letter from Jack when Snaxx woke up.

Not the surfacing kind of waking. The proper kind. Eyes opening and staying open and taking in the room and finding it and holding it.

Snaxx looked at the ceiling. She looked at the window. She looked at Elira.

Elira was already moving.

She had Snaxx in her arms before she had entirely decided to, her face against Snaxx's hair, both arms around her with the unmistakable force of someone who had been keeping something at bay for five days and had stopped keeping it at bay.

"My Lady," said Mira Kess, from the doorway where she had been conducting her morning check, in the tone of someone who had anticipated this and had prepared a response. "Please do not crush the patient."

Elira loosened her grip. Slightly.

Snaxx made a sound against her shoulder that was not quite a word but was unmistakably hers.

Elira pressed her forehead against Snaxx's and closed her eyes and felt something in her chest loosen all at once after being held too long. When she looked up her eyes stung and she let them. Snaxx's hand came up slowly and found her wrist and

held it.

Elira laughed once under her breath in a way that was almost not a laugh. "I have things to say to you," she said quietly. "When you are ready to hear them."

Snaxx made the sound again and Elira smiled because it sounded exactly like attention. Outside, morning continued with complete indifference. Inside the room, that felt generous.

Make it Ours

The ceiling of the Wandering Apothecary's back room was low and unadorned, Snaxx had been looking at it for the better part of a few hours and had already developed uneasy opinions about it.

The room itself was small. There was a bed, a chair, and a table with Mira Kess's kit arranged on it with the precision of someone who had strong feelings about where things went. A narrow window that showed a slice of the lower market road: feet mostly, the occasional cart wheel, the city going about its business without any awareness of what had happened five miles northwest of it.

The room smelled like Elira. Not exclusively. It smelled like an apothecary back room, herbs and clean linen and something astringent underneath, but Elira had been here for five days and she had left herself in the air of the place the way people did when they had been somewhere long enough.

Snaxx found this unreasonably comforting.

She was taking stock of what her body could and could not do, which was an exercise in frustration. She could sit up without assistance. She could reach for things on the table beside her. She could not stand without the room doing something unpleasant, which Mira Kess had explained was normal and would resolve with time, a word Snaxx had developed strong feelings about.

"Time," she had said, when Mira Kess had used it the morning after she had woken up.

"Yes," Mira Kess had said, with the equanimity of someone who had heard this tone before and was not going to be moved by it. "More of it than you would like. Less of it than you fear. Rest."

Snaxx had rested. She had not enjoyed it.

Elira came back later that same morning with correspondence and stayed until Mira Kess's afternoon rounds, then came back after and stayed until the light from the window went dark. She did not hover. She was simply present in the way she had become present, settled into the chair beside the bed with the quality of someone who had decided where they were going to be and was being there completely.

On the second morning Mira Kess finished her assessment, made a note in the small journal she kept, and said she was going to step out for a few minutes.

The door closed.

Elira set down her correspondence.

"I have things to say to you," she said. "I said I would say them when you were ready and awake. I am going to say them now."

"Alright," Snaxx said.

"I love you," Elira said. "I told you when you could not hear me and I am telling you now when you can. I heard what you tried to say on the hillside and I mean it back, entirely, without qualification. I wanted you to know that."

Snaxx looked at her. "Without qualification?" she said.

"Yes," Elira said.

Snaxx was quiet for a second. "You love me," Snaxx said slowly, as if tasting the words, "You said it like you'd overthought it."

Elira blinked. "I do not think that is a criticism."

"It's not, Elira." Snaxx's mouth was doing the thing it did when she was trying not to smile and had already lost. "You cannot even say I love you without adding a disclaimer." She reached over and took Elira's hand. "It's very you."

"It was not a disclaimer," Elira said. "It was clarification."

"It was very you," Snaxx said. "It was the most '*you*' thing you have ever said to me and you have said some extremely you things." She reached over and took Elira's hand. "Say it again. Without overthinking it."

Elira looked at her. Something that had been held very carefully for several days loosened. Her eyes brightened and she seemed briefly annoyed by that before deciding she had more important

things to do. "I love you," she said. Simpler this time. Just the words.

Snaxx squeezed her hand. "There she is."

Elira let out a small breath that could almost have been a laugh. "I was always here." Elira exclaimed, and something in her voice was soft in a way that it was not always soft, the way it got when she had stopped performing composure and was simply feeling something.

Snaxx's thumb moved against the back of her hand. "Yeah," her voice softened, "You were here." She looked at Elira for a moment. "I love you too," Snaxx said. "I tried to tell you in the bandit camp but I ran out of breath."

"I know," Elira said. "I was there."

"Terrible timing."

"Exceptionally poor."

"To be fair," Snaxx said, "I had just been shot."

"You had," Elira said. "Which I have thought about not just every day since, but every fifteen minutes since." She looked at their hands on the bed between them. "I am very glad you are here to be annoying about it."

"I'm not being annoying," Snaxx said. "I'm being charming."

"You are being both," Elira said. "Simultaneously. It is a skill."

Snaxx grinned. "You love me," she said again, because she could, because it was true, because Elira's expression every time she said it was something she was going to be collecting for a long time.

"I do," Elira said. "Unreservedly."

"No overthinking this time," Snaxx smiled and settled back into the pillow. "I'll take it."

Mira Kess came back fifteen minutes later, looked at the room, looked at both of them, and made a note in her journal. She had developed, over the course of five days, a comprehensive understanding of what was happening in this room, which she had arrived at primarily by listening to Elira talk to an unconscious Snaxx for hours at a time. She did not require explanation for most of what she observed.

The second day at the apothecary had the quality of something settling. Snaxx could stand for short periods now, which she tested several times more than was strictly necessary. Mira Kess added half a day to her recovery timeline. Snaxx accepted this with the grace of someone who had learned that arguing added more time than accepting.

Elira read correspondence from the chair and occasionally read pieces of it aloud when something was interesting enough to share. Snaxx had opinions about the political situation that were blunt and occasionally correct, which Elira had stopped

being surprised by. "House Caveth wrote again," Elira said, on the second afternoon, setting down a letter with the expression she wore when something had confirmed a suspicion she already had.

"What do they want?"

"They are asking about ward service contracts," Elira said. "They want to be early clients."

"Tell them no," Snaxx said.

Elira looked at her over the letter. "It is more complicated than that."

"It really isn't."

"If we refuse House Caveth outright, without diplomatic framing, we create an enemy before we have even opened the door. Noble houses have long memories and longer reach. We do not need to make enemies of people who have not yet done anything to deserve it. What we need to do is decline in a way that leaves the door open for them to come back as ordinary clients rather than patron clients." She set the letter down. "There is a difference between a house that expects preferential treatment because they were first and a client who comes in through the same door as everyone else. We want the second kind. We do not want the first. But we have to get from here to there without making the first kind feel insulted."

Snaxx thought about this. "So you're going to tell them no but

in a way that sounds like maybe.”

“I am going to tell them we are not yet accepting pre-opening arrangements,” Elira said, “but that we look forward to serving the community broadly when we open. Which is true. And which leaves them to draw their own conclusions about what broadly means.”

“That,” Snaxx said, “is exhausting.”

“Welcome to nobility, Lady Snaxx.” Elira said, almost sarcastically, picking up her pen.

“This is why we’re building the shop,” Snaxx said. “So you don’t have to do that anymore.”

Elira paused. She looked at the letter, and then at Snaxx, and something in her expression shifted into something quieter. “Yes,” she said. “I guess it is.”

In the evening, Mira Kess said Snaxx could go home the following morning, provided she did not do anything between now and then to change that assessment. Snaxx spent the rest of the night doing nothing at all, except sleep and rest, with the focused intention of someone preserving a deadline.

On the morning of the third day after Snaxx woke, Mira Kess did her assessment and confirmed it.

“Instructions,” she said, in the tone of someone who knew she was about to be selectively heard and was going to be specific anyway. “No exertion beyond walking for the next five days.

No lifting anything heavier than a cup. No weapons work of any kind, and I want to be precise about that: no practice, no testing, no holding them to see how they feel. The wound is closed but the tissue is still fragile and overextension will reopen it and you will be back in this bed with another week added to everything.”

“Understood,” Snaxx said.

Mira Kess looked at her with the expression of someone who understood completely that understood did not mean agreed. “I mean it,” she said.

“I know,” Snaxx said. She paused. “You overheard everything, didn’t you? While I was out? Elira talking about the shop?”

Mira Kess was quiet for a moment. “This is a small back room,” she said. “And Lady Varnis talks to you the way people talk when they need to say things out loud. I was not eavesdropping. I was present.” A pause. “The ward shop sounds like something this city needs.”

“It is,” Snaxx said. “You should come by when we open.”

Something in Mira Kess’s quiet face was warm. “I will,” she said. “I expect I will need healing or protection wards at some point.”

She looked at Elira then, and held the look for a moment with the directness she brought to things that mattered. “The ward work you did in the field kept her alive long enough for me to help,” she said. “By the time she reached me, the difficult part

had already been done.”

Elira nodded once. The kind of nod that was doing considerable work underneath its surface.

“Thank you,” Snaxx said. “For all of it. For taking care of her, too, while she was busy pretending she didn’t need taking care of.”

“I have worked with worse patients,” Mira Kess agreed, simply. “You are both welcome.” She gathered her kit. “I would be pleased if our next interaction required less blood.”

She left. The room felt different without her in it. Smaller, in the way rooms felt smaller when the person who had been holding them together was gone.

“Ready?” Elira said.

“Very,” Snaxx said.

* * *

The manor staff had been informed. This was evident from the moment they came through the door, which opened before Elira had reached for the handle, Jack holding it with the particular efficiency of someone who had been watching for their approach.

“Welcome home, Miss Snaxx,” Jack said. The words landed with more weight than four words usually carried.

The entrance hall smelled like the manor: wood polish and

whatever Hollander had been cooking and the quality of a house that had been maintained with care for a long time. Snaxx stood in it for a moment and breathed.

Poli came around the corner from the corridor at a pace that was almost but not quite running and wrapped both arms around Snaxx with the full commitment of someone who had made a decision and was not revising it.

Snaxx held on.

When Poli finally stepped back her eyes were wet, which she addressed by immediately becoming very busy with her hands, straightening things that did not need straightening.

Hollander was in the kitchen doorway. He was looking at Snaxx with the expression of a man who had strong feelings and had decided, after some internal deliberation, to say them.

"Sit doon," he said. "Both of ye." He waited until they had moved toward the small dining room before he continued, following them in with the particular energy of someone who had rehearsed this. "Lady Varnis told us what happened out there. What ye did." He looked at Snaxx directly, which was not something he did lightly. "Ye pushed her out of the way. Took the arrow that was meant for her." His jaw worked for a moment. "Dinnae ken many folk who'd do that. Dinnae ken many folk with that kind of courage in them." He set the food down on the table with more care than usual. "So. Thank ye. For bringing her back safe." He looked at Elira then, and the look said several things that his words had not quite reached. "And for bringing yourself back too."

He went back into the kitchen before anyone could respond, Elira looked at the table. Something in her face that she was

not managing.

"He means it," Snaxx said quietly.

"I know," Elira said. "That is why it lands the way it does."

They ate. Muriel and Kolia came through in the late afternoon. Muriel with the frank assessment of someone revising an opinion upward and not making a speech about it. Kolia with the warmth he brought to most things. Nobody acted like Snaxx needed entertaining. People came in, talked, left, brought things, adjusted around her being there the way people adjusted around someone they expected to still be there tomorrow.

Jack had prepared the guest room. Fresh linens, the window cracked to the autumn air, the pipe on the windowsill. The ring on the bedside table.

Snaxx put it back on.

The first day at the manor was slow in the specific way of days that had nothing required of them. Snaxx moved through the house at the pace Mira Kess had prescribed, which was a pace she found deeply unsatisfying but had agreed to. She sat with Elira in the operations room while Elira worked through correspondence. She sat in the small dining room while Hollander made breakfast. She sat in the entrance hall for twenty minutes simply because it was a different chair from the one she had been in.

"You are sitting in the entrance hall now?" Elira said, passing through.

"It's a different chair," Snaxx said.

Elira looked at her. "I see." She continued past.

The second day Snaxx found the short blade.

She had not been looking for it. It had been in her kit, which had come home with her, and she had been going through the kit to take inventory and the blade had been there, and she had picked it up the way you picked things up when they fit in your hand, and then she had snuck away to the garden.

The garden in late autumn was bare and cold and honest, the kind of honest that didn't soften for memory. The same garden where things had been named between Elira and herself, spoken once and then left to stand in place like stakes in frozen soil.

Snaxx moved through a slow practice sequence, testing her range. Her shoulder answered in small, reluctant increments, sending back information she did not like but could understand: this much, not that far, not yet. The news should have discouraged her. Instead it felt almost cooperative, as if her body had decided to negotiate.

She was on the third pass when she became aware of Elira in the garden doorway. She finished the pass anyway. Then she stopped.

Elira crossed the garden without haste. Dead leaves shifted under her steps, brittle as old paper. "Give me the blade," she said.

"I was just testing the range," Snaxx said quickly. "Nothing

serious. Low extension only, controlled movement. I'm not pushing it, I know exactly what I'm doing."

"Give me the blade, Snaxx."

"The shoulder feels better than it did," Snaxx added, like the sentence might help if she set it down carefully enough.

"I am not asking about the shoulder," Elira said. "I am asking you to give me the blade. Now."

Snaxx hesitated a fraction longer than she meant to, then she gave her the blade. Elira took it with the ease of someone receiving something that already belonged under supervision.

She looked at it for a moment, expression settling into that precise stillness she used when she was deciding how a sentence needed to be shaped before it was spoken. "Mira Kess was specific," she said at last. "No weapons work. I was in that room when she said it. You were also in that room when she said it."

"I know what she said."

"Then you understand that what you were doing directly contradicts it."

"It was controlled movement," Snaxx said. The words came faster now, as if speed could make them more reasonable. "Low extension. I know my own body, Elira. I know the difference between what's going to hurt me and what isn't."

"You took an arrow less than ten days ago," Elira said. "Your

assessment of what is and is not going to hurt you is not currently reliable.”

Snaxx stopped. She could feel the argument she wanted to make, the one about competence and instinct and knowing your own limits, and she could also feel that it was not going to land the way she wanted it to land, and she could see in Elira’s face what the past tenday had cost her.

“You saved my life,” Elira said, quieter now. “In that bandit camp. You moved without thinking about yourself at all and you nearly died doing it. I know you know that. I know you don’t understand what those five days you were out were like.” She held Snaxx’s gaze. A pause. Not empty. Full of everything she wasn’t packaging into words. “What I am asking you to do is let me not go through that again. What I am asking you to do is give me the last few more days before you test what your shoulder can do. That is all I am asking.”

Snaxx looked at her for a long moment. “Two more days,” she said.

“Two days,” Elira didn’t argue the number. “And then I supervise.”

“You’ll watch me practice?”

“I will ensure you do not overextend yourself.”

“Here? In the garden?”

“Yes.”

The garden wind moved through the dry stems along the fence line, making a small, papery sound that didn't quite belong to either of them. Snaxx considered this as if it were a deal she could turn over in her hands and inspect from both sides. "Alright," she said. "Two days, but I want it noted," she added, "that I'm doing this because I want to, not because you're making me."

"Noted," Elira said, then, after a moment: "Sit down."

They sat on the garden bench.

The autumn garden lay stripped back around them, stems, stone, and the thin geometry of branches against a pale, indifferent sky. The air was cold in a way that felt deliberate, as if warmth had been a choice recently revoked.

Snaxx's shoulder ached faintly, that specific warning ache that arrived when she had pushed it a fraction beyond what it preferred. She did not mention it. The thought was placed carefully somewhere out of reach, like setting a tool back on a shelf and refusing to look at it again. "I saved your life," she said, after a while.

"You did," Elira said.

"I'm a hero."

"You are," Elira said, without irony. Her gaze lingered on Snaxx a moment longer than necessary. "A hero who just handed over her blade without much of a fight."

"I was choosing my battles," Snaxx said.

"A wise hero, then."

"The wisest," Snaxx said. "You can put that on the sign above the door. Mercenaries and Wards. Proprietors: the wisest hero in Pamerial and her very reasonable partner."

"I will not be putting that on the sign," Elira said. There was the faintest pause before she added, "It would attract the wrong kind of customers. People would expect competence."

Snaxx looked offended. "I am deeply competent."

"In bursts," Elira said.

Snaxx gasped. "That is slander. That is my livelihood."

"It is your personality."

Snaxx nodded solemnly, as if this were a bureaucratic disappointment rather than a refusal of a deeply important civic monument. "Very reasonable partner," she said. "That's you. Very reasonable. Devastatingly so."

"I just took your blade away."

"And I let you," Snaxx said, lifting her chin slightly, laughter caught under her words.

Something in Elira's expression gave way entirely into something that was warm and exasperated and fond all at once. "Yes," she said. "You did." Then, quieter, as if she had decided not

to let the moment remain purely procedural: "My hero." She reached over and took Snaxx's hand without comment.

Snaxx blinked once. "Wait, excuse me?"

Elira's mouth curved faintly, restrained but unmistakably amused with herself. "Don't get used to it," she said.

"That sounded very much like getting used to it." And this time, when Snaxx laughed, it stayed soft. They sat there in the cold garden while the afternoon did its patient work around them.

* * *

Two days later, on what Snaxx had been privately calling the last day of house arrest, Elira came into the guest room in the morning with her correspondence and sat in the chair and said, "There is something here I want to read to you."

Snaxx was sitting up in bed with the alertness of someone who had been awake for a while waiting for the day to start. "Alright. What is it?" she said.

Elira unfolded the letter and held it with the quality she had when she was about to say something she had been thinking about for a while.

To Lady Elira Varnis, Warden of House Varnis, Pamerial.

We write to advise of the availability of a commercial premises at 12 Middle Market Road, Shop B, suitable for

retail or professional services.

The property is ground floor, north-facing aspect, comprising one large reception room and two smaller rear rooms. The premises have been vacant for three tendays and are available for immediate viewing. Asking price is negotiable.

Please direct enquiries to the office of Aldric Pemm, Property Agent, Lower Guild Hall.

She folded the letter and set it in her lap.

Snaxx looked at her. "North-facing," she said.

"That one was deliberate, it gets the light in the morning," Elira said.

"Ground floor. Large front room. Two smaller rooms."

"I made sure of the layout," Elira said.

"You know this place already."

Elira's expression did the thing it did when she had been caught at something and had decided to own it. "I received this correspondence a few days ago when you were in the apothecary," she said. "I read it to you then. You were not awake enough yet to respond."

"You described it to me while I was unconscious?"

"I thought it was useful to have something to talk about that was not the current situation," Elira said. "And I had strong feelings about the north-facing aspect."

Snaxx raised an eyebrow. "You already want it."

"I think it warrants a viewing."

"Elira."

"The location is appropriate, the size is reasonable, the north-facing aspect means better morning light for the ward workroom, and the asking price is described as negotiable which suggests room to work with."

"Elira," Snaxx said again. "You already want it."

A pause. "Yes," Elira said. "I already want it."

Snaxx smiled. It started small and became something considerably larger. "Then we go look at it. We argue about the desks and the filing cabinets and we figure out what it costs and we make it ours."

"The asking price for a city center merchant space in this district runs between one thousand and four thousand crowns depending on condition and negotiation," Elira said. "We go in aiming for the lower end. One thousand, if the condition warrants it."

"I only have seven hundred and fifty-five gold crowns," Snaxx

said.

“You do,” Elira said. “Which means we negotiate hard, and if we need to supplement, I can draw from House Varnis funds. It is an investment. The house benefits from having a ward operation in the city regardless of who runs it.”

Snaxx’s expression shifted. “No,” she said.

Elira looked at her. “It is not charity. It is a practical arrangement.”

“I know what it is,” Snaxx said. “And I know you mean it that way. But no. We earn this.” She looked at the letter in Elira’s lap. “We have seven fifty-five. We negotiate it to a thousand. We make the two forty-five work somehow. I’m not starting this with your family’s money.”

“My family’s money is currently my money,” Elira said. “And I am offering it as a loan if that makes it more acceptable. With repayment terms. Written down. Official.”

Snaxx was quiet for a moment. She thought about her eight coins from her father’s chest in Myrefall, and everything that had come after, and what it meant to build something rather than find something.

“A loan,” she said.

“A loan,” Elira confirmed. “Documented. With interest if you insist, though I would prefer you did not insist.”

“No interest, Gods no,” Snaxx said. “But I’m paying you back.”

“I know you are,” Elira said. “I never doubted it.”

Snaxx looked at the letter one more time. “12 Middle Market Road, Shop B,” she said. “That’s a good address.”

“It is a very good address,” Elira agreed.

“When can we go?”

“Tomorrow,” Elira said. “When your recovery timeline is over.”

Snaxx tilted her head. “So I have to behave until then?”

Elira looked at her. “As long as you’re not trying to test your limits with a dagger again. Which you were absolutely not supposed to be holding.”

“I was being safe,” Snaxx said, immediately less convincing than she intended. Her grin faded into something more thoughtful as she studied Elira. “So what, you want me in one piece for this?”

Elira didn’t hesitate. Her voice came softer than her usual precision. “I want you there properly. Not half-focused on whether your shoulder is going to complain about everything you touch.”

Snaxx’s expression shifted, the grin returning but gentler now, less performance than warmth. “That sounded like you want

me enjoying it.”

Elira held her gaze for a beat too long. “I do.” A small silence settled between them. Then, quieter: “Just... don’t make me take you somewhere I’m trying to imagine us in, and have you fall apart halfway through it.”

Snaxx let out a quiet laugh. “Deal.”

* * *

They went the following morning, walking to the middle market road in the late autumn light, the city doing its ordinary business around them. Cart wheels rattled over stone seams. A delivery cart paused too long at a corner. Somewhere nearby, metal clinked against metal in the steady rhythm of shops waking properly into the day.

The road was louder here, tighter with movement. People passed close enough to brush sleeves if no one paid attention. A seller called out prices that were swallowed half a breath later by the next voice, the next step, the next transaction already happening.

They stood outside 12 Middle Market Road, Shop B, and looked at the door. It was a good door. Solid wood, worn smooth in places where hands had turned it over time. North-facing, catching clean morning light that showed the grain without softening it. The frame was straight, honest in its fit. Beside it, the window gave a full view into the front room beyond, clear enough that nothing inside could hide what it was not yet becoming.

Inside, the space waited. It was empty in a practical way. Pale walls that had been redone but not yet lived in. Floorboards that held light unevenly, still untested under real weight. Two doorways at the back suggested smaller rooms, not yet assigned purpose. Everything in it held still, not resisting, only unclaimed.

Nothing inside insisted on them. It simply made room. Snaxx's hand found Elira's without looking away from the glass. Elira took it immediately. Their fingers settled into each other with the ease of something already practiced.

Around them, the market kept moving. Voices rising and falling. Footsteps passing too close and then gone. The city continuing, unconcerned with thresholds being noticed. Snaxx's grip tightened once, small and certain. Elira's thumb moved against her hand in response, steadying without thought.

They did not speak. Elira reached for the door. It creaked open. The sound was small, but it felt final anyway. They stepped inside.



About the Author

Bryan Gargan lives in Delaware with his partner and their two children. Between family life, worldbuilding, late-night writing sessions, soccer, gaming, and an unwavering dependence on pumpkin spice coffee, he stays reasonably occupied.

He writes fantasy stories filled with dangerous bargains, sharp-tongued thieves, ancient magic, and characters who make terrible decisions for understandable reasons. A longtime tabletop RPG player and Dungeon Master, many of his stories begin as D&D campaigns and eventually grow far beyond the table. *The Thief and The Warden* grew from one such adventure and became his first published novel.

When he isn't writing, he's usually playing Dungeons & Dragons, preparing to lose his next game of Magic: The Gathering, or thinking about fantasy taverns more than any reasonable person should. His favorite character he's played remains Nym T'Sarran, a Drow necro-bard with a deeply

unthreatening voice and a pet pigeon named Raven, which probably explains more than enough about the stories he likes to tell.