

## *Chapter 12*

Iah's heart and mind were racing. Vel was nowhere to be seen, which should have been impossible, considering he gave off the glow of an intense bonfire. For a moment, she panicked, wondering if she had somehow managed to crush Vel in her sleep. But a quick inspection of her hand and her fur showed that there were no bloodstains. She breathed a sigh of relief at that, but that left her with other questions.

Iah wondered if Vel had somehow managed to run off. That would have been very difficult for him to do. He would have needed to conceal himself with something heavy enough to help dampen his glow. However, anything he could have moved around under would still be bright enough in the dark inn that anyone could have seen it. Still, as she heard loud paw steps rushing into the room as the other members of her clan responded to her shout, she yelled out, "Everyone be careful, Vel might be on the floor."

The ones that burst into the room immediately started to cast their eyes carefully about the room. And as the others around her woke up and collected themselves, Hes asked, "Where's Vel?"

"I don't know."

"Did he run away," Ryrrg asked, sounding a little incredulous at the question even as the words came out of his mouth.

"I'm trying to figure that out now. Just be careful as you move around," Iah said as she looked around the room. She had mixed feelings about the possibility of Vel having run away. The mercenary and predator in her were angry even thinking about that, especially after all she had promised to do for him. However, there was another part of her that was happy for him. While what was going to happen to him was necessary, it still was not something she liked. He was a nice enough person, and he deserved to be eaten like any decent person. If he had somehow managed to find a way to flee in an inn full of her clan and other beings that made him seem so small, then she would have saluted his ingenuity.

Ryrrg chose that moment to cast doubt on the chances that Vel had run away as he said, "I'm not smelling any signs of him on the floor. Unless the humans have a way to conceal their scents or fly that we don't know about, I don't see how he could have made his way off you." He said that while he had his nose to the floor and was sniffing all over the place, being very careful with the placement of his hands and paws as he moved around the room while everyone else stayed where they were.

"Could he have used magic, sister," Hes asked, "I mean, could Vel have been lying to us, and the humans know how to use magic after all."

"I don't think so," Iah thought carefully about all her time spent with Vel and what the other humans had been like, "If the humans can tell who among them is gifted, they have been hiding it well. And unless they can see the gifted, I don't see them figuring out how to use magic. Everyone but the humans could at least tell who the gifted were, but the elder races were the only ones who figured out what that meant, and that's supposedly because every member of their races was gifted. And I've seen thousands of humans, and Vel is the only gifted one I've seen."

"If he didn't escape by magic, then I doubt he escaped at all," said Lylneah. Iah was glad to hear Lylneah say that. She barely knew Vel and lacked the attachment Iah had developed. Dismissing the possibility that Vel had tried to escape was not something she wanted to do without good reason.

However, if Vel had not escaped and, thankfully, it did not look like he had been crushed, that meant he had to have been abducted somehow. Just the thought of that had Iah's fur standing on end, and her muzzle was already wrinkling in a snarl. Someone had somehow managed to steal her little Vel from her, someone she had grown to like and who was under her protection. Enraged did not begin to describe the way she was feeling.

She had to tamp down that rage and try to think logically about what had happened. How could someone have managed to get Vel out of the room without her knowledge, even with the assistance of magic? Well, there was one way to find out. Iah turned to her clanmates standing at the doorway, "Close the door and make sure no one enters."

They nodded in understanding. Iah's clan knew what she had planned. When the door was closed, Iah flipped up her eyepatch. Since the only people in the room were from her clan, no one was surprised to see that both of her eyes were perfectly fine. There was something a little off about the eye that had been under the patch, though. Inside the black were little specks of blue, making the eye seem like it was full of tiny stars. It was obviously special, a fact that she and other gnolls tried to keep secret.

Iah did feel a little pang of guilt. She had not been entirely honest with Vel in her description of the gifted. Yes, among the other races, they had been able to produce mana powder. But that was not the only reason they had been called gifted, at least among the elder races. All of the gifted among the elder races had developed other special abilities, the unbreakable horns of the unicorns being one of those abilities. Some of those abilities were mere shadows of what they used to be. With the loss of their ability to produce mana powder had come a loss in potency to their unique abilities.

By the time the elder races encountered the other races, none of them had such abilities, and, in their arrogance, they thought they never would. The gnolls had developed such an ability among their gifted, and Iah suspected that other races had also done so. While they had long since lost their ability to produce mana powder by the time it happened and the ability was weak, it could still be of use with the proper training. With her eye, Iah could see traces of magic left behind that should have been imperceptible. She could even see through things like illusions as long as she was not blocking her eye off. Gifted who were stronger, like Vel, even left a trail behind that allowed her to track their movements. It was why certain clans of gnolls were renowned for their ability to track the gifted. She was sure the elder races thought the gnolls had just developed some sort of tracking spell, and she was fine letting them continue to think that.

There was a little surprise in store for Iah. Since her gift was weak, like all other gnolls, the traces of magic should have been very faint, easy to miss if not for her training. By the way everyone else was looking at her, she was sure the surprise was evident on her face. What should have been easy to miss trails looked clear as day to her. A trail of light led into the room from around the level Iah had carried Vel into it. Usually, it should have been nearly transparent, but this line looked so solid that it felt like she could have reached out and touched it. Eventually, Hes looked at her in concern and asked, "Are you feeling alright? You don't normally leave the patch open for long."

Iah was startled to realize that Hes was correct. She was so amazed by what she saw that she had not even noticed how long she was staring for. Her ability usually gave her a headache or made her feel nauseous if she used it for longer than a couple of seconds at a time. But now, here she was, using it for as long as she wanted, and it was more powerful than ever. Then Ryrrg commented, "Matriarch, there's a glow coming from your, uh, cleavage."

Iah looked down to discover a very faint glow, one that only she or Ryrrg would have probably noticed. She had stored the pouch of mana powder that Vel had created there, and she quickly pulled it out and saw that the pouch did have a noticeable golden glow to it. She undid the opening to the pouch and peered inside, finding a grain of the golden powder floating above the rest, looking like it was in use as if she had just cast a spell. That was quite the discovery. It looked like her gift was fueled by the golden powder if her assumption was correct. Thanks to Vel, it looked like Iah was getting to experience what her gift was supposed to be like for the first time in her life or any other gnoll's life. That meant she was further in his debt, and she had to do everything in her power to find out what had happened to him.

Iah looked around the room and saw that the trail led to where she had laid down with Vel. The strange thing was that the trail then looked like it would have passed

through Iah's body and the floor itself. Iah muttered, "It's almost as if he was teleported downstairs."

"I thought you could only teleport someone that is in your line of sight," Hes said.

"As did I," Iah growled before barking a command to those standing outside the door, "Get downstairs, and don't let anyone leave. And be careful, Vel might be down there." She heard her clanmates rushing to follow her commands. At the same time, she flipped her eyepatch back down and started throwing on her armor and weapons in the event there was a fight ahead.

It did not take Iah and the others long to get dressed and they rushed downstairs to join the others. The crocodile that owned the inn was already in a hallway and looked somewhat disgruntled, but Aakx had him at sword point. Though the crocodile was larger than the Aakx, only being a gnoll male, the crocodile was slightly plump and clearly not as used to actual combat. He would not try taking on Aakx, especially not while unarmed. Upon spotting Iah, the crocodile quickly voiced his displeasure, "What is going on here."

Iah returned his disgruntled tone with a growl of her own, "Something has been stolen from me, and I intend to get it back."

Then, she pointedly ignored him and looked down the hallway. There were three rooms in the hallway, one door standing open that Iah assumed belonged to the croc. Still, she signaled for others to check the room and one of the others. Iah went to check one of the rooms herself, which looked like it should have been directly below her own. Based on what she had seen, Vel had somehow been taken into that room.

She burst into the room and entered, weapons drawn, prepared to defend herself. No attacks came and all she saw were some of the fennec foxes that worked in the inn. Even the largest of them was not even a third of Iah's height, but these were no cowering prey beasts. Though Iah could smell the fear in the air, all the foxes had their teeth bared and looked ready to fight at a moment's notice. None of them were foolish enough to throw themselves at Iah, though, not with a few other gnolls entering the room right behind her.

"Watch them," Iah instructed her clanmates as she inspected the ceiling. It looked mostly normal, but she thought she spotted something. If she had not known to look at the ceiling, she might have missed it, though Ryrrg would have probably spotted it. There was a very slight piece of something peeling from the ceiling. At any other time, Iah might have just thought it was just the ceiling chipping with age.

This was a small inn and the room was equally small, by her standards at least. So, Iah was able to simply reach up and pick at the abnormality with a claw. She soon discovered that it was the corner of a covering that she was easily able to peel off. Beneath that covering was a scroll, also stuck to the ceiling, with a magic rune on it. It was unfamiliar to Iah. As well studied as she was in magic, if she did not recognize it, that had certain implications.

"Elders," Iah muttered under her breath, now turning to face the fennecs in the room. They were not looking as aggressive now, though their muzzles were still wrinkled in slight snarls. Mixed in with aggression and fear was now a sense of bewilderment. They had all seen the rune, too, and they had to be wondering what it was doing there, unless they were the one that put it there. She did wonder how long that rune had been there. The fennecs were too small to put that rune on the ceiling without using a ladder to get up there. Whoever put it there would have had to do it when the other foxes were not there, unless they were all in on this, which Iah doubted.

"Who reacted the most when I reached for that rune," Iah asked of her clan. It did not go unnoticed when even a few of the foxes' eyes all started to look in one direction.

Ryrrg and Lylneah also responded at once, "That one."

They pointed out the same fennec that the others had looked at. Iah walked up to the fox, and she seemed to wilt a bit once confronted with the much larger gnoll. She inspected the fox for a bit and made note that she was probably the tallest fennec working at the inn. Besides that, the fox did not look much different than any of the others, with sand-colored fur, large ears, and poofy tail. Iah suspected that there was something off about the fox. If she had been willing to use her eye, she could have confirmed it, but she did not want to reveal the secret of the gnolls to everyone. That really was not her right to do, even in this situation.

Iah chose to try to confirm her hunch in some other way that the fox would probably enjoy much less. She seized the fennec fox in one hand, nearly covering her entire torso as she did so. Then Iah pinned the fox against the wall at eye level for herself and put enough pressure on her to let her know that her chest would be crushed if Iah wished for it to happen. The fox looked like she was about to try and claw at Iah's hand, but a look from the gnoll told her that would be her last mistake.

"Who are you," Iah practically hissed at the fox.

"My name is Sera," the fox said, sounding suitably intimidated now, "Why are you doing this to me? What have I done?"

Iah took her ax and slammed it into the wall, burying it almost to the handle beneath the fox's dangling tail. Then Iah spat, "Lie to me again or refuse to tell me the truth and the next one takes off that pretty little tail."

As Iah forcefully removed the ax from the wall, the fox said, "You can't do this. By accepting our service, we are safe from predation."

The fox squirmed in Iah's grasp as Iah drew back her ax in preparation to take off the fox's tail. Just before Iah could make the swing, the fox said, "Okay, okay. The truth it is."

Iah smirked in satisfaction as she watched the fox change in appearance. The sandy fur turned pristine white, while the ends of her arms and legs turned blood red. Her ears shortened a bit, and intricate red patterns formed on her face. Those patterns on her face had meaning, but the nines were secretive enough about them that Iah did not know what they truly meant. The growth of a second tail confirmed what Iah had thought. She was dealing with a nine-tailed fox, somewhere between 100 and 200 years of age, based on her only having two tails. While the nine-tails reached adulthood after their teens, like every other race, they were among the slowest growers of all the races, not reaching their full height until they were exactly 500 years old and grew their sixth tail. They had 2,000 years of life, though, so they had plenty of time to make up for their extended period of growth.

"My name is Serisu," the nine-tailed fox said, "The elders sent me here to put that rune in that exact spot."

"What does it do?"

Serisu's eyes darted around for a bit before she said, "I can't tell you that. The elders would come down on me like the wrath of the gods if I revealed something like that."

Iah pulled back her ax once more and prepared to take off one, if not both of her tails.

"Okay, okay, I'll tell you," Serisu squeaked, trying to lift her tails out of the path of the blow, "I swear, you gnolls are so touchy. A bunch of brutes that are always ready to resort to violence."

Iah ignored the insults. She was not going to be baited into such an obvious distraction. Seeing that she would have to talk, Serisu pouted, "If that rune is directly under its target, and it has to be exact, it allows for something to be teleported without having to be in sight."

When Iah next spoke, she put a very threatening growl into her voice, "You've stolen something very precious from me, and I want to know where he is." She reinforced the growl by squeezing the fox against the wall, getting a little yip out of her before she stopped.

Serisu's voice sounded strained as she struggled for breath, "I don't know. Really, I don't. It's the rune. When I cast the teleportation spell, instead of teleporting that strange little gifted creature where I wanted, he was teleported to some preset destination."

Iah panicked for a second. Vel might already be well outside of her reach. He could have been teleported all the way to nine-tailed territory for all she knew. She tried to push that panic aside and think. No, Vel might not be out of reach just yet. If the elders had something like this up their sleeve, they would have weaponized it by now. They would be teleporting armies into volcanoes. None of the other races knew the details behind how teleportation spells worked. Since they did not use the spell on opposing forces, it was assumed that it was possible to resist the spell with one's own will, but that could have been the elder races trying to trick everyone else. However, Serisu was able to teleport Vel. That might have been because he was asleep, though.

A thought struck Iah, and she looked Serisu straight in the eyes as she said, "Vel wasn't a willing subject to that spell, even if he could not resist it at the time. The range of the teleportation was limited, wasn't it?"

"Uh..."

Seeing Serisu's reluctance to answer that question was all the answer Iah needed. She tossed the fox to one of her clanmates, not even paying attention to which one, "Secure her. She's coming with us."

Her clan followed her as she rushed out of the room, and then she bellowed loud enough for everyone in the inn to hear, "Get ready. We're heading out. We've got a hunt on our hands."

The crocodile that owned the inn did try to confront her on the way out, saying, "Now, wait a moment. You've terrified my workers and damaged my-."

Iah shoved him out of her way, surprising the crocodile. Despite the number of gnolls surrounding her, he was not intimidated. Crocodiles were not known for their timidity. He was about to pursue her to voice his complaints further when he noticed something in his hands that had not been there before. It was a bag full of coins, payment

for rooms, plus extra for the damage and the commotion. That helped to calm him down. Iah may have been angry, but she was not that discourteous.

When Iah left the inn, she took a good look around. It indeed was a small hamlet, and saying there were a handful of buildings might have been an overstatement. The buildings were spaced far apart, but that was no guarantee she could not be seen by a more keen-eyed neighbor. With the way things were going with the elder races, it would be just her luck if a gryphon was watching her from one of those buildings. She subtly signaled for some of her clanmates to surround her. When that was done, she quickly motioned like she was going to scratch around her eye patch, stealthily lifting up her eye patch just enough to get a halfway decent look at the area.

Under normal circumstances, it probably would not have been enough for her to gather much information. However, her ability was still being boosted by the gold powder Vel had produced. Even a brief look was more than enough to get a good look at the direction Vel had been teleported. Since a teleportation spell caused things to move in a straight line, going right through anything in their path, that was all she needed to know where she had to go. And with the information she had gathered, she was also reasonably sure that whoever the thief was, they were not that far away. So, pursuit would not be pointless.

There was something odd. Actually, there were many odd things about all of this, but the one that concerned her the most at the moment was the direction that Vel had been taken. It looked like the thief had taken him toward Cado instead of away from it. Cado was a dragon dominated city, and it would not have been all that hospitable for the nines. Perhaps it was all part of a trick of some sort. Iah would not be able to tell that until she managed to catch someone and wring some answers out of them.

"On me, and be cautious. We're dealing with one of the elder races, and some unexpected surprises may be in store for us. For some reason, the elders have been willing to risk revealing some long-held secrets ever since we encountered the humans. Keep that in mind as we track down this thief," Iah cautioned her clan. Then they headed out of the hamlet. Iah did want to rush and there was a certain urgency in her movement, but she was paying attention to her own warning. She did not like how many elder races were involved in all this. They kept too many secrets, making it nearly impossible to guess what they wanted in all this. Vel certainly was valuable, but he should not have been valuable enough to warrant something like this from any of the elders.

Iah only hoped that they were not prepared for her to be able to track them down that easily. Hopefully, they thought she would either waste a lot of time searching the inn for a runaway Vel or give up after discovering that Vel had been teleported away. A normal teleportation spell could allow someone to travel up to a week's distance in the



blink of an eye. Searching an area that large would have been impossible. Everyone knew that, and Iah thought there was a chance the thief would have depended on that.

There was no way of telling for sure. More uncertainty was involved in this situation than Iah would have liked, especially with the elder races involved. However, she needed Vel and had promised to protect him. There was no telling what the elders had in store for him and she wanted to find out what that was. Abandoning Vel was out of the question. So, Iah had her clan depart the hamlet and headed in the direction she had seen the teleportation path.

Iah and her clan did move with a sense of urgency, but they were still cautious. The area outside the hamlet was mostly overgrown grassland, nearly as tall as any gnoll. Anything could be hidden out in those fields. That also had its benefits. Iah could be reasonably certain that no one would be able to see her use of her gifted eye, so she was able to check where she was going as she moved through the grass. It remained in a straight line, angled slightly toward the ground, for a few minutes until the line eventually came in contact with the ground.

Iah could plainly tell that someone had been there, and it could not have been just Vel, not unless he had somehow developed absurd levels of strength for a creature so small. The grass in the area was bent and flattened, as if someone closer to her size had been resting in the area. Whoever had been there was gone now, though. A quick glance showed the path that Vel had been taken, even though she did not really need her eye for that. The person who had been moving through the grass was very sloppy and left a clear path. It was actually so sloppy that Iah thought it might be a trap.

“Ryrrg, are there signs that anyone else passed through here,” Iah asked.

He quickly stepped forward and looked over the clearing. It did not take long before he was frowning in consternation, “Either the person that was here to capture Vel was some sort of legendary rouge, or they’ve never stepped hoof outside of a city before.”

Iah sighed in frustration, “So those are cloven hoof prints I’m seeing. Please tell me I’m mistaken in thinking they are kirin prints.”

“I’m afraid that would be a lie, matriarch.”

Iah hissed, “And now the nines and the kirin are working together to steal Vel. What unholy thing is going on here?”

There were no answers to be had out there. They could only continue their pursuit of the kirin. Once more, the trail led in the direction of Cado. Iah was mystified as to

why that could be, and she was not the only one because Hes dubiously asked, "Could our employer be conspiring to avoid paying us for Vel?"

"That seems insane," Iah responded, "Whatever the other elder races would have asked for in return for such a favor would have surely far exceeded what we are being paid. But I don't know why else multiple elder races would conspire to steal just one gifted individual."

There was a chorus of disgruntled huffs from the rest of Iah's clan. No one had ever heard of a situation like this before, and none of them liked it. But they all chose to continue. None of them liked the idea of being cheated, and more than a few had cubs relying on them. If they failed now, it would be the last failure for a few cubs. They really did not have much of a choice.

After everyone got a good smell of the area and the kirin that had been there, they started to move on again. Iah did not even need to use her eye at that point. Her clan were at least passable trackers and Ryrrg was a phenomenal one. He could have tracked someone's scent over a week after their passing. With barely an hour's head start, tracking the kirin would have been child's play for any gnoll present.

The trail led them to the gates of Cado a few hours later. It was not that long after sunrise, and the gates to the city were already open. Visitors were passing through the gates, and the guards stationed at the gate, inspecting everyone as they passed through, shifted uncomfortably as Iah and the well-armed group of gnolls approached. There were not enough of them to stop them from forcing entry into the city if they wanted to.

Four dragons guarded the gates, three of the winged variety and one of the more serpentine kind. Each of them was around the size of Iah's clanmates. Being gate guards, they were probably younger by dragon standards. She doubted any of them were more than 200 years of age. Still, they were fierce enough looking, and she doubted most people would give them any trouble. Getting into a conflict with the elder races was usually not something one would have done lightly. Iah snorted at that thought, considering all the elder races seemed to be conspiring to start trouble with her.

The dragons did have some help in the form of wyverns. There were about twice as many of them as dragons, but they were also a medium-sized race. As such, even the largest of them only came up to Iah's midriff. All of them were considerably more tense than the dragons. While people may not have been willing to get in a fight with the dragons, the wyverns were a different matter. That did not mean they were fearful of violence, though. No, they were hardened veterans who were used to those who considered them easy targets.

Fortunately for everyone, there was no need for violence as one of the dragons, a violet-scaled male, recognized Iah and adopted a condescending smile in greeting, "I didn't expect to see you back here so soon, savage. Welcome once more to Cado, *Princess Iah.*"