

Red and Cross

By Roidh

“Get in there!” the dark elf yelled as he kicked the folk-fox upon his rump into the cell. He landed face first on the cold damp grey stone floor. Bits of slimy moss grew within the cracks and stained the white fur on the underside of his chin. His new cellmates chuckled at the fox’s misfortune. Paying them no mind, a growl formed in the red furred one’s throat as he turned to watch his companion escorted to the next cell.

“This one’s yours,” the jailer said as he gestured for the second vulpine to enter an empty cell.

“How kind of you to give me a place all to myself,” the cross fox said. Unlike his friend, the vulpine entered without a struggle and sat upon the dirty straw mat.

The guard locked the door and smiled at him. “Well, the way I bet you’re a real handsome fellow back where you come from with all your black and orange fur like that. Shame you aren’t a female, or we could make a fortune on you. Still, I bet someone will want a piece of that tail and I don’t want these other scum laying a hand on such a prized possession.”

The vulpine glared at the elf with his cold blue eyes but did not justify the disgusting suggestion with a response. Instead, he just flicked his tail back and forth counting out the seconds till the jailer left. Eventually, the elf grew bored with his prey’s lack of response and walked back down the hall to leave them alone.

“My-“ said the red in anger before being cut off by the other vulpine.

“Not a word,” the cross fox commanded. He stood and examined the cell’s door. Rust covered the hinges and lock from years of neglect. Using his claws, he ripped the sleeve of his shirt and began to carefully unwind a series of threads. They were then tied to one another to create a pair of long strands. The fox draped each of these over the sides of the door before running them over the floor to the back wall. He tied the two ends together and sat against the stone, waiting.

“Wake up your sorry sacks!” the jailer shouted down the hall. He cackled and slammed the end of a club against the bars of the cells to produce a large gong. “I got good news for all of you. The caravan will be here in the morning to ship you lot over the markets in Ekadrul. I know how excited you all must be to get out of my hair.” He paused for the prisoners to produce any response, but they all chose to remain silent at the news. “That’s what I thought. For now, though, you’re still mine for one more night and I’ve got a treat for your final supper.” He pulled a loaf of bread from a large sack. “That’s right, civilized food for people. Not something beasts like you normally deserve, but it’s a special treat so you can play make believe one more time.”

The dark elf began tossing the loafs into each cell. The prisoners within fought and squabbled over the measly portions. The jailer watched as the newly captured red refused to join the fray. He laughed and tossed a particularly small stale piece to the fox. “I’m sad you didn’t get to experience my hospitality longer.”

The red caught it before it hit the floor. The elf glared at him. His eyes told the vulpine to eat the scrap in front of him. The fox sighed and attempted to bite into it. The bread did not give and might as well had been a stone.

Satisfied, the elf grinned and walked to the next cell holding the cross fox. "Same with you pretty boy. I wish we could have spent a bit longer together."

The vulpine smiled back. Mana swirled within his body as he channeled it down the thread. The door blasted off its hinges and compressed the elf against the cell behind him, slaying him instantly. The prison went silent before faint whispers of "spirit-touched," "dark one," and even "demon" circulated amongst the inmates.

The vulpine ignored them as he nonchalantly leapt to his feet. He strolled over to the guard and retrieved the keys. The rest of the prison watched intently as he walked to his companion's cell and tried the keys, one by one till the door swung open. The red hopped to his feet and exited with a slight nod.

"Alright," the cross fox addressed the jail's residents. "My companion and I are going to break out of here. It is going to be dangerous and there is a low chance of survival and success. Still, we are on a mission of utmost importance and will not be deterred. So, I offer you all a choice. You can come with us, but you must know that we will not hesitate to discard you for our own survival. Any dead weight will be left behind. Alternatively, you can also try and break out of here on your own. I am not so cruel that I will not unlock your cells. All I ask is that you give us a few minute head start before causing a ruckus. The final option is you remain here where it is safe, and you will be shipped to the slave markets in the morning. So, are there any volunteers to come with us?"

Faint whispers floated amongst the prisons though none volunteered till a single lynx-folk spoke up. "I'll come with you," she said. The cross fox nodded to the red who promptly unlocked her cell.

"Anyone else?" the vulpine asked. None spoke up. He turned to the lynx. "Well then, my lady. By what name might I refer to you?"

"My lady?" Her ears perked up and eyes momentarily grew wide with surprise from the unexpected politeness of the address. "It's Elior."

"Nice to make your acquaintance, Elior. You may call me Ren."

"My-" the red attempted to object.

"There's no need for such formalities here, Kelik. We are all naught but prisoners," Ren interrupted.

"Yes," Kelik paused as he overrode his linguistic instinct. "Ren." The red vulpine walked over to the jailer and ruffled through his equipment.

"So, Elior, what skills might you possess to aid in our escape?" Ren inquired of their new companion.

She rubbed her paw against the ground, nervously. "I was a thief. A pickpocket. I guess I'm pretty good at getting around unseen."

Ren placed his paw upon her shoulder. "Normally I would condemn the actions of such a ne'er-do-well, but today I feel they will come in quite handy. Perhaps this is your opportunity for redemption, my lady. I'm sure the gods will smile quite kindly on your actions today."

"How's the sword?" Ren inquired of Kelik.

Having taken the blade from the disposed jailer, Kelik tested it with a few swings and jabs. His ears folded against the back of his head and the tip of his tail flicked back and forth. "It's junk, but it'll do," he commented. "For a people that always go on how superior they are and how we are mere animals to them, they obviously have no skill in forging a proper blade."

Walking over to Elio, Kelik handed her a dagger. "Ever killed before?" He glared into her eyes as he asked.

Her ears pointed downwards as she sheepishly shook her head.

"Well, my lady," Ren said, "I hope you will not have to sully yourself with such a vile act, but I warn you that such actions might be necessary in this operation."

"Alright. Kelik, unlock the rest of the cells. It is time for us to depart."

"Up here," Elio whispered from the roof. She extended a hand and pulled Ren up as Kelik pushed him from below. The thin cross fox lacked much in upper body strength compared to his red furred companion. Ren struggled to pull himself over the side and paused to catch his breath once he finally did.

In contrast, Kelik leapt from the ground and pulled himself to the roof with no help from the others. He immediately rushed to check on his winded companion. "Ren, are you alright?"

"I am fine, Kelik," he said, pushing himself to his feet.

"No, stay down," Elio hissed at him. "And be quiet."

"Don't speak to him that way," Kelik snapped at her.

"It is quite alright, Kelik," Ren said. "She is correct we must remain hidden."

The three scanned the fortress they found themselves in. The last remains of twilight were quickly vanishing. A few guards wandered back and forth across the outer walls and many more milled about the courtyard. The events of the prison had yet to escape its walls and the level of alert remained low.

"So, what's the plan," Elio asked.

"We head for the keep," Ren stated and turned to face the structure behind them. Built directly into the mountainside, a fifty-foot face of rock separated the base of the keep from the rest

of the fortress below. Only a single stone path, barely three soldiers wide, allowed one to traverse in and out.

“But I thought we were escaping,” Elior asked. Her voice quivered in distress.

“We are,” Ren replied. “But first there is an important item we must retrieve for our journey. If we escape without it, we might as well have not escaped at all.”

“Come on,” Kelik said having already hopped to the next building. Silently, the three moved across the roofs till reaching the foot of the path. Soldiers milled up and down the twisting stone ramp. The light of their lanterns marked each of their positions against the dark backdrop of the mountain behind.

Elior gestured for the pair to hide behind some barrels. “What now,” she whispered.

“Now, we wait for our friends to provide a little distraction,” Ren said with a smile. A bell began to ring from the other side of the courtyard. The lights of the soldiers began crawling down the path from the keep like little ants. “They will be so concerned about attempting to contain the other prisoners escaping that they will not be expecting us to travel farther in.

With the last guard vacating the path to the keep, the trio slipped off the roof and began rushing up. Screams and chaos echoed from the fortress floor. Elior grimaced as she listened to the terror from below.

Kelik suddenly halted held out his arm the pair behind him to do as well. Two guards stood at the entrance to the keep. The red drew his sword and nodded to his companion. Ren walked to the mountain wall and searched for a loose rock. Finding one suitable, he extended his mana into it causing it to levitate spin above his hand. Taking a step back, he lowered his stance and took aim at the guard on the left. He nodded back to Kelik.

Kelik began charging at the pair. With a flick of his wrist, Ren sent the stone flying at the guard. It struck him right in the forehead, slaying him on the spot. The other soldier hardly had time to react before Kelik sliced his sword across the man’s throat. He fell to the ground, dead.

With the enemies silently dispatched, Kelik waved the pair over. The trio snuck along the wall. A door to the left acted as the entrance to the gatehouse interior. Kelik briefly tested it before shaking his head. “Locked,” he whispered.

“I got this,” Elior said. Reaching into her boot, she retrieved a set of lockpicks and went to work on the door.

“How long have you been hiding those?” Kelik inquired.

“Not long. I was only tossed in there the day before yesterday. I’ve just been waiting for a good opportunity to escape.” The lock clicked open. She stowed her tools and prepared to throw the door open. Kelik readied his blade and nodded to her. Elior yanked it, and Kelik wasted no time launching himself inside. A trio of soldiers sat playing cards. Their grey skin turned white as the fox drove his blade into each into each before they could even draw their weapons.

Ren and Elior quickly shuffled themselves inside and closed the door behind them. The cross fox snagged a keyring off one of the guards and locked the entrance once more. Eying the deck, he snagged it along with the coins they were gambling with and slipped them into a pocket.

They all looked towards the single narrow spiral staircase leading upwards. A door at the top exited to the ramparts. Kelik slowly pushed it open and peaked outside. He held up two fingers to indicate the number of guards upon the wall.

Ren reached into the purse and retrieved a hefty copper coin. He levitated it between his fingers as he lined up and targeted the far one. Kelik dashed across the rampart and slew the unassuming guard in a single slice. Ren simultaneously launched the coin at the other soldier. It collided with his back and forced him over the edge. The initial strike proved non-lethal, and a scream filled the air as he plumped to his doom. Noticing the noise, the guards in the courtyard pointed up to where Kelik stood.

“Run!” he yelled to Ren and Elior. The trio scrambled across the wall and into the keep proper. The soldiers within the courtyard were quick to react. They drew their blades and dashed up a staircase to pursue the invaders.

“I’ll catch up,” said Ren as he turned around and placed his hands upon the door separating the keep from the ramparts. Kelik nodded and gestured for Elior to follow him up another set of stairs. Ren waited till the door handle moved. With another surge of mana, he blasted it into the oncoming soldiers. The door, along with half a dozen dark elves flew from the ramparts and into the fortress below. If the first soldier did not alert everyone to their presence that act certainly did.

Ren drew the pack of cards and darted off to rejoin his companions. He caught up as the pair as they carefully looked into a larger room. Within, another dozen soldiers gathered. Unlike the others, this group stood ready and waiting.

“I guess the only way is through,” commented Ren. One by one he infused magic into the cards. As he did, they came to life and flew about his body. Soon the entire deck rotated about his form in a dazzling display.

“Very well,” Kelik agreed as he readied his blade once more.

“Stay back, my lady,” Ren addressed Elior. “We shall not be long, but I have a most important task for you. While we dispatch these villains, we require someone to watch our back. Can you do that?” Elior nodded and the pair walked into the room.

“Hey! Who are you? Wait! Stay there!” one of the guards yelled. Ren and Kelik remained silent throughout his demands and only answered with the sound of a sword slicing flesh.

Elior remained hidden as the sounds of battle raged in the other room. Between the clash of swords, her ears flipped backwards to pick up the sound of another soul wandering up the stairs. Rising to her feet she drew the dagger. The sound of chainmail clanked as her foe approached. Sweat formed on her palms and she instinctively tightened her grip to combat how slippery it made the handle. Closer the sounds came. Her body shook, and she held the pommel with her other hand to steady the blade. As the elf rounded the corner, she charged. A searing pain burned in her

leg as she brought the dagger down. Her mind drained of all thoughts as the instinct for survival consumed her.

Her consciousness finally returned to the feeling of Kelik pulling her away from the slain foe. She looked at the dagger in her hand; its blade soaked in blood.

“I must apologize for asking you to sully yourself in such a way, my lady,” Ren said and offered her a hand. “I want you to know that Kelik and I are eternally grateful for it. Without your action the two of us might not have survived his surprise assault.”

“You’re very welcome,” the lynx said, unsure if she actually meant it. She grabbed his arm and allowed herself to be pulled up. A single step brought a sharp pain in her left leg. She held herself against the wall and checked the limb. The elf’s sword had made a shallow cut on her outer thigh.

“Kelik, see if you can find anything to treat the wound,” the cross fox ordered. He placed his arm around her and helped walk her into the next room. The bodies of their slain foes littered the hall.

“I thought you were just going to leave dead weight behind,” she asked.

“Well, my lady, I already have. The dead weight were those unwilling to help with our cause and even they were most helpful in reaching this point. No, even injured you are no dead weight. You have been an invaluable member of this team and I owe you a great debt. Furthermore, I feel you have more of a role to play in the events ahead.” Ren assisted her into a chair. Slowly, he helped her pull down her trousers till the wound became visible.

Kelik returned with a bottle and set of bandages in hand. He poured a generous helping of the liquid over her wound. Elicor grit her teeth in pain as the alcohol burned. Ren grabbed a mug of water from a nearby barrel. Wrapping his fingers about the glass he concentrated his magic into its contents. The surface of the liquid bubbled forth with a stream of steam floating from its lip. Slowly, he brought its temperature down and poured it over the wound to fully clean it out. Kelik completed the act of first aid by finishing with the bandage.

“Hopefully, that should keep it from being infected,” Ren commented. “Now, my lady, I must ask for your help once more. I believe our first destination lies through that door, which happens to be locked. Would you be willing to put your skills to use for us again?”

“Of course.” She slid her set of picks from the boot and pushed herself up. Ren rushed to support her, but she shook her head. “We aren’t going to get out of here if you must support me the whole time. I have to walk on my own despite the pain.” She slowly limped towards the door. The cut seared in agony with each step. In her mind, she concentrated on trying to keep a consistent pace despite it. Step by step she washed the pain from her thoughts. By the time she reached the door her gait returned to mostly normal. Still, she grimaced as she dropped to her knees and took to working on the lock. The process took not even a minute before a satisfying click announced the completion of her task. Ren once again helped her to her feet, and she limped away from the door.

The cross stood right behind his companion and stretched his arms forward. The concentration upon his face spoke to the difficulty of the spell he wove while the heaviness of his

breathing showed the fatigue growing from how much mana he used in their escape thus far. “Go,” he commanded Kelik.

The red fox threw the door open. A barrage of crossbow darts whizzed towards the vulpines only to stop in midair mere inches from Kelik’s body. He ducked under the levitating bolts and charged at one of the elves before he could even contemplate reloading. A quick slice from the red’s blade slew the foe. He planted a foot and launched himself over the next soldier. With a single backwards thrust of his blade the second elf collapsed upon the ground.

Ren held the levitating bolts before him. One by one he plucked them from the air and with a flick of his finger into each enemy. They crumbled on the ground till only one remained alive. The final elf cried clutching his leg where one of the bolts had lodged itself in. Splashes of his compatriot’s blood marred his gleaming golden armor. Kelik stepped over the man and pressed his foot paw directly on the middle of his chest, pinning him to the ground and adding new blemishes to the piece. The fox held his blade against the elf’s throat.

“Who are you?” the elf growled. He spat at his attacker. “You aren’t mere fox-folk who survived a shipwreck.”

“Indeed, we are not, Lord Commander Grandil.” Ren smiled as strolled towards the injured man. Two bolts still danced between his fingers. “We are your nightmare given living form. A pair of beasts, as you would call us, with the power, skill, and lack of fear to stand up to the evil you represent. Now, I am not here to merely pass judgement upon you. There are important things you stole from us, and we would have them back.”

“I didn’t steal anything!” he yelled. “And you still didn’t answer my question!” Ren flicked one of the remaining bolts into the man’s other leg. He yelped in pain as it pieced his flesh.

“You are not in a place to ask questions. That is purely our privilege at this given moment,” the cross fox stated. He flicked the last bolt between his fingers so Grandil could watch. “Now I ask again, where are the objects you stole.”

“We salvaged that fair and square from the wreck,” Grandil objected. Ren held the bolt between his fingers and glared at the man. “If you must know they’re in my personal vault. It’s on the left wall there. Third shelf up behind the books. The key is here, on my waist.”

“Did you hear all of that, Elior?” Ren called out of the room.

The lynx walked into view and nodded. Ren tossed her the keys before returning his attention to Grandil below him. Elior limped her way over to the vault and looked inside.

“What does it contain?” Ren asked.

“Mostly just a bunch of coins. There’s also a small jewelry box here,” she called back.

“Is that it?” Panic and worry filled Ren’s voice for the first time.

“Yes, that’s all I see,” Elior confirmed.

The vulpine turned his attention back to Grandil and growled. “Where is the sword?”

Grandil refused to answer.

Ren sent the final bolt into the elf's shoulder. "I ask again. Where is the sword?"

Still, Grandil continued to remain silent.

"Very well," Ren said while walking over to one of the corpses to retrieve more ammunition. "I must inform you though, that we will not be leaving without it. We will tear apart you, all of your men, and the entire fortress stone by stone until it is found." He held another bolt so the dark elf could see it. "So, I ask again. Where is the sword?"

"It's in the vault," the elf blurted out in fear. Ren levitated the bolt between his fingers and took aim. "The secret vault. Hidden here, under the keep. Take the stairs to the right of this room down. There will be a large door at the bottom. That's where it is. Use my keys. Just know, once you enter, you most likely won't survive. There are evil things kept down there. Things that should never be let free. Things spawned from the darkness. Things like your precious sword."

Ren launched the bolt into his other shoulder. "I want you to know, that sword is the sacred heirloom of the Kingdom of Nemorok. It has resided with our people since King Kirian I landed upon these shores centuries ago. To even suggest the darkness, you speak of, had a role in its creation is blasphemy and I will hear none of it."

"Well then you will remain willfully ignorant and blind till it destroys you," Grandil replied. "You toy with forces beyond your comprehension. Our seers saw precisely what lies within it. So, we promptly sealed it away where it could do no harm."

"I tire of this," Ren said. "Kelik, go ahead."

"Wait!" Fear gripped the elf. "I told you what you wanted! You have your stuff back and know where the sword is!"

"I never said I would let you go," Ren replied. "Your crimes against my people are far too great to allow you to remain living. Why it was not even a month ago when the people of Kormel were subjected to one of your raids. They were ripped from their homes and forced into that backwards barbaric world you call slavery. And where did that ship come from? But your port. Then, they were held in your prison of which I got to experience the hospitality of before being transported to the markets in Ekadrul. Your crimes are too numerous to count. For every soul of my people you have taken I, Rendamel, Prince of Nemorok, condemn you. Go ahead, Sir Kelikkorsen."

"Yes, my lord," Kelik said and drove his blade into the man.