

Chapter 8

When Vel woke up the following day, his experience was different than it had been before. As before, the gnolls had woken up before him. Now, though, they seemed to visibly brighten up when they noticed he was awake. And it was not long before he was greeted with one quick lick from each of them, their massive tongues leaving him drenched in saliva even after a brief touch. Apparently, it no longer mattered that licks were not professional since what had happened yesterday. Vel did not know what that meant for him, but the gnolls were still taking him to whoever had hired them, so he assumed his position had not changed that much, even though they seemed to be on a friendlier basis with him.

Before they broke camp to get moving for the day, the gnolls had another surprise for him. Vel found himself standing on the ground with them seated in a circle around him, their massive forms still dwarfing him and leaving him cast in Iah's shadow as her body easily blocked out the rising morning sun. Despite how well they were all getting along, it was still disconcerting to find himself the center of attention of the massive beings like that. If this was an attempt at intimidating him, it was indeed working.

"Vel, I've been thinking about how we can express our gratitude for your courteous behavior," Iah addressed Vel, "As I've said before, this is a strange situation. If we were in a better position, I'd be tempted to let you go or adopt you into my clan, but since neither of those is possible, I think I may have an offer from you."

Perhaps intimidation was not the goal of this, after all, Vel thought. This was a business meeting, and the gnolls were sitting in a protective circle around their client. Or at least that was what he hoped. Vel looked up at Iah, "I don't suppose this is an offer of rescue after you've turned me over to your client and gotten paid."

That was able to get a little chuckle out of Ryrrg while Hes and Iah just smiled sympathetically down at him, "That's a good way for mercenaries to become wanted outlaws, so no Vel. However, it will be time to move my clan shortly after completing this job. I'm offering you the chance to pick where that will be and for what purpose."

"Purpose?"

"Protection for friends of yours," Iah said, "Or perhaps you have enemies you want us to prey on and weaken for you."

Vel took a moment to think. His response would have implications for the future, and he did not want the gnolls getting too much information based on his response. So he said, "I appreciate the offer, but once the Empire is mobilized, I don't know if they'll need your protection."

"Vel, we've discussed that you aren't an actual soldier, but we are professional mercenaries," Iah said, suddenly looking very serious, "We make a living knowing where our services are needed and knowing just who to side with to keep ourselves alive. I'll admit, the numbers you told me about the other day for how large a fighting force your empire maintains did throw me off. But, actually fighting a group of raiders that would have been a major force among any other group of people managed to get me thinking. Vel, how many humans do you think it would take to defeat someone like me?"

From the tone of her voice, Vel could tell she probably knew the answer to that question better than he did. And the implications of that disturbed him. With her clan of 20 gnolls, even if they were all only Ryrrg's size, they could make conquering the Empire look like child's play. As for taking on just Iah, Vel could only respond, "I suspect the losses we would take would break us."

"Exactly, you aren't completely helpless, but you're not far from it either. And I can guarantee you that there will be others from my world who will abuse this power disparity. As you've already seen, the more aggressive herbivores want you exterminated. We also have bandits and raiders, and I could imagine even individuals who just kill for pleasure would have the time of their lives with your people."

"It is as you say," Vel could only hang his head in depression.

"There is no need to feel shame in that. You can't help that you were born that small," Ryrrg said sympathetically, "I'm sure the gods had some sort of meaning behind that."

"Yes, I'm sure there is some hidden meaning behind all this," Hes offered.

"Depending on your answer, the gods may be smiling on someone now," Iah said.

Vel did not like what all this meant for the future of the Empire. It had only taken Iah one battle to realize that she and her clan were mightier than the Empire as a whole. And it sounded like there were many others where she came from. Once this convergence event was completed and their worlds became one, Vel could only imagine what would become of the Empire and humanity, not that it would matter much to him since he would be long gone before that happened. But, at least he might be able to do some good for some people with this offer.

"Do you think you could find your way back to Adrianople, the town where you found me?"

"Of course."

"Then would you settle there, protect them?"

"If that is what you desire?"

Vel thought of something else before answering that right away. Everyone he still knew, his only friends, were hiding away in that town. His decision was going to put a bunch of titans right next to them. So, Vel asked, "How long does this offer of protection last? What happens when a new matriarch takes over your clan? This convergence event won't even be over until you should be dead in a couple hundred years, right?"

The gnolls shared a brief knowing look before Hes said, "The humans are a short-lived race after all."

"That's kind of not fair," Ryrrg groused, "If the gods made them this small, they could have at least made them a long-lived race like us."

Iah noticed Vel's confusion at this conversation and said, "Vel, I'm a young matriarch who only recently took control of my clan. And by young, I mean I'm only 178 years old. It's time to move the clan because it's tradition to do so within the first ten years of a matriarch's new rule. I doubt anyone will challenge me for rule of the clan anytime soon, barring gross incompetence on my part. So, I might expect to rule until I start getting old, sometime after 950 years of age. Based on that look on your face, I guess that our assumption of yours being a short-lived race is correct and that you probably only live for around 100 years. So, I would think 800 years of protection should be a good enough bargain, possibly more if whoever takes over in my place decides to take any of the humans with her when she needs to move."

Vel's mind was reeling from that revelation. He had honestly thought Iah was around his own age. The deal he was being offered was of much greater importance than he had thought. His choice here would affect people for generations to come. He tried to figure out why the gnolls would even make an offer like this. It could not have just been what he did yesterday. Sure, the weapons stuck in their paws had been enough to cause them an annoying itch, but they did not seem that relieved to have them all gone.

"Are there any strings attached to this offer of protection?"

"Just one," Iah said sternly, "Herbivores and omnivores tend to practice things like burial and cremation for their dead. Well, that would end under our protection. While we won't prey on those under our protection, the dead must go to us. Treating the dead with such disrespect will not be tolerated. They will provide sustenance for the clan, allowing their spirits to pass on through us as is only proper."

Vel stifled his initial feeling of revulsion as realization suddenly hit him, "Does the fact that you won't be able to eat me bother you that much?"

The sad look on all the gnolls' faces surprised Vel as Iah responded, "Of course it does, Vel. While the means of your death is necessary, it still brings me great shame, which I must make up for, especially considering how much we've come to like you in such a short time."

Vel worked up his resolve and finally said, "Then yes, I would appreciate it if you would move your tribe to protect the people of Adrianople."

"Very well, it will be as you wish," Iah said gently. And with that, their business was concluded, and Iah offered her hand to Vel so he could step into it. Once again, he would be traveling with her for the day. He was soon placed in the now familiar pocket she had made for him and he was left in darkness with only his thoughts and the soft heartbeat of the gnoll once more.

Vel struggled to absorb all the information he had just heard. The gnolls did care for him in their own peculiar way. And he had effectively bargained away a part of the Empire to them. Undoubtedly, the gnolls would take charge of the area, but that would happen everywhere once this convergence event was done. At least he had given his little part of it to someone who would not eat the living. And this protection would last for centuries. People would be born and die with the same gnolls always being there. Vel knew, whether Iah liked it or not, that people would come and view such titans as gods. He just hoped their gods and the gnollish gods would be able to forgive everyone for such a transgression.

Keeping an eye out for danger in this world was fairly easy for Iah, what with everything being so much shorter than herself. It also meant she stood out more, but that did not seem like as much of an issue now that she was aware of human military capabilities. Without magic to help them, it would take the better part of an entire nation's military force to hope to challenge her, a thought that she found pretty wild. She did feel sorry for the humans because she knew there would be those who abused that fact, without a doubt. Hopefully, they would not be too stubborn to submit to coming under the rule of the various factions of predators, maybe some of the stronger omnivores.

With Ryrrg scouting ahead for danger as they walked, Iah was more at ease. She was able to contemplate things and just enjoy the scenery. This world really was lovely, though small. It was so full of life, like it used to be in her world in pictures from centuries ago. Hopefully, she would get to see what that was like in her world again soon. With

the convergence event already underway, her world would start to see life returning slowly to it once more. She wondered how things would look once the worlds had wholly merged. The geography of both worlds tended to change as the aftermath of convergence usually looked as if parts of each world were dropped into one another and faded into each other over time. Even after thousands of years, it led to some odd looking places sometimes that still stood out so much that it was easy to tell when some areas used to belong to different worlds. This seemed like it would be a much more dangerous process for humans than any other race, and they would undoubtedly need someone's protection.

The area that Vel had asked her to protect was a promising one. On the other side of the portal she had come through, the area had already been abandoned due to how much the land had deteriorated, so there was currently no competition. Now, though, she had already seen signs of new growth near the portal. It would not be long before the vegetation returned, along with herbivores that would be good for hunting. For Iah, it certainly seemed like good times were ahead, with one notable exception. She almost could not help but bring her hand up to gently touch the spot on her armor where little Vel was being kept safe. Her heart went out to the poor little man. It did not seem like he had done anything to deserve his fate, but he had been cursed with this gift of magic by the gods themselves. His fate had been determined from birth.

After some time, the gnolls started coming across human settlements again. None were nearly as large as the city they had dealt with before, but that was a provincial capital. Still, it was hard to tell if they were dealing with small cities or just towns. Then again, based on numbers, what the humans might call a town probably would be considered a city to her. The size and numbers difference between their peoples still required some thought on her part to grasp the reality of the situation.

All the settlements they ran across had a different look than the other human settlements Iah was familiar with. She assumed they had crossed over into the lands of a different nation, probably the Alkur, since that raiding party had to come from somewhere. None of the settlements were inhabited, though. Some looked like they had been abandoned, and there were signs that vermin had been rooting around in some destroyed buildings, probably looking for food. However, some settlements showed signs that they had been attacked, and not by other humans.

Once again, there were hoofprints spotted in those towns. Oddly, though, the settlements had not been completely destroyed. There were the remains of a few crushed people at the bottom of some of those hoofprints, but not enough to account for the entire population of those settlements. Either the humans had managed to escape, or their attackers had taken the people with them. There could be multiple reasons for the abductions. While many herbivores despised carnivores and herbivores, some were indifferent. She could imagine that there would be some of them willing to take all these

little humans and sell them to predators. They might even think such a thing was funny. This was overhunting, though, a practice that any dignified predator absolutely despised.

There was an even more unfortunate possibility for the humans. They may have been taken back as entertainment for the herbivores. Some of the wealthier herbivores did enjoy making predators and omnivores participate in some sick little games of theirs. As small as the humans were, she doubted they would fare too well in such games. Such wealthy patrons could fund a raiding expedition to this world. They would have needed to get word that this world was populated by omnivores first, though. It had been a couple of weeks since convergence started, but Iah thought she was among the first to begin exploring this world. Others might have come before her, but it usually took a few days even to notice an event had happened, and then you had to get people equipped with magic devices to the area to begin exploring the new world to begin with. This would have needed to happen very quickly for word to get back to them.

Well into the evening, Ryrrg returned with a report to her, "I've found signs of a lot of activity, matriarch."

"What have you found?"

"A lot of hoofprints. I'd say 4 to 6 zebras, just as many antelopes, 12 or more gazelles with a few kobolds thrown into the mix, too." The zebras, like the gnolls, were a larger race. Antelopes were a midsized race, most only standing around just below chest height to Ryrrg or hip height to Iah. The gazelles, like kobolds, were considered a smaller race before humans had been encountered. To gnolls, they were only around knee height.

"That's a pretty sizable party," Hes piped in, "They've got some money behind them."

"Like us," Iah remarked, "Probably best we avoid a party of that size."

"Matriarch, there's something else."

"What is it?"

Ryrrg looked torn as he said, "I'm not used to looking for things as tiny as humans, but I'm still a good tracker. And I'm pretty sure I've found traces of a lot of humans walking along the tracks left by the hoofers."

Iah's heart began to sink, "How many humans?"

"Can't say for certain due to just how many, but if I had to make an educated guess, I'd say it's the missing populations from the towns we came across."

Iah took a moment to think about that. She was a mercenary, and getting involved in this situation was not in her interests. Still, if she walked away from this, what would that mean for her soul and the soul of her clan? What she was doing to Vel was already questionable in the eyes of the gods. If she abandoned these humans to the evils that were about to befall them, even if it was for the betterment of her clan, it was hard to imagine they would not end up damned as a consequence. What was wrong was wrong.

Iah let out a frustrated growl, "Do you know how far away they are?"

"Yes, a few hours at most."

"Then we get closer for now, get to sleep early, and hit them at sunrise," Iah said.

"As you command, matriarch," Ryrrg responded. Both he and Hes looked like they knew the weight of what they were getting into, but they also seemed to agree with her. They were fighters and knew the clan's soul was on the line here.

The gnolls moved swiftly to a location Ryrrg thought would make for a good camp. Despite their rush, they still wanted to take care in case their opponents had their own scouts in the area. It was a tense couple of hours before they reached their campsite, but they encountered no issues and did not detect anything of their size around. When they were settled, Iah decided who would be taking watch for each shift while they rested.

Iah took the first watch, mostly because she wanted to talk with Vel. This time, she did not pull him out of his pocket, though. She just held her shirt open to speak with him more easily. Of course, he noticed the strange behavior and was quick to ask, "What's going on?"

"We've found some herbivores that have taken many humans prisoner. At the crack of dawn, we plan to attack them and liberate the humans," Iah explained.

"That's...very kind of you," Vel sounded doubtful, "I thought you were mercenaries, though. Don't you need some sort of compensation to do something like that?"

"In this case, I think it would cost us more not to do anything."

Vel let that statement hang for a little while before asking, "How many do you plan to fight?"

"Enough, but it's not being outnumbered that has me all that concerned."

"Then what are you worried about?"

"Based on the numbers they have on this world, I'm certain they have a wealthy enough backer that they've been supplied with mana powder. That's far more dangerous than a bunch of herbivores could ever be."

"Is that why you won't take me out of this pocket?"

"No, I'm more worried about them spotting the glow that you give off," Iah said, "We should still be far enough away that they could not spot you easily, but I'd rather not risk you alerting them to our presence. By the way, you get to relieve yourself now and before we set out on our attack. Even then, I must keep you covered with a cloth."

Vel nodded and said, "Whatever you say."

"It's not like that will be embarrassing at all," Vel grumbled. Iah was sure he did not mean for her to hear that part, but he underestimated her hearing. She decided against letting him know he heard her and just smiled in silent amusement. After completing their business, they settled down to rest for the night.

Hours later, Hestrihz woke Iah up. It was still dark outside, just like they had planned. Ryrrg was also waking up and they all prepared. Iah did think of letting Vel rest, then thought that might not be for the best. This might be his last chance to walk in the outside world, even if she did have to keep him covered. While Iah did not think she was going to die, her little group was outnumbered and her enemies most likely had magic available to them. Death was certainly a possibility, and Vel deserved a chance to stand on his own feet one more time in the event that things went badly.

Once that was all done, they set out to confront the herbivores and see if the humans could be saved from their ill fate. Ryrrg took the lead at first, all of them moving silently through the night. When they drew close enough to the herbivores that Iah was able to catch their scent, she and Hes switched places with Ryrrg. He was so stealthy that he might as well have been one of their shadows, and that was just the way Iah liked it. If she could barely tell he was there and she knew he was there, she doubted her enemies could detect him. For how long that would last was a different matter, though. Once the sun rose, staying hidden in a world where everything was so tiny would be hard for them.

It was still shortly before dawn that Iah spotted a human settlement with quite a few large shapes milling around inside of it. There were some fires burning, human-

sized ones at that. She was able to spot what looked like many thousands of humans around those fires. It looked like they had found the human captives and it was a relief to discover they were alive.

Those fires looked like they were there to help the herbivores keep track of the humans. Almost every species present, humans included, had pretty poor night vision. She did spot a couple of kobolds and they had exceptional night vision. Fortunately, most of them were keeping watch on the humans and those fires, small though they were, served to weaken their night vision. It was unlikely they could spot Iah and her group. So, they moved to approach the settlement and the herbivores from the east.

As they neared, they were able to tell that the vast majority of the herbivores were sleeping. There were a few of their number on watch, but no one was in pairs. They were not watching out for each other, and Iah was certain that a couple of them had fallen asleep on watch, which was not uncommon at this time of the morning. That was one of her reasons for choosing to attack at this time. There was an antelope, probably around two-thirds her size, keeping watch on the east side of the settlement she was approaching. But he was either nodding off or already asleep.

Iah and Hes crouched down into a ready position, and when Iah gave the signal, they sprinted silently towards the antelope, their padded paws surprisingly quiet against the ground. This was one of the reasons they had forgone footwear when coming to this world. Iah had been expecting to do more stealthy work. Never in her life would she have imagined that her paws would be the one thing the inhabitants of this world could reach to attack.

Despite their stealth, two massive titans like themselves rushing at the antelope must have been able to get through his sleep-fogged mind. He suddenly snapped awake and was about to sound the alarm when an arrow suddenly sprouted from his neck. A brief moment of dumb shock crossed his face before his eyes went dim and the gnolls were on him. They did not attack him, though. Instead, they took hold of his lifeless body before he could fall and gently lowered him into what would have looked like a sleeping position if anyone else saw him. It was all nice and quiet, just like they wanted.

That was the only lookout that had been looking in their direction. The sun was going to start rising soon, though, so everyone else in the group would probably be waking up shortly. Not wasting any of their precious time, Iah and Hes began moving through the human settlement, killing anything not human in their path. They were forced to make more noise than they would have liked as they moved through the settlement. The humans had not exactly built their settlements with people of the gnolls' size in mind. Most of the settlement had already been haphazardly crushed by the herbivores, but the debris still crunched under their paws. Apparently, the herbivores

were so used to the noise now that it did not bother their sleep much. Most of them were lying on the remains of various parts of the settlement anyway.

Iah managed to rip out the throats of two more antelope and four of the gazelles while they still slept. Hestrihz did not do much worse. She took out one antelope, two gazelles, and a kobold. That cleared out the city's east side and left them a clear path to the humans, who were being watched over by the remaining kobold. Ryrrg made sure that the situation with that changed very quickly. An arrow of his arced neatly through the air and the arrow, longer than the kobold herself, impaled her through the chest and pinned her neatly to the ground. She was dead before she could make a sound.

When Iah approached the humans, she could tell they were deathly afraid of her, as was to be expected. She motioned for them to be silent and hoped they understood the gesture. Fortunately, no one screamed, but she could not tell if that was due to fear of her or fear of gaining the attention of the herbivores holding them captive. Iah noticed something off about the crowd of humans as she looked them over, mothers clutching their children more tightly whenever her gaze fell on them. Those women and children seemed to make up the majority of the humans, along with a few elderly scattered among them. There did not seem to be a single man of fighting age among the group.

As Iah started to get a sickening feeling as she put things together, she caught motion out of the corner of her eye and dodged out of the way just in time to avoid getting skewered by an arrow, the shaft passing close enough that she felt it glance off one armored arm. Iah looked over to find herself confronted by the remaining antelope as the zebras and remaining gazelles roused themselves from their rest and tried to rush over.

This was poor timing for them as the sun was finally starting to rise, their eyes were struggling to adjust to the light, and their sleep fogged minds made them sloppy. It also did not help that they never noticed Ryrrg's presence with the sun rising behind him in the east, its radiance serving to blind them of his presence whenever they looked in his direction. Now that the camp was roused, Ryrrg no longer saw a need for stealth and started firing as quickly as he could. The antelope managed to get out of the way of any arrows, but one zebra went down with two shafts in his chest. He also managed to take down an additional two gazelles before one of the zebras finally got it into her head to cast a spell of protection that put up a wall of air between themselves and Ryrrg's arrows. With his arrows no longer effective, Ryrrg pulled out a pair of daggers and started sprinting up to back up the other gnolls.

While most of the zebras still remained, the rest of their numbers had been cut down to a quarter of what they were based on the numbers she could see. This left most of their party looking disconcerted, but a female zebra looked more angry than anything else as she approached Iah and Hestrihz, the others trailing not that far behind her. Her

aura of command alone seemed to be spurring everyone else forward. The human crowd tried to shrink in on itself as it was sandwiched between the two groups of titans, unsure of how to react to all this, probably wondering if they should stick with the giants they knew or risk taking their chances with the newcomers.

There was fire in the female zebra's eyes as she stared daggers at Iah before glancing down at the humans between them. She sneered at them before spitting into the crowd, not even caring to look at the results of the glob of her phlegm bowling over some people. She came as close to growling as a zebra could as she said, "I can see those worthless pests we sent at you did not manage to do much damage."

"So, it was you that sent those humans to attack us," Iah hissed, "And you were holding their mates and cubs hostage from the looks of it."

"Promised to kill every single one of them if a single one of them returned alive without the magic source or proof of its death," the zebra laughed, "Looks like I should have just exterminated the pests anyways."

Iah stared hard at the zebra, "It's not like you weren't planning to do that from the start. Probably just wanted to murder them all at once."

"Looks like you're smarter than these vermin," the zebra smirked while motioning at the humans.

One woman among the humans shouted, "But you promised you would let us go if we did what we were told."

It looked like the zebras had cast a translation spell on at least one of the humans. That made sense. How else would they have convinced that raiding party to go off to their deaths otherwise? The zebra laughed at the woman, "More the fools are you for believing that nonsense. Further proof that this world would be better off without such idiots."

"We'll see just who this world will be without," Iah growled.

"Yes, we will, carrion breath," the zebra woman taunted as she drew her weapon, a rather impressive unicorn spear. It was further proof of their financial backing. A spear tipped with a unicorn's horn was incredibly durable and never dulled. Still, an expensive weapon was just that, nothing more and nothing less. Iah had dealt with her fair share of wealthy fools who thought a good weapon somehow made them good fighters. Considering that she was the one who ate them, they were most likely wrong about that.

Whether the zebra was a talented fighter was yet to be seen. Iah braced herself to meet her in combat, trying to move to the side of the crowd of humans. The other two zebras hesitated to back her up, but that was because Hes was already charging them. Ryrrg had positioned himself to deal with the remaining smaller races.

The zebra confronting Iah further proved her true nature when she completely disregarded the crowd of humans and charged straight through them. It only took her a couple of steps to clear the humans, but steel-shod hooves made quick work of over a dozen people. Iah could not concern herself with that, though. She had to deflect an incoming strike from the spear aimed at impaling her through the gut. While the zebra was proficient, she was still just a zebra, a prey species. Iah was faster and stronger, and she was more than willing to demonstrate that.

The gnoll was able to practically dance out of the way of the zebra's blow and tried to dart in for a counterstrike of her own. It looked like the zebra had anticipated such a strike and used her spear to keep Iah at a distance. Still, based on what Iah had seen of the zebra, finishing her off would not take much. The zebra was proficient, but she was not exceptionally skilled. There was a bit of a complication. When the zebra had stomped through the crowd of humans, she had caused a panic. Humans were running all over the area now in an attempt to get out of the area. There were so many of them that they quickly began to cover the ground. While the zebra did not seem bothered by this, Iah found that she had to be much more careful with where she placed her paws.

The zebra noticed Iah's hesitation and took full advantage of that and her spear's superior reach. If the zebra happened to step on a human here or there, it was of no concern to her. And seeing or hearing their fellows get turned into paste only further panicked the humans. They were running in blind fear even as Iah did her best to avoid them. Trying to fight the zebra and not step on any humans was a losing prospect. When she absolutely had to pay attention to deflecting the zebra's spear, that meant taking her eyes off the ground for long enough that she could not help but step on the occasional human herself. Every little wet crunch beneath her paws was enough to make her wince.

Even though Iah's speed advantage was somewhat neutralized, she was still clearly the more skilled fighter. Iah managed to get the odd blow off here and there, most of them glancing off armor, but she had been able to draw blood from shallow cuts on a couple of occasions. Unless she managed to get some backup, the results of this little duel were clear. That backup probably would not be forthcoming, either. Hes had already injured one of the other zebras so severely that he would probably die without healing magic, and her other opponent looked like he was about to break and run at any moment. Ryrrg was also making his way through the smaller species efficiently. He may have been the smallest gnoll and only using daggers, but he still towered over the other races and his daggers might as well have been short swords to them. That, combined with his speed and strength advantage, had already resulted in him felling half of the remaining

gazelles, and Iah saw him as he took off the head of the antelope. Of the remaining gazelles, one was already fleeing at full speed and the other appeared that he would do the same if she were not the center of Ryrrg's attention.

If anyone would be getting back up soon, it would be Iah. The zebra seemed to be aware of this, too, but she did not seem frightened of that fact. If anything, she only seemed disgusted with her allies. She grabbed the manglass around her neck and began reciting a spell that Iah recognized to be a fire spell. Iah immediately began to counter with a water shield and was able to render her opponent's spell useless easily. But that gave the zebra a little breathing room and she used that to yell out, "Use your magic, you dimwitted donkeys."

That seemed to get through to the other zebras, including the dying one on the ground. Both began chanting attack spells of different elements. That was something that Iah had feared. Apparently, both zebras, possibly all four of them, had managlasses. Hes would only be able to counter one of those elements at a time. For the moment, she concentrated on the one still on his hooves. The injured one on the ground was barely choking out his spell and was well out of sink with the other. They might have been a danger to Hes if they had been able to do so simultaneously. Without properly coordinating, Hes looked more annoyed with this turn of events than anything else.

While Hes prepared to counter her standing opponent's spell, she rushed the one lying on the ground. This caused the uninjured zebra to try and rush his spell in response as he realized Hes was probably going to cave his companion's head in before he had a chance to cast his spell. The already panicked zebra only managed to mess up his spell as he rushed, the resulting wind attack spell having little chance of damaging Hes even if she had not managed to protect herself first. It was not even enough to draw her attention as she brought her mace down on the other zebra's head with all her strength, practically shattering it like an egg before he could finish his spell. Before she could turn her attention back to the other zebra, he was already hastily backing away, trying to retreat while preparing another spell to cast to keep Hes at bay while he did so.

The loss of yet another one of her comrades did not seem to bother Iah's opponent. All the zebra did was start on another fire spell. Iah prepared to counter it again, at least until she realized she was not the target of the spell. The zebra was smirking at Iah as she directed the spell at a group of humans. Iah rushed to try and defend them, but they were too far off. That was when Ryrrg burst onto the scene after having let his other opponents flee to help deal with the zebra. Unfortunately, Ryrrg had no means of defending himself from magic as he threw himself between the humans and the zebra.

All the smaller male could do was try and block the attack with his own body, throwing his arms in front of himself and hoping his armor would help to give him some protection. A fireball large enough that it would have incinerated dozens of humans in

the area hit Ryrrg full-on. The gnoll let out a brief yip of pain as the armor on his arms burned away, along with a good deal of fur and flesh. Ryrrg began to topple over in pain, but Iah noted that he still had enough control to try and avoid falling over on and crushing the very humans he had just protected. She gave him a nod of respect before closing in on the zebra.

The zebra had not been expecting Ryrrg's sudden appearance, and his display left her distracted just long enough that Iah was able to get lethally close. Iah swung for her neck, planning to take the zebra's head off with her axe. The zebra noticed this and for the first time, there was a hint of fear in the zebra's expression, making Iah smirk in response. Iah thought that the zebra was panicking when it looked like she swung her head at Iah's axe, as if she planned to block the blow with her skull. Then it was Iah's turn to be surprised when her axe suddenly felt like it hit something midair in front of the zebra's forehead, despite nothing being there.

Even though it did not look like any contact had been made, the zebra's head snapped back as if it had been struck. She shook her head as if dazed. Something else was happening, too. Her appearance began to waver. The zebra's stripes began to fade, the stockier appearance of a zebra gave way to a more lithe form, solid hooves turned cloven, and the mohawk-like mane turned into a long, wavy white mane. When a long spiral horn appeared on her head, Iah realized she had just broken an illusion spell.



Illustration by Timid-Wolf

Standing before her was a snow-white unicorn of almost stunning beauty, only marred by the look of absolute hatred on her face.

Iah growled, "Ah, that explains things. Unicorn death cultists would have the funding to send an expedition of this size here."

"You dare call us cultists, you filthy carrion beast," the unicorn snapped.

"It's easy to insult someone else's appearance when you waste magic enhancing your appearance like that. Such vain creatures you unicorns are," Iah countered.

Iah hoped to keep the unicorn angry and sloppy. Fighting a unicorn was a different beast entirely than a zebra. She was not faster or stronger now, but she had undoubtedly been holding back while trying to keep up appearances. Even though the

unicorn still looked enraged, she did not take the bait. The unicorn began to recite a spell that Iah was unfamiliar with and could only guess what she needed to do to counter what was about to happen. Iah charged the unicorn, hoping to get in a deadly blow despite what she was about to do.

Whatever the unicorn was doing was seriously draining her managlass. It looked like the unicorn would only get one chance to do what she was doing. Suddenly, the unicorn smiled triumphantly as three objects suddenly appeared in her hand, the managlasses of her other companions. It was a teleportation spell she had just used, knowledge that had not been passed on to most races. But the unicorns were among the oldest magic users and their race held many secrets. Iah and Hes' managlasses had protection against having theirs stolen like that, but all four of the managlasses the unicorn now held probably belonged to her anyways.

The unicorn managed to hold off Iah with her spear while she began reciting yet another spell the gnoll was unfamiliar with. That did not stop Iah from attacking. She was still the more skilled fighter, and it was only a matter of time before she broke through the unicorn's defenses. As she did that, she suddenly felt warmth against her chest where her managlass rested. Almost as soon as she felt that, it shattered along with one of the unicorn's managlasses. Well, Iah knew what that spell was for now. While the unicorn had been forced to sacrifice one of her managlasses, she still had a nearly depleted one along with two almost full ones. And now Iah was incapable of defending herself from further actual attack spells.

Iah growled at the unicorn as she smiled in triumph at the gnoll. Just as the unicorn began reciting a lightning spell to strike down Iah, something came sailing through the air. It struck the unicorn hard in the head with enough force to knock her to the ground, dazed and confused nearly to the point that she almost took an axe to the throat as Iah did not miss the chance to follow up on this opportunity. The unicorn rolled away, crushing a few unfortunate humans still in the area beneath her massive body as she did so.

They both looked at what had just hit the unicorn when they had some space between each other. It had been the decapitated head of the final zebra Hes had been fighting. Taking his managlass away from him had done him no favors in his duel with Iah's sister. And now Hes was rushing over to join the fight with the unicorn. The unicorn sneered at this turn of events and began reciting another spell that started to quickly drain one of her final two managlasses. Iah fought her all the while, but she could not get the unicorn to mess up her spell.

The gnoll worried that the unicorn might also be trying to break her sister's managlass. She just could not stop the unicorn in time, though. At the conclusion of the spell, the unicorn snorted, "Some other time, primitive beast."

Then, the unicorn began to fade away. She had teleported herself away. Fighting two gnolls was not something the unicorn had been eager to do. That was fine with Iah. If they both took significant injuries, it would have made things difficult. For now, she called Hes over to her and they turned their attention to poor Ryrrg. He was still lying on the ground, breathing heavily as he nursed his scorched arms. There were some humans gathered around him, some looking at him almost reverently. When Iah and Hes approached, a few scattered, but a surprising number stayed close to their savior.

Iah looked at Hes and asked, "Have you gotten any better with your healing spells, sister?"

Her ears folded in embarrassment, "I'm still practicing."

"Then I'm going to need you to hand over your managlass so I can heal Ryrrg."

Hes did not argue as she removed the managlass from around her neck, but she was curious as she asked, "Did you really exhaust yours during that fight?"

"It was destroyed during the fight."

"How? The managlasses should be nigh indestructible," Hes stated in astonishment.

Iah hissed, "Apparently, at least the unicorns, probably the other elder races for that matter, have been keeping it a secret that it is possible to destroy another's managlass by sacrificing one of your own."

"That's...not good news," Hestrihz practically mumbled to herself. Her statement was all too true. The elder races already controlled the secret for mana powder extraction and knew spells that no one else was privy to. It was well known that they only handed out a fraction of the managlasses that they produced. Many thought that the elder races would not just hand out such managlasses to the other races if they did not have some means of controlling them, and it looked like that was true.

That was something to worry about in the future, though. For now, they had to help Ryrrg. He looked half delirious with pain, but he was refusing to whimper, acting every bit the warrior a Splithallow clansman was expected to be. Iah did not delay any further in casting a healing spell once she had been given Hestrihz's managlass. Healing spells were not as flashy as things like attack spells, but the effects were still nothing short of spectacular to watch. The moment Iah completed her healing spell, Ryrrg's burned flesh began to look revitalized. Exposed flesh started to knit itself together within seconds and even the fur regrew as good as new once the flesh was healed. If not for the

damaged armor on his arms, one might never have known he had been injured. And all it cost was around half the mana powder in the managlass.

The wave of relief that came over Ryrrg's face made him look as if he thought he was in heaven. A broad, open-mouthed smile formed, and his tongue lolled out of his mouth. He honestly looked a bit goofy and undignified to Iah, but she was willing to let that pass for the moment, considering what Ryrrg had been through. The humans gathered around Ryrrg had been watching the display, and they had backed away from him a bit, making what Iah could only guess were religious gestures. Some even looked to be bowed down in prayer, a reaction that did not exactly please Iah. She would have to get Vel to clear up some things with these humans, many of whom were either still trying to escape the area or were observing them from behind some piece of rubble or another.

Thoughts of Vel made her eye wander down to her chest. Mana powder from her shattered managlass was all over her armor and whatever bits of exposed fur were there. Based on how much she was itching, some of that powder had also gotten under her shirt. Iah did feel some slight wriggling in Vel's pocket, but it was not close to being as frantic as it had been after her first fight. She hoped that meant Vel was doing alright, but she decided to take him out anyway just to check on him to be sure.

Something felt strange when she reached into her pocket. There was more than Vel inside the pocket. In fact, it seemed to be surrounding Vel. To her, it felt like the pocket had a considerable amount of very fine sand within. She could feel Vel weakly but insistently pulling at her finger, making her worry. Iah had to resist the urge to quickly pull him out of her pocket, thoughts of how fragile he was to her forcing her to remain cautious. When she did manage to get Vel out of the pocket and brought him before her eye, she did not see much movement from the little human. He was laid out in her palm and looked like he was struggling to remain conscious. With increasing worry, Iah asked, "Vel, are you alright?"