

## Chapter 1

Autumn fog clings to the cold morning air. The few people that are out and about Vigilton are wrapped in heavy cloaks, their breath showing as white clouds that are quickly swallowed up by the mist. The sound of a small bell breaks the stillness that the fog imposed on the village as Draguz, the baker, exits the trading post with a bag of salt slung over his shoulder, its weight barely noticed by the bulky half-orc as he quickly strides away to the mill at the edge of town.

Before the silence can take hold again, it is chased away by raised voices. Miss Dewtree, her hands on her hips and her dark eyes glaring dangerously at the man before her, yells: "You could be the king of Durnmorn for all I care. If you cannot pay for your drinks, you're not setting one foot inside my alehouse."

"Come on," the man whines, his speech slightly slurred. "I promise I'll pay you back. Just gimme one more drink." He might as well have been pleading to a brick wall.

What the man, a stranger, only stopping in the border town for a few days before travelling further into the kingdom of Durnmorn, can't know is that the proprietress of 'The Dragon and The Hydra' alehouse has no patience or tolerance for those that do not pay what they owe her.

"Get lost," she says coldly, but the man, not noticing the steely tone of her voice or the way her slender hands restlessly tap against her thighs, tries again.

"My fair lady," he says in as polite a voice as he can manage in his inebriated state, his eyes glued upon her voluptuous body, but before he can utter another word, miss Dewtree snaps her fingers and sparks erupt from his clothes, setting fire to his breeches.

"And stay out!" she calls after his quickly retreating form.

Yup, another day like any other, Lymle thinks to herself as she walks the short distance between the trading post and the Vigilhouse.

After closing the door behind her to shut out the cold, she deposits her load of freshly baked breads on the table they use for eating and asks the only other occupant of the room: "Where are the others?"

She has to crane her neck all the way to look up at his face, the massive tiefling towering over her, Lymle herself hardly taller than a human child. Indeed, many people mistake her for a youngling, until they come closer and notice the tail, the fur covered ears and the bright green eyes with vertical slits, marking her clearly as a cat-sha. Lodal, on the other hand, is big for a tiefling and could tower over anyone in the town, excluding perhaps Draguz Orcson and his father.

The tiefling frowns for a second at Lymle's question, the ridges and scales on his blue skinned forehead rippling, then rumbles: "Dex is out. Captain got called to the village chief. Shadin is still in bed."

With a disgusted sigh, Lymle leaves Lodal in their kitchen and climbs the stairs to the second floor where several doors enter unto the landing. Without bothering to knock, she pulls one of the doors open and says loudly: "Shadin. You're going to miss breakfast."

The small bundle on the bed moves and a glossy black nose protrudes from the blankets and sniffs the air. "Food?"

"Yes, food, you useless lump," she says, "and if you don't hurry up, Dex will have eaten it all."

Shadin yawns, disentangling the rest of his head from the nest of blankets, showing his rodent-like front teeth, and combs a hand across his whiskers.

"Now if you had said that Lodal would eat all the food, I might have believed you," he says, rubbing his eyes. "Not Dex. She barely eats a mouthful."

"Well, Lodal *is* the only one downstairs at the moment," Lymle says slyly and, laughing, she goes back downstairs, followed by Shadin's yelp and the loud thud as the rat-sha, in his haste to get up, falls out of bed.

"He's awake," she tells Lodal happily, climbing unto the high bench the smaller inhabitants of the Vigilhouse use to reach the human-sized table. The tiefling only grunts.

"Seriously." Lymle sounds exasperated. "If not for the need to eat, you'd stay in bed all day. And when you do get up you just stuff your face."

"Lerrofme," Shadin mutters, a few pieces of bread spilling from a mouth that's full to bursting.

"No," she says, folding her arms across her petite chest. "You could try to be more civilized."

Shadin shallows and looks at the cat-sha on the bench next to him. "Like you're so civilized, Lym."

She glares at him, but before she can reply, a soft voice drifts vaguely in their direction. "They are bickering again, as if they were siblings," Dexonia says, seemingly to herself, as she walks into the Vigilhouse and takes a seat next to Lodal.

"We are!" the sha yell in unison.

In the six months that she's been in Vigilton, the pale half-orc has adamantly refused to believe that the two sha could be brother and sister, much less that they could be twins.

None of them know why Dexonia came to Vigilton, but when she arrived with the last spring storms, disheveled and weak, she was in dire need of a place to stay, which, like all of them, has earned her a place in the Vigilhouse.

Knowing it futile to try to argue with the soft-spoken woman that gingerly takes her seat, as if either it or she herself could break, Lymle simply pushes a large piece of bread across the table towards her.

"You need to eat more, Dex," she says eyeing her with a frown. The harsh journey had wrecked the woman and, although Lymle and the village healer Arrain helped her through the worst of it, Dex still has the slightly unhealthy look of a chronically ill patient. Her long white hair, so unusual in her kind, is unkempt and she is pale and thin, which gives her skin an odd grayish-green color.

Delicately, she breaks off a small piece of the bread and puts it in her mouth, more to silence the protests of the small sha in front of her than to satisfy any hunger.

In relative peace and quiet they finish their meal, but as Shadin deposits the used plates on the counter, the door is suddenly thrown open, allowing entrance to a chilly breeze that would not be remiss in the dead of winter, and to captain Teppum, their commander. They have rarely seen him this excited. The half-elf practically bounces into the room and says: "Get your gear, kids. We've got a mission."

Shadin can't suppress a groan, but they are hardly in a position to argue. In payment for the food and lodging they receive at the Vigilhouse, all of them have had to join the vigil, a small band of semi-trained fighters the town keeps on hand in case any problems arise. All of the villagers take a turn serving the vigil in their time, but currently it's only the four of them, led and trained by the hunter and only permanent member of the vigil, Teppum.

Their job usually consists of breaking up fights in the alehouse and scaring away predators from the herds of sheep and cattle, but they can all sense that something different is afoot now.

The captain, ignoring Shadin's moan, drops into one of the free chairs. He leans across the table as if he is bestowing a secret upon them when he says: "I've just spoken with chief Aya. She has heard rumors that goblins are camping near the old Vigil and it is our duty to drive them off."

"Goblins?" Lymle asks.

"Small, green and vicious," Teppum says as if that explains everything. He regards them silently for a few seconds before he suddenly barks: "What are you all waiting for?! Get your stuff ready!"

Shadin and Lymle jump up and race each other to the stairs, followed more calmly by Dexonia and Lodal.

Dexonia contemplates the problem before her.

"This will not do at all," she says to no one. "Why would one need this much stuff?" She glares at the overstuffed bag as if it holds the answers as well as the source of her problems.

It would surely be far too much hassle not to bring the items her fellows have given her, even if she is used to living without them. Lymle would pout and Shadin would berate her, while Lodal

would wonder why it all took so long, so Dex has packed it all: the tent, the rope, the tinder twigs. But now she faces an entirely different problem.

Footsteps outside her bedroom alert her to the presence of one of her fellows, but Dex just keeps glaring at the bag as if magically willing it to shrink.

"Captain wants to go," Lodal's deep voice rumbles from behind her.

The tiefling follows her gaze towards her pack, frowns and then sighs. He crosses the room in two steps and hoists the offending bag across his shoulder next to his own as if it weighs little more than air. With Dex' soft footsteps in tow he rejoins the others who are waiting in front of the squat building they call home, Lymle equally excited and concerned, Shadin muttering how all this work leaves so little time to eat and sleep and captain Teppum calmly inspecting his identical swords as if he has done this kind of thing hundreds of times already. Lodal figures that might be true. Although only half an elf, the captain is still older than any of them and has been in the vigil since the day he could wield those swords.

"Ready to go?" Teppum asks them, eyeing Dex' lack of gear and the two bags the tiefling is carrying. They nod and the captain leads them out of the village.

The Vigil, the ancient fort for which the town and its guards are named, lies two days travel north of the village.

Their journey is uneventful. It seems the cold, so early in the season has driven all of the predators of the forest to their dens and thanks to Lymle's acceptable cooking and the ample supply of wine Teppum takes with him wherever he goes, their spirits are high when they finally reach the ruins.

Fog rolls across the second morning they spend outside the village, so thick it seems almost tangible, obscuring the ancient ruin from view. They only know that they have reached their destination because Teppum tells them so. Although they can't see a thing, they trust the half-elf's knowledge of the area and cautiously creep forward, close together so none of them is swallowed up by the mist.

Lymle sticks close behind her brother, her ears trying to pick up any sounds made by the creatures they are hunting. Small as they are, the two sha can be fairly stealthy, but Lodal, with his heavy gear and the multitude of weapons he carries, is slightly less so, and Lymle is sure he will give them away long before they can reach the goblins. In the stillness the sound of the tiefling drawing a two-handed sword from its scabbard carries far, but still they hear nothing in response.

Nervously Lymle grips her shortbow, straining to see or hear anything. She doesn't like this silence, the fog muffling everything as if they are wrapped in thick blankets, and she is about to say so when suddenly figures loom over them, far larger than the small creatures the captain described.

Lymle is about to call out when she realizes the figures are unmoving. The statues, easily four times as large as the small sha flank a stairway that leads to a tiled plateau a few feet above their heads.

Now Lymle and Shadin can barely manage to keep quiet as they ascend the stairs, the steps worn by time, uneven and made for far bigger feet than their own, but eventually they all reach the top and are greeted by an odd red glow, its source still obscured. High pitched voices echo through the fog, speaking in a quaint language that seems to consist of guttural barks, squeals and clicks.

As far as they can tell from the sounds, there could be as many as twenty, or as few as two of the creatures hiding in the mist.

Captain Teppum loosens his swords in their scabbards and says: "Let's get to work."