

One

Nyissa stood on tiptoe to look over the edge of the parapet. Her five pursuers were outside the old tower looking up at her, shouting curses. She gave them a friendly wave and blew kisses in response. One loosed an arrow which curved gracefully up over the wall and dropped back over the other side of the tower. She wagged a finger at him and was rewarded with more curses in Sanshen. Some were good ones too. She memorised those for later reference – Sanshen was a language just made for cursing in. Even when the speaker was saying something nice it sounded absolutely repulsive.

She settled back behind the wall and waited. Presently, noises from downstairs told her that they'd decided to come up after her. Leaving her pack in the shadow of the wall she peeked down through the hatchway to see what was on the way.

It looked like two of them had decided to stay with the horses. The other three were trying the rickety old staircase up the inside of the ruin with sensible trepidation. Nyissa wiggled her fingers and watched them inch their way up to what was left of the first floor. Sensibly, they had spread themselves out a bit so the wobbly old staircase was holding up. The leader hesitated at the jump across the gap to the second flight, but was preparing to give it a try. Nyissa drew breath and called up the patterns that would let her cast a spell at him, then let fly just as he jumped.

She felt the release of mana rush through her and smiled. It always felt so nice and tingly. Her target didn't appreciate it so much. The surge itself startled him in mid leap, but it also numbed his fingers and made him tremble violently. Normally, this was a good spell to make an opponent drop a weapon, but it served just as well to make the raider miss his grip on the second staircase. He wobbled on the edge of the gap for a couple of seconds until the old wood cracked under his weight and with a terrified howl he toppled back, arms flailing uselessly on his way down to the rubble strewn floor. The fall was only twenty feet or so, but there was a loud crash and he only seemed to be twitching afterwards. The shouts and curses from his comrades lasted far longer. Nyissa smiled sweetly down at them and gave them another friendly wave.

They really should have given up then, but no, they just had to make her pay. As one covered the hatchway with his bow and the other leapt onto the second staircase, Nyissa retreated to the shadow of the parapet and began preparing another spell.

It was about a minute before he popped his head nervously through the hatchway and looked around for her. Of course, by that time she was nowhere in sight – her spell had blended her into the shadow perfectly. He crept out onto the roof, looking puzzled and wary. A few seconds later the second raider appeared, still clutching his bow. They mumbled together for a moment, then split up and cautiously stalked over to opposite sides of the tower roof. The one with the bow passed very close to her and leaned over the low wall to look down...

Nyissa drove the blade of her dagger into the archers kidney and stepped back quickly as he screamed and fell back. Her action broke the spell so she was fully visible again, but by the noise he was making it sounded like he was out of the fight and she was down to a single opponent. Backing off to get some room she sized up the remaining bandit and shifted her sabre into a ready stance, flicking blood off the blade of the dagger in her left hand. He was small, wiry and bandy-legged. Hefting his thick single edged chopping sword he issued a stream of curses at her. Nyissa nodded and offered a few back. Might as well practice her Sanshen while she could.

The nomad screamed and charged at her, hacking wildly. Very undisciplined. Nyissa calmly deflected the first swing, ducked under the second and ran her sabre straight up under his ribcage before he could reel off the third.

He stood dead still, a look of stunned surprise on his weathered face, then grimaced with pain as she dragged the blade free. As she stepped back he crumpled to the floor, clutching the wound and making soft grunting noises. Judging by the amount of blood Nyissa estimated that he'd be dead within minutes, and probably without too much pain. The other one was in more trouble – left alone he might take days to go from that stab in the kidneys. She walked over and opened the artery with a precise stroke along the side of his neck, then peeked out over the wall as he gurgled quietly to himself. The other two were still down there. Currently they didn't look too alarmed.

Nyissa picked up the dropped bow. It was short, made from impala horn and carved Whipwood and looked quite attractive. She decided to keep it. His arrows were too long for her, but that was all right. Other people's arrows always were. She lay a few of the shafts out on the edge of the wall, stepped up on the back of the dead man to get some height, leaned over and took aim.

Her first shot missed by a stride or so. The second went further off the mark as the pair scrambled for cover. She got one in the shoulder with the third shot, and put another into him as he lay on the ground screaming. The last raider leapt onto his pony and galloped off. She narrowly missed him as he pelted down the path and out of sight. A pity. He'd probably be back with friends, so she couldn't really afford to camp here tonight.

Well, four out of five wasn't bad.

Nyissa quickly searched the corpses, dropping the interesting gear into her pack. Apart from a nice gold signet ring that the leader was wearing the other bodies didn't have much on them, but at least she'd gained a few more ponies to go with the one she'd stolen from them this morning. Their saddle packs had dried meat and biscuit rations and several large water skins in addition to odds and ends. She checked the food and decided she could stand to be on a diet for a day or two until she made it to town.

Stringing the reins together, she set off to find a camping spot.

Two

Gathish had been a guard in Hidari for eight winters now. The job was poorly paid but it offered many opportunities for bribes and shakedowns, and he'd got the scams down to an art. The occasional melee went with the territory, but Gathish was big and mean looking, so people usually tried not to give him trouble. If he did have to fight, his ring mail armour and open helm offered more protection than the majority of opponents had, and the metal shod club he carried was always a bit of a winner. He'd been using something similar since he was a brat and was now very, very good with it. His officers didn't hassle him much as long as they got their cut, not since that fancy pants one a couple of years ago had the accident and none of the other guys saw anything. All things considered he was a pretty content individual. He figured he'd put in a couple more years and then buy a bar and a wife with the stash he'd been hiding away.

His favoured post right now was at the main gate with Niiri One-ear, where they had first crack at the visitors and didn't have to get involved with the rough stuff that occasionally spilled out of the bars. It was a prime spot and he'd had to warn off a couple of the other guards, but the hassle was worth it. He and Niiri usually doubled their weekly salary just from "entry tolls".

You had to be careful who you tried to shake down. Visitors were usually good for the "entry toll" scam, but you had to watch out for the nomad bands. Some of them got feisty when they were in groups. Solitary visitors were a different matter, though much rarer. Few people would brave the trade road across the wastes on their own, but those that did make it usually fell into two types. There were the wounded, frightened ones that somehow managed to beat the odds and crawl in, and there were the really tough ones that had somehow punched through the bandits and other predators. Gathish usually let those in without a toll because though he may have been big and ugly, he wasn't stupid. Niiri was stupid as well as big and ugly, but he protected Gathish's back and did what he was told, so that was fine.

The solitary visitor who was leading a string of nomad ponies into the gatehouse courtyard right now didn't seem to fall into either category. She seemed uninjured, but she hardly looked like the dangerous, fight your way through type. For a start, she was very small. Petite, even. She'd probably only come up to his chest, even wearing her cute high boots. Even with all the travel dust he could tell she was very pretty, with long dark hair tied up in a bunch, a little elfin face and big brown eyes. The blackened chain mail tunic she wore over quilted silk padding was nicely curved too. He got a good look at her leather clad legs and behind as she swung down from the saddle of the lead pony and growled softly in his throat. Niiri chuckled to himself and rubbed suggestively at his crotch. If not for the armour he'd have put this one down as a fancy courtesan, but you never could tell with adventurers.

As she walked up to him Gathish also noticed a few other things. The wrist of her swordarm was thick with muscle, and the ivory hilts of the sabre and dagger she wore at her fancy belt were well worn. Her gloves had the palms cut away to ensure a good grip – swordsmen's gloves. Gathish had once seen a famous duellist called Marik Fartraveller when he came through Hidari. He'd noted the way the man had moved while he'd killed a couple of local bravos and announced that he was leaving right now, unless anyone had any objections? Gathish and the other guards had very politely stood aside and let the man pass. This young woman moved the same way, and it made Gathish unusually cautious.

"Welcome, erm, miss. Lookin' for entry are yee?" The woman fixed those big brown eyes on him and he caught his breath. A man could drown in those eyes...

"I'm looking for somewhere to sell off these ponies and an inn with clean beds and a bath." She sneezed suddenly, dislodging trail dust. "Definitely a bath."

"Well, you'll be wanting to pay our entry toll, then I can tell some of a good place." He knew there was no sense him trying it on with a woman like that, so he decided to try his favourite con instead. The woman looked at him levelly – not easy to do when you are more than a foot shorter than the other person. Her hand just naturally came down on the hilt of her sabre.

"I don't know anything about an entry toll." Gathish felt a small measure of doubt growing, and behind him he felt Niiri shift nervously.

"It's just a copper piece per leg in the party, miss." He blinked when he realised how much that would be with all those ponies. She cocked her head to one side and stared at him for a few moments, while he swallowed and carefully kept his hand away from the club at his belt.

"I'm sure that should be one copper piece for each leg you have, yes? For directing me to a good inn. You have two legs, I see." She glanced down, then up again. "Currently." Behind him, Niiri was being very still and quiet. Gathish decided to cut his losses while he could.

"That'd do fine, miss." She nodded and fished inside a belt pouch, flipped him some coppers. "You should try Giltman's place, miss. Clean beds, and he's got a bath in the stables people can use." She looked annoyed, and he quickly took a step backwards. Niiri yelped as he stood on his foot.

"I meant a bath in the room. I don't give anyone a free show. What's the best inn in this dump?"

"Uhhrr, that'd be the Silk 'n' Billows. Costly that is. They might not let you in all covered in dust and crud like that..."

"Well if they don't want to, you can come over and keep the peace while I convince them to be more hospitable, can't you? Where can I sell these nags?"

Gathish gave her directions to a horse trader he had an arrangement with and watched her lead her string of ponies off into town. He made a mental note to keep well away from the Silk 'n' Billows today, just in case. He had the feeling there might be trouble.

Three

The ponies didn't fetch much. They certainly didn't cover the cost of the nice Esroli cavalry horse the bandits had shot out from under her. She'd not been previously aware how little regard the Peshmiri had for the bigger foreign horses. Nyissa made a mental note not to not spend a lot of money on nice horses in future. It was about the tenth time she'd decided this in her life, but she always succumbed when she saw a really nice piece of horseflesh. She never managed to keep them long.

She walked back through the narrow, rough paved streets on the way to the town square slapping dust off herself and ignoring the curious looks from passers by. She knew it wasn't that she looked odd to them. The locals were a mixed bunch because Hidari had grown out of a walled trade enclave and people from all over the region had settled here. There were tall dark skinned Esroli, stocky, desert tanned Peshmir nomads and a few delicate looking pale skinned Belani wearing broad brimmed hats to keep the sun off as well as every kind of half-breed. People stared at her because she was so damned pretty. It was occasionally useful, but generally a source of more problems than anything else and she generally considered it a handicap.

After a little wandering through side roads and casual browsing on stalls of bric-a-brac she found her way to the town square and quickly spotted the inn. She also noted the small kids circulating in the crowds shopping at the market stalls and gave herself a quick once over for easily removable items. There was a small stage to one side, where members of a players troupe were performing to indifferent response. It was likely the kids were part of the troupe too. She smiled indulgently. A troupe like this one had taken her in as a girl when she ran away from the man that had bought her off the slave block. If this troupe were anything like hers, the kids would be getting an education in everything from juggling to burglary as well as picking pockets.

Nyissa sauntered into the Silk 'n' Billows, nodding to the man at the door, who looked slightly perturbed by her travel stained gear and weaponry. Inside it was neat and fussy, with someone's crude attempt at a fresco in the Imperial style gracing the wall. Doubtless the locals would consider this place the height of luxury and style. The fat little man behind the bar looked down his hooked nose at her until she selected a bottle of quite reasonable wine from his stock by name and complimented him on the fine Harari embroidery that trimmed his robe. Pretty soon he was hanging on her every word, to the obvious disapproval of the imposing woman that appeared to be his wife. She had no problem securing his best rooms, and judging by the way the woman's eyes widened and she glared daggers at him, he'd given her a reasonable discount.

The fat little man clapped his beringged hands together and a pretty little maid appeared. She glanced nervously at the fat man and then bowed gracefully to Nyissa. The wife glowered at her from the back room, hands on wide hips.

The maid trotted ahead to show Nyissa to her rooms. She appeared to be a mix of Esroli and Belani, and Nyissa admired the slim brown legs and firm behind on the way up the stairs. Oh, it had been such a long time. Weeks, actually. The last one had been that pretty blond guy, the bard that had sat with her and made up poems that made her laugh. She smiled at the memory, and looked the girl over covertly as she let her into the rooms.

The rooms were actually quite nice. A sunken bath tiled with a modest Imperial purple and white mosaic was nicely positioned in front of a fireplace, and some graceful furniture was positioned about the room. The bedroom was almost filled with a quite spectacular platform bed scattered with silk cushions in more shades than Nyissa had previously seen in one place. The fireplace opened into this room too.

Nyissa wondered how often you needed a roaring fire out here in the desert. Oh well.

“Could you fill the bath for me please? I’d like to wash up.” The maid bowed and scurried off while Nyissa dropped her pack in the bedroom and had a look out the window. It overlooked the inns private courtyard, where a pretty fountain gurgled in the midst of a formal garden. The bustle of the town square was just background noise, and the sound of water was very soothing. A small black cat looked up at her from the Skullbushes around the fountain but quickly went back to the more interesting task of grooming itself in a sunbeam. Gurgling noises and some clattering announced the return of the maid, so Nyissa sauntered back into the other room. The girl bowed, clutching a basket of soaps, oils and powder boxes. The bath was filling from the faucet, doubtless pumped from wherever it was heated by another servant. Scented steam rose lazily, and bubbles were beginning to slop over the side. It looked like heaven.

“Will that be all M’aam?” the maid asked politely. Nyissa smiled. Well, she thought...

“Oh, I think I’d like you to help me bathe. I’m sure you give a lovely massage, don’t you?” The girl smiled and looked a little flustered as Nyissa started stripping off her gear.

“Well, I try, M’aam...”

“I’m Nyissa, dear. What’s your name?” The girl stared a moment and then looked away as Nyissa peeled the tight leather trousers off and dumped them on the floor in a cloud of dust.

“Uhhh, I’m Lishi, M’aam.” The girl seemed to be blushing, though her skin was dark enough that you couldn’t tell. Nyissa stripped off the quilted silk padding and undertunic in one movement and stretched happily. After several days on the road, it was delightful to get the armour off. She looked coyly over at the girl.

Yes, she was definitely blushing. Nyissa felt a little sorry for her, but a little fun would improve her day. She took the girls trembling hand and smiled brightly. “Well Lishi, lets start, shall we?”

The warm water and scented bubbles were wonderful, though Nyissa suspected the water would turn muddy by the time she’d got all the dust off. Lishi started fussing around and unclipping her hair. Nyissa endured a few minutes of the girl trying to bend over her to soap her back before sighing loudly.

“Lishi. Really, you can’t bathe me properly from up there can you? You’ll have to get in with me.” She heard the girl gulp loudly.

“G – g – get in? Oh, I don’t think I should do that...”

“Well of course you should. Come along now, I’d really like you to massage my feet. How about if I give you a little something for your trouble? Lets say... a couple of gold pieces?”

Nyissa suppressed her giggles as the girl stripped down to her shift and slipped nervously into the water. Actually, the shift was a nice touch. It promptly got wet and clung in a very interesting fashion. Nyissa started to feel a little warm buzz.

Lishi settled down a bit while she massaged Nyissa’s feet, then scooted around behind her to start soaping her back again. Nyissa snuggled back against her happily as the girl sponged her shoulders and arms, and stroked the girls shin under the water. The girls heart was beating very fast.

“Uhh, Miss Nyissa... M’aam?” Nyissa grinned and reached up to take Lishi’s hands, guiding them to her breasts.

“Don’t forget to soap me there too, Lishi, dear.” The poor girl jumped like she’d been burned and pulled her hands away with a gasp. Nyissa couldn’t hold on any more, and broke out in a fit of giggles.

After a minute or so of sitting at the other end of the bath watching her giggle, Lishi was starting to look a little cross. Nyissa wiped her eyes.

“I’m sorry love. You were so nervous, I couldn’t help but tease you. I’m sorry.”

“I thought, I thought you wanted...” Nyissa gave her her sweetest smile.

“Well, actually... ah, well. I would like to have some fun. But only if you feel like it. I won’t force you. I’ll pay you the gold for the massage though. Mmmm, and some more gold if you feel like being a little... adventurous. Wash my hair for me and have a think about it.” The girl slowly moved around behind her and started to wash the dust out. Nyissa sat patiently and behaved herself. After a few minutes of silence, Lishi ventured in a small voice:

“Uhm... how much gold? For being... adventurous?” Nyissa swept wet hair back from her face and smiled.

“Hmm, I don’t know. Lets see what I have.” She reached over for the purse on her belt and dumped a small pile of loose coinage onto the tiles by the side of the bath. Lishi’s eyes bulged as Nyissa sorted through it.

“...fifteen, sixteen, oh, there’s a nice ruby I picked up, seventeen, eighteen... must do something with that gold ring, nineteen, twenty, a bit more, plus all this silver...” She looked coyly over at the wide eyed girl. “Well, I seem to have quite a lot. How much would you like?” The girl was looking stunned, her pretty mouth open – one gold piece was about a months pay for a serving girl, but loose change for a successful adventurer. Nyissa felt a slight pang of guilt for manipulating the girl, but it didn’t dissuade her much.

“Uhh, well... I don't know. How about... two?” she asked nervously. Nyissa smiled broadly.

“I think you are worth more than that dear. Lets say four. Plus the two for the massage. How does that make you feel?” Lishi licked her lips nervously and nodded. Nyissa scooped the rest of the loose change back into the purse and settled back into the warm water to enjoy herself.

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It took the offer of two more gold pieces and the contents of the wine bottle to encourage Lishi to get really very adventurous, but once over her initial nervousness she became quite enthusiastic. She even got to be pretty good after some intimate instruction and a demonstration that left her gasping. Nyissa stretched lazily and gazed over at the girls dozing form as evening drew in. There were marks on the girls back, marks that had been put there very recently. Nyissa had got a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach when she'd seen them. The marks looked like ones made by a thin cane. Nyissa didn't much like people who beat their staff. She sighed and slipped out of bed. It was time to go to work.

Nyissa bent to give Lishi's exposed breast a gentle, lingering kiss, then slipped silently out of the bedroom to get her gear. It took a while to clean it properly, but she did so feeling much more comfortable. She left the girl to sleep and ambled downstairs. Her freshly cleaned gear drew wide eyed looks from the owner, who probably recognised that the equipment this woman was wearing was worth more than his whole establishment.

He seemed a little flustered when she casually mentioned that she'd decided to hire Lishi as her personal maid for the next few days, but happily took Nyissa's gold for it. So far her fun had been pretty expensive, but hey, it was only gold and if it got the girl out of his hands for a while, it was worth it. She had more gold hidden away up in the room, plus gems worth a good deal more hidden away on her person.

After telling the owner that Lishi was currently in her room performing some tasks Nyissa had set her, she strode past the door guard and out into the town square. It was time to start on the real reason for her visit to Hidari.

Four

The Boar's Eye Wayhouse took a little while to find, and Nyissa decided she would try to avoid coming here again. It was in a very rough corner of town, near a tannery. The tannery gave the area a pungent aroma and probably kept away any passing trade. So as she slipped in through the beaded curtain, she wasn't surprised to see that the kind of customers it did have were reclusive and furtive. Several had missing ears and fingers. One had an ugly scar where his nose had once been. The population of the bar took note of her entrance and sized her up, many with a leer.

A middle aged woman danced sullenly on a centre table, her pendulous bare breasts pierced with rings and her flabby buttocks tattooed with fading blue swirls. She glowered at Nyissa and bent to wave her broad backside at her to the general amusement of the other customers. Nyissa rolled her eyes and headed for the bar.

As half expected, a burly fellow with a tattooed face made a grab at her as she passed his table. Nyissa caught his hand by the thumb and twisted. There was a loud pop as it dislocated and a louder noise as he yelled in pain. She dropped the offending hand and moved on, ignoring his two companions who rose to their feet and growled threateningly. She heard steel clear leather, saw other customers in her line of sight staring over her shoulder and promptly dropped and spun on one foot, her other leg slashing out.

The leg sweep caught one of the pair on the side of the knee and he staggered, his knife slashing out wildly. He caught at the edge of another table to steady himself and brought his knife hand up again.

Nyissa had already sprung up and brought her booted foot up under his chin. There was a nasty crack as his jaw broke and a splatter of blood from his ruined mouth caught a nearby customer in the face. The knifeman hit the floor while the bespattered bystander looked dumbly down at himself. The second guy snarled at her and darted forward with his own knife. He drove it out at waist level, his other hand covering it so she couldn't grab his wrist.

Nyissa didn't try. Instead she just jinked to the side and drove the heel of her hand into his face. His nose flattened and he staggered, blood streaming down his face. She took a step forward and drove the toe of her boot hard into his groin. Surrounding customers winced and clutched at themselves as he folded silently and lay on the floor. He was either unconscious or locked in his own private world of pain. She looked over at tattoo face, who sat there nursing his injured hand and raised an eyebrow. He growled something and looked away. With a shrug, Nyissa turned and continued her walk to the bar.

Room was made at the bar when she got there, and the other customers seemed to be paying a lot of attention to their drinks. She beckoned to the barman, who shambled over with a sour face. He smelled like he'd come out of the Tannery himself and Nyissa resolved to breathe only through her mouth as he leaned over the bar to her.

"Waddayerwant?" he squeaked in a surprisingly high voice, breathing ale and tobacco fumes at her.

"I'm looking for Karamtis. I was told he came here." The barman's brows came together and he stared suspiciously.

"What's your business with Karamtis?"

“That’s my business, and his. Is he in?” She could feel the eyes on her from the surrounding customers and sighed. “There’s money in it for you.” He grunted and stuck out a grubby paw. She palmed a few silvers and dropped them into it. They disappeared into the pouch on the front of his greasy apron.

“He’s on the roof.” He nodded towards the stairs and wandered off to serve some customers.

Nyissa looked around the bar. Since she hadn’t maimed anyone for a few minutes, most of the customers had gone back to their own business. The few that were still staring were probably deep in some repulsive fantasy that involved her. The two she’d knocked out had been dragged out and dumped in the street and tattoo face was nowhere in sight. The dancer had gone back to her clumsy gyrations, and was currently offering a double handful of breast to a couple of men who hunkered over their jacks of ale and ignored her completely. Nyissa pushed away from the bar and headed for the stairs.

Upstairs were several doorways covered with grubby curtains. Dubious noises came from behind a couple. Nyissa headed past and up the next flight of stairs which let to the roof.

It was a clear night and even though the larger moon was only a sliver, it was bright enough to see fairly well. There was a kind of wooden hut built on the roof. Light leaked out between the boards and under the crude door. Glancing around, Nyissa could see no one else. With a shrug she headed over, unhitching the wooden hook that kept the door closed.

A bewhiskered face regarded her with curiosity from behind a rickety old table groaning under the weight of several piles of Vellum and a number of thick candles. Other heaps of mouldering calf hide were stacked around the tiny hut, amongst a collection of wooden platters holding half eaten meals and a rickety unmade cot. The occupant had wild grey hair and beard and his skinny arms were veiny and splattered with ingrained ink. A crude tattoo of a dragon curled around his forearm. His fingers were black with ink. A large feather quill was clutched in his spidery fingers, poised over a sheet on the table in front of him. He seemed to be in the middle of annotating a map.

“Karamtis?” Nyissa ventured. The old man blinked at her. His voice was deeper than she’d expected from such a skinny old frame.

“Yes, I am he. Do I know you?”

“Krudmoc the Grouch told me to come and find you. He said you’d be the best source of information in this town – if you were still alive. He said to give you his regards.” The old man started shuddering and Nyissa thought he was about to have some kind of fit, until she realised he was laughing.

“That old reprobate! You tell him I’ll be alive long after he’s bust his gut with those fancy pastries he favours! His regards, eh? What about the 20 gold he owes me? Didn’t send that, I bet!” He waved her in and she looked about for somewhere to sit, without success. In the end she perched on the edge of a wooden crate full to overflowing with old parchment. The old man glared and waved his quill at her. “Don’t you upset my filing system – and don’t take anything! I’ve got my eyes on you!” She shook her head in amazement, but he seemed to take that as a promise. He peered at her with surprisingly bright eyes.

“Now then. That’s fancy gear you have there. And you know Krudmoc, who I suppose still works at the temple library in Hickoryhead? Your accent comes from the Fairmarch, I’d say, and that’s a fair way from Hickoryhead or here. What are you then – not an ordinary errant girl, no, not all the way out here. An adventurer, sure. But what would you need with an old scribe, hmm?” Nyissa shrugged.

“I’m on temple business.” He looked surprised.

“Temple business? Not hired by Krudmoc to come and bother me about something then? No, that gear is too fancy to belong to any normal adventurer. So what temple, hmm?”

“Hawkgard.”

“Hawkgard? But that’s weeks away! What does the big temple want all the way out here? Hold on...” he squinted at her for a few seconds and suddenly his manner changed. His voice acquired a slightly awed edge to it. “Hold on... you’re not... your not one of those “sword sages” are you?”

“You got me. My names Nyissa Py-cleia. Krudmoc sent something on to Hawkgard and I’m here to follow it up.”

“Well, what do you know? I never saw one of you before. I never thought you got out to places like Hidari. Thought you stayed in the heartlands, in your fancy temples.” He seemed somehow... rattled. He started casually shuffling the sheets on his table. The map he’d been working on disappeared into one of the piles.

“Far from it. We get sent all over, especially places where the priests think things might get a little rough. That’s the whole point of a sword sage. We go in and recover things the Temple wants when they can’t get to them any other way.” She paused. “Personally, I’m interested in fourth and fifth century ballads. But in this case I’m looking for some poetry by Robotent.”

“Hmm, Robotent. Overrated blow-hard if you ask me.” Nyissa smiled.

“Some think so. But he’s got those epics to his name, and the legendary 12 sonnets to Varirenda of course. Only 7 of which are in any library. Anyway, Krudmoc sent this over to Hawkgard.” She pulled a slim scroll tube from her cleavage and handed it over. Karamtis took it with an embarrassed little chuckle and opened the end, extracting the crisp parchment inside and muttering something that included “..still warm...”. He held the fresh copy up to the light and read. After a minute he looked over at her sharply.

“This is Robatent?” Nyissa shrugged.

“Not my field. But I’m told it seems to be. Not part of one of the known ones, so it’s probably out of one of the missing 5 sonnets. Krudmoc told me the original sheet it was copied from was used as packing material for an old Marrori glass bowl that someone was trading in the market in Hickoryhead. It was part of a batch that had come in from Hidari. He hopes he might get the rest of the sonnet, or perhaps even more, if I can find out where it came from.” She grinned ruefully “He told me he’d been searching through all the packing out of Hidari ever since, just in case. The merchants think he’s touched in the head.” Karamtis had gone as still as a statue, his face reddening. He studied the parchment closely for a moment before continuing. Hmm, she thought. I’ve touched a nerve...

“I can imagine. And he probably is touched in the head. Robatent was widely copied. This could be by anybody.” Nyissa shrugged again.

“Maybe. But he said the parchment it was on was old enough, and the ink properly faded for the age. Besides, he knows Robatent pretty well. He thinks it’s genuine.” The old man wound his fingers through his beard, twisting it savagely.

“Well. That certainly would be a find. So, what do you plan to do next? Search the bazaar for old parchments that are being used to wrap up trinkets? Check all the outhouses in Hidari in case someone is about to wipe their bottom on something historical?” Nyissa blinked at him.

“I thought I’d start out by tracking down the source of the Marrori bowl. That’s rare enough, and Krudmoc told me you know about the Marrori. He said you used to lecture about them, and collected their glassware.” The old man spat contemptuously into a wooden bucket by the desk.

“I don’t do glassware any more. If I had any, it’d be stolen by next morning. All I do is read or write things for people who can’t do it themselves. Besides, Marrori glass doesn’t come up these days. No one here sells it.”

“So, if it was unusual it’d stick in someone’s mind. They’d remember about it.” He shook his head.

“No one here would recognise it as Marrori. They wouldn’t even realise it was valuable. Like the poem they wrapped it in. Out here they’d blow their noses on old parchment, or use it to start a fire. Trying to track it down would be a fools errand.” Nyissa was surprised at his reaction to this. She started on a slightly different tack.

“Hmm. The Marrori have been gone for centuries, ever since the Peshmiri overran their lands. Either someone’s had this glass bowl sitting in their house and pawned it, or someone recently dug it up. Anyone been digging around any old Marrori ruins lately?” He looked flushed and irritated.

“I don’t know anything about any ruins.” He stood up and stretched elaborately. “Well, it’s very late and my old eyes are tired. I’ll ask around about the glassware for you and let you know if I hear anything. If you ask me, you’d be better off trying the market and showing your little poem to the merchants there in case one of them has anything similar. Good luck with your searching. Give Krudmoc my regards when you see him.” He handed back the scroll tube. Nyissa tucked it in her belt as he hustled her out the door and back onto the roof. The door shut behind her about as firmly as it was able to without falling off its rope hinges. She could hear him muttering – it sounded like he was swearing under his breath.

Outside, she stood and stared at the hut for a few minutes. Something wasn’t right about this. He’d been too eager to put her off, and surprisingly disinterested in the subject for someone who Krudmoc said had been fascinated by the culture. And the mention of ruins had really upset him.

Nyissa decided she’d like to have a good look at that map.

Five

The streets in this part of town were so narrow that Nyissa had no trouble jumping across to a nearby roof where she settled in to watch Karamtis’ hovel. She didn’t have to wait long before he came out, wearing a long woollen cloak. She watched while he disappeared down into the Boar’s Eye, and followed him at rooftop level as he left and hurried down the street, past a familiar looking tattooed man who was waiting outside the tavern with some friends. They exchanged a few words Nyissa couldn’t hear, after which the ambush party ignored the old man. It was a difficult job to keep up with him from up on the roofs, and she soon lost him somewhere in the tight, winding streets.

Backtracking quickly she let herself into the hovel. A thorough search of the piles failed to turn up the map. Perhaps he’d taken it with him. Nyissa stamped her foot in frustration. She briefly considered paying tattoo face a visit to teach him and his friends why it was a bad idea to hang around after dark, but decided that would be petty and reluctantly headed back to the nicer end of town, travelling most of the way by roof to avoid complications.

In the town square she selected a better quality tavern and settled in to think with a mug of bitter Belani ale.

Karamtis hadn't seemed to know anything about the poetry. He'd only become nervous when the subject of Marrori glass had come up. So, strictly speaking, she should probably carry on with her mission and try and track down the merchant who'd packed up the glassware. But she knew it would bother her until she knew exactly what was going on.

She couldn't really lean on Karamtis. He was still an acolyte of Losori and there was no evidence that he'd done anything wrong. If she threatened him and word got back to the temple she'd be in trouble. And if he had enough divine favour saved up, Losari himself might rebuke her. Nyissa had been skirting the edge of acceptable devotion for some time now – the Lord of Wisdom might decide to make an example of her. The withdrawal of some of the magic he granted his agents would be very inconvenient, and a visit from the spirits of retribution would be even worse. A dose of divinely inflicted Brain Fever could incapacitate someone for weeks. If she was going to find out what was happening here, she'd have to do it by using her brain.

No idea immediately came to mind however, and Nyissa returned to the Silk 'n' Billows without much of a plan. It'd been a long day, and she was fuddled. She also hadn't eaten much, what with bathing, seducing the locals, and wandering around the rough end of town. She decided to turn in and think about it in the morning.

Lishi quickly appeared when she got back to her inn, making saucy eyes at her. Nyissa sent her off to the kitchen for some fruit, bread and cold meats, stripped off her armour and settled into bed with the girl for a late supper. The girl was getting bold – she was busy under the covers even before Nyissa had finished eating. Nyissa brushed crumbs off her boobs and settled back to enjoy it. Sleep could wait.

Six

Nyissa awoke as Lishi slipped out of bed, and dozed happily until the girl reappeared with breakfast. They munched on the fruit and fresh bread for a while, then spent a couple of hours repeatedly satisfying a different hunger that Lishi seemed to have developed in abundance. Leaving the girl napping in bed, she dressed and slipped out again.

The market was in full swing by the time she got there. Nyissa wandered around looking at cloth and trinkets, bought one of the latter as a present for Lishi, chased off an urchin who made an attempt to slit her purse and asked a lot of questions.

None of the merchants had any glasswork of the type she described. One of them sent her off in the direction of a colleague who he thought might have had some once.

Nyissa found herself in a narrow alley, by a beaded curtain that covered a doorway. The sign for a pawn merchant had been painted by the door. With a cautious look over her shoulder, she entered.

The shop inside was full of junk. Ragged carpets and battered furniture lay heaped against the walls. Piles of old clothing mouldered quietly alongside stacks of chipped stoneware. From behind one of these, a dark, feral face appeared.

It was attached to a little stunted man. A long face and pendulous earlobes fronted a glossy shaven head lightly tattooed with swirling blue patterns. His hands reminded Nyissa of a bundle of sticks. He wore a musty old robe of heavy, embroidered fabric and red felt slippers. When he grinned at Nyissa she saw that his teeth were filed to sharp points.

“Ah, pretty miss, welcome to my store! What is it I can do for you this fine, hot day?” His dark eyes roved up and down her – not ogling her figure she realised, but appraising her gear.

“I’m looking for some glassware.” He looked curiously at her.

“I don’t get much glassware in. Stoneware, yes, but not often glassware. My customers don’t often have the money for pretty things.”

“But sometimes you get some? How about a blue glass bowl, about as wide as my palm, with a Phoenix engraved on the side and picked out in gold leaf?” His smile faded slightly, and he edged away from her a little.

“Ah, miss. Was that yours? I thought it was a fine thing for that ruffian Belol to have. He swore it had been left him by his grandmother. Said he needed some ready cash. I paid him 12 silvers for it.” Nyissa raised her hand and smiled.

“Not to worry, it wasn’t mine. But I’d like to meet up with this Belol person sometime. So, who did you sell it too?” He looked a little wary, but seemed to be willing enough to talk. Perhaps he didn’t get many visitors.

“Ah, I sold it to Toberan, the caravan master. He and I used to travel together, you know? Always pops in when he’s in town.”

“And Toberan was heading... where next?”

“I think he was heading back to the coast. Didn’t really say – usually he stops off at Hickoryhead and Pelembic before resting up at Stow Heights. Why? Has he done something?” Nyissa shook her head.

“No, he’s done nothing wrong. The glassware was sold in Hickoryhead, to a friend of mine who’s very interested in buying some more.” She saw his eyes light up.

“Ah! You are a buyer for a collector! I see it all now! There was I, worrying that there was trouble coming!” His smile faded a little. “But, as I said, sadly, I have no more of the glassware. Belol might have more. But personally, I think not. I don’t think it was left to him by his grandmother, you know?” He regarded her from under dark brows and shook his head sadly.

“Well, I’ll be happy to pay you for your help. Have you any idea where I can find this Belol character? It would be worth asking him, just in case.” He nodded.

“You can probably find him at the Boar’s Eye, in the dark quarter. Not a nice place for a pretty lady. If you go there, I hope you can use that sword.” Nyissa smiled. She fished out a gold piece and watched his eyes light up.

“I can, thank you. Thank you again for your help – if you see any more of the glassware, could I ask you to let me know? I’m staying at the Silk ‘n’ Billows.” He nodded eagerly, taking the gold and immediately biting it to check it was real gold. Nyissa made to turn and go, then paused and casually turned back.

“Oh, while I’m here – you don’t happen to have any scrolls, old books, that kind of thing, do you? I have another friend who likes that kind of thing.” He looked blank for a moment, then smiled his sharks grin and nodded.

“Oh, I do, yes indeed! Got a heap of the stuff! Not many of my customers can read, so I don’t sell it. Just use it to wrap up things that might break...” he showed Nyissa through a curtain at the back of the shop and lifted an armful of old rugs off a crate.

The crate was half full of old parchment and books. Nyissa rummaged happily for a few minutes and came up with an old tome with a wooden cover. A few pages were missing, but the rest contained faded sepia writing. Nyissa scanned through the first of Robotent’s sonnets to Varirenda.

Putting the book aside, she located several other interesting looking items, before she came up for air. The little man smiled eagerly at her. She smiled back.

“Let’s haggle, my friend.”

It was a very happy Nyissa who returned to the Silk 'n' Billows with an armful of books and manuscripts. Lishi listened blankly as she enthused over her purchase. Even reading her one of Robatent's sonnets did little to catch her interest. When Nyissa explained that Robatent had been a talented poet of modest family who'd fallen for a nobleman's wife and composed 12 sonnets to her, she shrugged and said "Well, he was silly then, wasn't he? He should have found a different girlfriend." Nyissa held off telling her the story of how Robatent's work had come to the notice of the nobleman, who had tracked him down and nailed the poets hands to his writing desk. She'd probably say it was his own fault.

Still, Nyissa thought as she carefully wrapped her treasures in cloth and stowed them in her pack, that was her mission completed successfully. Time for a little celebration. She sent Lishi off with a handful of coin to order the finest meal and wines the Silk 'n' Billows could provide, and sunk into another hot bath. She decided that whatever Karamtis was up to was none of her business. She would have her hands full getting back to Hickoryhead intact.

Seven

Nyissa became aware that they were being watched.

It was dark outside, but Lishi had left some candles burning as they made love. The girl moaned softly under her, her hands clutching at Nyissa's breasts, but she distinctly heard the scrape of cloth on stone and a soft intake of breath from the window. She casually tossed her head to get her hair out of the way, and glanced that way as she did so.

Unfortunately, the candles were ruining her night vision, and she couldn't see anything outside. She got the definite impression something was there though. She kept moving casually against Lishi, thinking hard. This was absolutely not a good thing. Lishi had her legs wrapped around her hips. It'd take several seconds to untangle herself from the girl.

She just had to hope that the watcher wasn't about to shoot her with a crossbow or something. Or that he or she was enjoying the show and was willing to watch to the end. She gently increased the pressure against Lishi and upped the tempo, hearing the girl gasp and her breathing grow more ragged. Her hands squeezed Nyissa's breasts firmly and her thighs tightened as Nyissa rode her. Nyissa sneaked a finger down to stroke the tight little hole between her buttocks to add a little emphasis and Lishi immediately started gasping. Within seconds her moans turned into a long wail of release and she bucked against Nyissa, her head thrashing from side to side. Nyissa kissed her softly, her ears alert for noises from outside.

She rolled off the girl and casually stretched. Her weapons belt was close to the bed. She could almost reach it...

There was a scrape of cloth and a figure scrambled through the window. Instantly, Nyissa rolled off the bed and swept up her swordbelt, stepping back towards the doorway as she drew both blades. The robed figure hesitated, then came on, a short wide blade glinting darkly. Over his shoulder Nyissa heard Nishi squeal and saw her clutch covers up to her neck.

The attacker stamped in, slashing at Nyissa's unprotected stomach with his blade, then cutting back up with a shot that whistled up between her breasts harmlessly. She danced backwards into the other room, letting his attacks glance off her blade, waiting for an opening. Behind him, another figure, then a third, entered through the window. Lishi shrieked again, but fortunately the attackers ignored her and followed their comrade out into the other room.

Nyissa decided she couldn't afford to wait. She deflected a cut with her dagger and counterattacked, pressing her opponent back and a little to the side. He stepped back as he parried, then staggered as his foot slipped on the tiled edge of the sunken bath. His blade came up as he tried to regain his balance and she slashed across his exposed belly. He gasped and toppled back, intestines spilling. One of the other two lunged at her, extending his blade too much. She beat his sword down and cut upwards, slashing his face in two. He dropped his weapon and let out a gurgling scream, his hands going to his ruined face. She caught a glimpse of a dragon tattooed onto his forearm as he fell back onto the floor.

The final attacker seemed to decide that he was outmatched. He sprinted for the door and wrenched it open. Nyissa threw her dagger at him, but she wasn't so good left handed, and it went astray. She leapt across the bath and chased after him as he ran out of the room.

She was just in time to see her target plough straight into the inn keeper. The fat man was wearing a long robe and carrying an oil lantern, and was probably investigating the noise. The two men went tumbling down the stairs together, the lantern flying. Nyissa grimaced and rushed to the top of the stairs as the screaming started.

The men crashed to the bottom of the stairs in flames, oil spraying from the spinning lantern splattering the stairway. It immediately caught light with a soft "whumpf". Nyissa groaned and stepped back a little as the heat hit her. She saw the larger man rise to his feet and stagger off towards the front door his back ablaze, while the fat inn keeper rolled around, beating at his burning nightshirt. Nyissa judged the danger quickly. She could try and get down there now and help the inn keeper while the fire was still small, or she could go back for Nishi and her gear and get her out before the fire spread. It was no contest really.

Nyissa raced back into her rooms, scooping up her fallen dagger on the way. The first attacker lay curled in the bath, moaning as he tried in vain to push his insides back in. The other lay unmoving by the fireplace, his hands, arms and chest soaked in blood and his face a ruin. She leapt the bath and hurried into the bedroom.

Lishi screamed again, then came to Nyissa sobbing. Nyissa hugged her briefly before pushing her away.

“Get your stuff – we have to leave now! There’s a fire...” The girl nodded, wide eyed and trembling. There was blood on her from when she’d pressed herself against Nyissa, but she didn’t seem to notice as she dragged on her shift and scooped up the rest of her clothes.

Nyissa tugged on her leather pants and shrugged on the silk padding. The screaming from down the hall had died off, to be replaced by shouting. The other guests were awake. She stuffed her feet into her boots, scooped her chain shirt up and dumped it into her pack, and belted her swordbelt on over the tunic, noticing smoke starting to drift in. Lishi rushed out with her slippers in hand, screamed at the discovery of the bodies and hurtled back in as Nyissa retrieved the little box of valuables she’d hidden under the mattress and added it to the bulging pack.

“This way!” she called, shouldering her pack with difficulty. She leaned out of the window. The courtyard would be easiest, but there were flames lighting it from the downstairs entrance already. They’d be trapped there. They needed to get onto the roof and across to another building.

A knotted rope hung down by the window, their attackers way in and a convenient escape route. Nyissa grabbed hold and pulled on it. It was firmly fixed. She stepped up onto the windowsill and started to climb.

Lishi called to her frantically as she reached the roof. Slinging her pack onto the tiles, Nyissa let herself back down to the window. It turned out that Lishi didn’t know how to climb, so Nyissa tied the rope around her and clambered back up to the roof. The rope was tied around the chimney. She gripped it and braced herself. Taking a breath, she began chanting a spell, her high voice growing deeper as it took effect. A hot rush of mana flowed through her, and she felt her muscles tighten and expand. The leather of her trousers creaked alarmingly and her tunic got tight. She felt powerful. Wrapping the rope around her wrists, she began to pull.

A shriek from below and the swing of the rope told her that Lishi had been pulled clear of the window. She hauled on it again, watching dust puff from the rope as it was dragged across the stonework. Smoke rose from the courtyard and Lishi’s screams were replaced by coughing. Nyissa pulled faster and the girl suddenly appeared at the edge of the roof. Nyissa reached down and grabbed her arm, hauling her bodily onto the tiles.

Supporting the girl she scooped up her pack, slinging it across her shoulder easily. The spell would last for a minute or so more at most. She’d be sore in every muscle for days afterwards, but hopefully it would get them out alive. She dragged Lishi up the gently sloped roof and over to the front of the building, dragging the rope with her.

People were streaming out into the town square and a bucket chain was already forming as people readied to fight the fire. Nyissa dropped the rope over the edge, slung Lishi over her shoulder and let herself down, climbing hand over hand effortlessly. Half way down she felt the spell start to fade and her muscles began to cramp and shrink, and she just made it to the ground before collapsing into the arms of several shouting rescuers.

The girls were helped away from the building and given water. Lishi sobbed and clung tightly to Nyissa as they watched the inn burn. The townsfolk were getting it under control, but there wouldn't be much left. Nyissa looked around. A familiar looking body lay ignored in the road, still smouldering. She walked over to look.

It was the last attacker. It looked like he'd made it out of the building, but that they hadn't managed to douse his clothes before he'd died. She looked him over, ignoring the smell of burnt hair and flesh. Something on his forearm caught her eye and she poured a little water onto the skin to wash it clean.

It was the tattoo of a dragon. Nyissa drew her dagger and went quickly to work.

Eight

Now, this was just too much coincidence. She took Lishi to another inn and left her there with orders to wait. She sorted out her gear, got the chainmail shirt on, tied her hair up and headed back to the dark quarter. So far she'd seen that dragon on two assassins as well as on Karamtis. Losari be damned, she was going to demand some answers from the man.

Nyissa stomped into the Boar's Eye in a foul mood. It was late, but there were still customers in the place, who jumped up as she crashed through the entrance. She strode to the stairs, ignoring the shouts from the barkeep. The other customers kept out of her way.

Karamtis wasn't in his shack though. Neither was much else. It looked like he'd been cleaned out. Nyissa strode back to the stairs and came face to face with the barkeep, who came up short when she drew her sword. He swallowed and raised both hands.

"I tried to tell you he wasn't there! Someone already did him. They found him in an alley this morning, gutted like a fish." Nyissa brought the sabre up and pressed the point to the soft jowls under his chin. He went wide eyed.

"Who did it?" He swallowed carefully, and whispered in his high voice.

"N-no-nobody knows!" Nyissa pulled a package made from a piece of bloody cloth from her belt and threw it to him.

"Then tell me what this means." He unwrapped it, stared dumbly for a second before dropping the piece of skin with a yelp. The dragon was clearly tattooed on the scrap. He began to back away, but Nyissa closed on him and held him at sword point by the edge of the roof. He trembled, the front of his trousers growing dark as he lost control of his bladder.

"Tell me!" she demanded. He whimpered.

"It's Caralt's band. It's their mark!"

"Who is Caralt, and where can I find him?"

"I don't know where to find him! He has a place up in the hills somewhere. He and his men come in for supplies sometimes. I don't know if he's in town! I don't know anything about it!"

"Karamtis was with him?" He nodded carefully, eyeing the blade.

"Yeah, he was. Caralt hired him to read some stuff for him, then came back later with things to show him. It was junk, but Karamtis got all excited about it."

"Right. And who is Belol?"

"He's one of Caralt's men. Comes here a lot."

"I want him. Right now. Take me to him." The barkeep dropped to his knees, begging.

"Leave me out of it! I don't want nuffink to do with all this! I don't want Caralt mad at me!" Nyissa lay the edge of her blade against the side of his neck and let it nick the skin.

"I'd worry more about me if I were you. Get up and take me to Belol, right now, or you won't live long enough for Caralt to get to you."

The sobbing innkeep took her back downstairs to the bar, which had become curiously empty. They left and headed down the road, the point of her sword firmly against his kidney all the way. After a few dozen yards they turned into an alleyway, and the innkeep indicated some rickety wooden stairs up the side of the building.

"He has a room up there." Nyissa nodded and looked him over.

She left him in the alleyway, his trousers torn into strips and used to bind his hands and feet, and stuffed into his mouth like a gag. She wondered if the experience would prompt him to wash his clothes more often. Patting him on his bare behind with the flat of her sword, Nyissa started up the stairs.

There was no way to stop the old stairs from creaking, but she went up as silently as she could. At the top was a rough wooden door with a crude lock. Noises came from behind it. She tried the door and found it wasn't locked.

The room was dirty and contained only a few pieces of rough furniture. Over by the opposite wall the middle aged dancer from the inn was on her face on the bed with her fat behind in the air. A muscular man was kneeling behind her, thrusting himself into her hard enough to make her flabby buttocks wobble. Nyissa noticed several tattoos, including one of a dragon on his forearm. He glanced around as he saw the door open and froze.

Nyissa stepped into the room and pressed the point of her sword to his neck. He sank back on his heels, his member leaving the woman with a wet sucking noise. She looked back over her shoulder and her eyes widened as she saw Nyissa. Nyissa put her finger to her mouth and said "Shush." The woman sank to one side and pressed herself into the corner of the bed. Nyissa turned back to the man, whose manhood was drooping fast.

"Belol, I guess."

"Who wants to know?"

"I ask the questions. Who killed Karamtis?" He shook his head stubbornly.

Nyissa slashed down with her sword and nicked the end of his penis. He yelped and clutched at it, his eyes wide as she brought the sword back up to his throat. The woman shrieked and huddled into the corner at the other end of the bed.

"Answer me or I'll carve off your balls and feed them to you." He looked shaken, glancing down at his hands. Blood was trickling from between his fingers. He shuddered and she lifted his chin with the blade, locking eyes with him.

"Answer me, or I'll start carving. Who killed Karamtis?"

"I don't know! It was probably Lani or Juno. Caralt's orders. He'd been giving Caralt a hard time about him letting us sell off some of the junk, and Caralt chucked him out. Told us the old man wasn't useful any more." Nyissa leaned in closer and whispered dangerously.

"What. Was. He. Doing. For. Caralt?" Belol shrank back.

"He helped Caralt track down this old ruined place. Read some old papers Caralt got hold of. Caralt took us there, we took some old junk out, but Caralt thinks there's more valuable stuff around there. The old man wanted us to hang onto the junk – said he'd take it as his share, so we thought it was worth something. I sold some, but I only got some silver for it." Nyissa sighed and shook her head. She stepped back from the bed.

“Get your pants on.” He scrambled to comply. Nyissa scooped up his tunic and threw it at him, then marched him out the room at sword point, scooping up the key from the crate that served as a bedside table. Out on the stairs she locked the woman in and poked Belol down the stairs with her sword, swapping it to her left hand and drawing her dagger with her right. They were most of the way down when he made his move, suddenly jumping off the stairs. He landed with a grunt and pelted for the end of the alleyway.

Nyissa brought him down with the dagger, putting it solidly through his knee from the back. He screamed and fell face down on the floor, clutching at his crippled limb. Nyissa walked over to him and wrenched the blade out, making him scream some more. She held the dripping blade where he could see it and whispered softly to him.

“You’re going to tell me where Caralt’s ruin is. Aren’t you?”

Nine

Lishi turned out to not be a very good rider either.

Nyissa had bought some ponies, saddles and tack, plus enough rations and water to last several days. The ruin was supposed to be hidden in the hills, a couple of days to the north. Belol had been good enough to draw her a map, but she’d bought him along with her just in case. He sat miserably on his pony, his knee swathed in bloody bandages. Lishi had kept well away from him during the trip. She wasn’t very keen on coming, but as Nyissa had suspected, the inn had been her only home. She’d agreed to follow along and hold the horses.

The terrain got rocky as they headed further north. Great outcrops of sun baked rock made a maze of twisting passages drenched in shadow. It would have been depressingly easy to get lost without a guide. Nyissa periodically looked back over her shoulder to check how it would look on the way back and committed the route to memory, just in case.

There were signs that they were on the right track. The occasional hoof print, some dried pony dung and a dead campfire showed that someone had passed this way very recently. Nyissa let Belol lead, taking the tail end herself and keeping alert for ambush. Before they’d left town she’d bought a crossbow, and had made a point of showing Belol how fast she could load and fire. When she’d put a bolt through an Orange at 30 yards with it he’d got the message.

She’d outfitted Lishi with some decent travel gear, and equipped her with a long knife. The girl was being surprisingly mature about it all. Nyissa had expected whining and sobbing, but she was being quite practical. She even suggested, quietly so Belol wouldn’t hear, that they should sleep apart and at different times so one of them could always keep an eye on him. Nyissa trusted her knot work more than Lishi’s ability to stay awake on watch, but agreed, though she didn’t actually sleep herself that night, just in case.

Towards the end of the second day, Belol led them up a steep, crumbling slope. They had to lead the ponies, and Belol struggled badly, his injured leg failing several times. But they made it up the slope without serious incident and he sat on a rock near the top clutching his wound until she caught up with him.

“It’s on the other side of this.” He gasped, nodding over at the crest of the slope. Nyissa left her pony with a panting Lishi, took her crossbow and clambered up to look.

The rocks fell away to a narrow canyon, nicely hidden amongst the hills. There was a glint of water, and some of the darkness seemed to be vegetation instead of shadow. Near the water she could see some buildings. A shriek from down slope made her spin around.

Belol had Lishi’s knife and the girl was tumbling down the slope. He swung himself clumsily up onto a pony and kicked at it, dragging the others by their reins. Nyissa snatched up the crossbow and cocked it as he rode off along the slope, kicking hard at the pony and cursing.

The ponies kicked up a lot of dust, and he was a good sixty yards away before she got it loaded, but that was still fine. The powerful bow sent its bolt straight through his back and out through the front of his chest. Belol slumped sideways off the pony and rolled limply down the slope.

Nyissa scrambled down to Lishi. She was conscious, and apart from bruises and scrapes, intact. She left her in the shade of some rocks and gathered up the ponies, then returned to clean and dress the scrapes. They settled down to await nightfall.

Ten

They found a way down to the valley floor by moonlight, and Nyissa left Lishi with the ponies amongst some parched old Banyan trees.

The trees were clustered around and down from a muddy water hole. It looked like a river had once cut this canyon out of the rock before disappearing underground, but there was no water flowing now. Steps had been carved into the valley wall, but they were now weathered and useless, doubly so since a rock fall had made the slope the girls had followed down.

The complex of buildings stood out brightly in the moonlight. There was a pair of great arched doors and elaborately carved columns along the front, and the structures had once been faced with fine white stonework, only some of which they still kept. The roofs and most of the upper floors were gone, leaving rubble choking what had once been paths and walkways. The doorway seemed to open into a courtyard in the centre of the buildings. Nyissa could see ponies in there.

She could also see a guard from her position in the bushes. He wasn't very alert and she was able to sneak up on him and choke him into unconsciousness easily before disappearing into the shadows of the courtyard.

Nine ponies and a pair of Esroli cavalry horses were tied up there, along with four mules. The Esroli shifted uncomfortably as they caught her scent, and the ponies tossed their heads nervously. Flickering light and the sound of revelry came from the shattered windows at the far end of the compound. Nyissa walked up to the animals, hands at her side, radiating harmlessness. She whispered to the two big horses and breathed gently on their muzzles to calm them. She looked around, still stroking soft noses. Saddles and tack were stacked by the wall. She went to investigate, found the big horses gear, and lugged it back to the animals.

After saddling the horses, Nyissa slipped closer to the building and rose up slowly by a large glassless window to look inside.

A campfire burned brightly on dusty flagstones of what had been a grand Marrori hall. Sleeping rolls were scattered about haphazardly. Men lounged about, passing a wineskin around and shouting curses at each other in a friendly manner. The remains of a great staircase leading to upper floors that had long collapsed had feed the fire. With it had gone the faded remains of ancient tapestries, once fallen to ruin, now forever beyond recovery. Nyissa groaned at the loss.

She took a second look. Around the hall were crates that the men had been filling with loot from the ruin. She wished them luck of it. From what she'd seen so far, she doubted there was much left of great worth to anyone but a scholar.

She was able to work out which one was Caralt after a few minutes of observation. A big hairy bear of a man with a double bitted axe at his belt, his men showed deference to him whenever he spoke. His voice was a deep, throaty rumble and he had a laugh like a bull rhino.

Tattoo face was also there, sitting at the bandit chiefs side. Somehow, Nyissa wasn't surprised. She checked around and sure enough, a couple of the other bandits looked familiar too. One was sporting a broken nose and a pair of impressively black eyes. The other still seemed to be having trouble crossing his legs.

She stepped back from the window and mounted one of the Esroli. She could see directly through the glassless window into the hall. Softly, she began chanting a spell.

Inside the hall, one of the bandits spluttered out a mouthful of wine and scrambled back in shock. Caralt jumped to his feet as a ghostly figure slowly formed in the centre of the hall. He snatched his axe from his belt and squinted at the figure.

It seemed to be... a woman. A pretty woman, with long hair in a high pony tail. She raised her hand and waved her finger slowly at him, making soundless tut-tut ting noises. At his side, tattoo face stammered:

"It's her – that Losari woman! It's her ghost!" he took a step back in fear, making warding signs with his fingers. The rest of the men surged to their feet with shouts of fear. Only Caralt seemed to keep his head.

"Settle down, you weaklings! The dead don't scare me! She can't do no harm to us or she would have already!" The ghostly apparition dropped her hands to her hips and her pose seemed to say "Oh, really?".

Nyissa jumped the Esroli through the window and into the midst of them. One bandit went down under it's hooves – Esroli cavalry were one of the few horse breeds who would willingly step on a fallen man. Nyissa nearly decapitated another with a stroke of her sword and charged Caralt and Tattoo face.

The Esroli barrelled into Tattoo face and sent him sprawling. Caralt deflected Nyissa's slash with the flat of his axe and swept the weapon back, the blade glancing off her chainmail. The Esroli carried her past and she shifted her weight and pressed with her knee to make it turn. She heard a crunch as the horses hooves came down. Tattoo face abruptly stopped screaming.

The rest of the bandits were scattering, panicked by the illusion and her shocking entrance. They rushed back into the courtyard blindly, past the figure of a young girl holding a crossbow. Lishi appeared to be bad at taking orders too.

Caralt hefted his axe and bellowed at Nyissa like a bull, spooking the Esroli. Nyissa jumped clear as it reared and rolled to a stop by what was left of the staircase, slightly stunned.

"Hah! Thought to take my own horse did you? No one steals from Caralt!" He raised his axe and started to run forward. Nyissa raised her sabre and braced herself to dodge.

Suddenly Caralt's charge slowed. He staggered to a stop, a puzzled look on his face. He lowered his axe and looked down at the bloody point jutting from his chest, then back at Nyissa in disbelief. Then he dropped the axe to the floor before toppling face first into the tiles with a crash like a felled tree.

Nyissa looked over at the doorway, where Lishi stood clutching the crossbow, and saluted her with her sabre. Wonders would never cease.

Epilogue

Lishi got considerably better at riding on the way back to Hickoryhead. Having one of the beautiful Esroli for her very own seemed to motivate her. The ponies wouldn't fetch much, but Nyissa felt the four mule loads of Marrori relics would be quite valuable enough to the temple for them to provide board and a job for the girl. Plus, she had the poems, which seemed to be three complete sonnets that weren't currently in the libraries. Krudmoc would be ecstatic.

For herself, Nyissa was eager to make her goodbyes and get back to Hawkgard. Lishi's charms notwithstanding, there was a pretty blond bard she intended to look up just as soon as possible.

Variety was, after all, the spice of life.