

The Threadbinders

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Chapter One

The griffon flew low over the snowy fields, the land splayed out beneath them covered in powder white like a coat of paint atop the trees that had months ago been stripped of their leaves for the winter. In just a few short months, the snow would pass and the flora would explode into blooms of color and life, but now, still in the mid of winter, the ice still clung to every available surface, the two suns giving spots of glare to both the left and the right of the magnificent flying creature.

Her name was Quiesh, and she was their friend.

Quiesh loved to skim down close to the surface, taking in the landscape as much as she could while her two passengers, partners really, sat atop of her, continuing their long voyage with no set destination, in search of work, which would bring them food, shelter and money to keep themselves going, and as such, Quiesh had been trained to spot one of two flags at a good distance. As much as she preferred flying low, she regularly took high swoops up into the air, to take in the lay of the land and scout for either of the two flags that would allow her partners to ply their trade.

To the right, a small forest splayed down up and over a hill, the ideal spot to find a village, and as the griffon lifted skyward, getting sufficient altitude to give the area a once over, she spotted a small town nestled in a grove that still clung to some foliage, some of that green still seeding the visual palate of the landscape.

That meant elves.

It wasn't a large village by any stretch of the imagination, only two dozen or so structures, but with the way elves built their homes, that could mean maybe fifty families living there, so they would be able to afford the services of her partners.

In the center of the village, as was true for every village and town Quiesh had ever seen, was a single flagpole that stretched higher than the top of any building, taller in fact than any tree around it. The signal flagpole tradition was one that spanned further back in time than written history, and every gathering of people had one, the height of it important so that mages could spot it at a great distance, even when impeded.

Most mages weren't dignified with a partner quite so elegant as Quiesh, and many of them had to travel the surface in carts drawn by lesser beasts of burden. Because of Quiesh's vantage, her partners were adept at finding the villages and townships that were lesser traveled and often more in need of their services.

The two atop her back hadn't always traveled by griffon, but since Quiesh had come into their lives, they had been more satisfied with their lives, seeing far more of the world than they had before. The two had always wanted to travel further, and with Quiesh, they were visiting lands neither had seen before, taking in as much of the world as they could, from the deserts to the forests, from the islands to the plains. Quiesh had been one of the best things to happen to their lives.

The griffon noted that the flagpole in the center of the village had one of the two flags she had been trained to stay on watch for, and saw it was the large blue flag with two red semi-circle lines not quite joined in the center of it.

The flag requesting the presence of a Threadbinder.

Quiesh moved to descend closer to the village, scouting the area carefully as she could see elves looking upwards at her, pointing and shouting, no doubt reveling in her majesty, as she finally decided on a proper landing place and glided downwards, giving a little shake to rouse her partners from their slumber, it still being mid morning, Quiesh having flown through much of the night.

The woman, Yasha, was the first to awaken, her silvery eyes fluttering open to look down beneath her, her fine elvish features hued in rose from the cool air. "Oh look, Arkady, it's your turn,"

she said to her husband, shaking the dwarf from his slumber.

“Hm?” the squat man said as he felt his wife tugging lightly on his beard. His eyes opened, the color of freshly mined ruby, as he looked down from their saddle where they were strapped in. “Mmm. Elves. I imagine that means you'll do the collecting, but I suppose we will see.” His thick hand patted Quiesh's mane affectionately. “Excellent spot, friend. You'll eat well tonight, I am certain of that.”

Quiesh cut through the air, swooping in a downward arc that curved up at the end before giving a single flap of her majestic wings to stop her forward motion, then floated down into an open portion of the village, one she would have no trouble taking off from after her partners had concluded their business.

Arkady unstrapped himself from the saddle and slid off, hopping down onto the ground once more, his leather boots happy to be back on the surface again. As much as he loved Quiesh and the ease of travel her partnership provided, a dwarf never liked to be too far from the stone.

In comparison to his slender elven wife, he was a short man, although no shorter than any other typical dwarf, strong and squat, with a proud red beard that he kept braided in a single knotted cord that ran down the center of his chest. Like most Threadbinders, he wore shades of dark blue, the familiar two red unjoined semi-circles embroidered in the fabric or painted on what sparse bits of armor he did wear, mostly on his shoulders and torso. He wore a heavy blue cap over the top of his head, the center quite bald, but the red hairs that formed a ring around that center barren patch peeked out from beneath the hat. He didn't look old, but then again, no binder worth their weight in spit did.

Behind him, his wife slid down from Quiesh's saddle, her appearance much more akin to those around them. She was a high elf, lithe and majestic, but extremely fit for her kind, her willowy limbs bearing strong muscle, her bosom perhaps a bit larger than average for her species. If her husband had a certain air of world-weariness to him, Yasha was sprightly and energetic. He moved with the deliberate resolve of the stone; she moved like water passing over that stone. Her hair was like spun gold, partially braided in a ring that formed a crown atop her head, the rest drawn back into a bound tail along the back.

The two provided quite the contrast to one another. His skin was leathery and heavily tanned by the sun, whereas hers still remained supple and light, almost the shade of milk, as if the sun simply rolled off of her and refused to color her even a smidgen. Both looked like they could easily win fights, but in very different methods. She looked as though she might wear her opponent down with lunges and parries before ending the combat with a single, well-placed deadly strike. He looked as though that great axe of his would split an opponent right in half on the first blow.

In contrast to her husband's blue attire, Yasha wore mostly red clothes, with a different blue symbol, that of four lines moving towards forming an X but unjoined in the center, reflecting the difference in her profession to her husbands. Mages often traveled in pairs or small groups, so that they could all benefit from one of their kind's services being in demand, but they were not often wed, as Arkady and Yasha were, something the dwarf had never been able to fully reconcile in his head, but as it turned out, many mages were far too timid to turn their abilities inward.

Once both were off Quiesh's back, Yasha moved up to stroke the griffon's neck a bit, scratching the muscles through the thick coat, taking a moment to pry some burrs loose from the fur, much to the creature's enjoyment, as a small number of elves became to approach them.

The leader of the village approached first, a large ceremonial staff in hand, a woman who had to be a few centuries past the lifespan of any human, but still only appeared as aged as a human woman in her forties. She had sharp, angular features, a sort of deadly pointed beauty to her, like that of well-crafted kris knife, with eyes the shade of ancient pine needles that looked at Arkady with trepidation.

“You are a Threadbinder?” the leader scoffed at him.

“Arkady Gormansson,” he said to her, accustomed to being looked down upon by elves, both figuratively and literally. “Eighth rank Threadbinder, so you know my skills are unquestionable. This is my wife and partner, Yasha Summervale, Threatbinder, twelfth rank.”

The village leader began to immediately bow. “My lady, I—”

“If that bow dips one inch further,” Yasha cautioned, “I will demand my husband double his fees.” The woman stopped bowing suddenly, hearing the tone in Yasha's voice that made it clear this was no idle threat.

“Apologies my lady,” the elder said, standing upright once more. “Your family name speaks volumes, even to us so far removed from elvish high society.” Arkady had grown accustomed to this over the years, and had accepted it part and parcel when he and Yasha had been wed, but he still found it all just a little silly. While dwarves also had their royalty, the bowing and toadying the elves gave theirs would've gotten any dwarf a punch up the bracket. “Also, I was not aware that binders could excel beyond a tenth rank.”

“Threadbinders have nine ranks, Threatbinders have thirteen,” she said, no opinion in her voice, simply relaying the facts to the villagers. “And the only name I choose to trade on in my own. You fly the Threadbinder flag, so someone here is in need of my husband's services.”

“Yes, I, ah...” the woman said, looking down at Arkady before looking back to Yasha once more. Arkady wasn't certain which had put the woman off more – the fact that he was a dwarf, or the fact that Yasha had identified him as her husband. “Forgive us, we are not used to having a dwarf among us. We do not mean to judge, fine Threadbinder, but your kind does not often venture into these woods, so far from any mountain.”

Arkady raised a thick hand in understanding, not wanting to put these people off any further. “It is no bother. If you do not want my services and instead choose to wait for a Threadbinder of a different race, you are entitled to do so.” He started to turn back towards Quiesh, as if he was going to climb aboard the griffon once more, but he had done this dance in enough towns and villages that he knew what would come next, and this was merely a tactic to cut through the bargaining bullshit. They would hem and haw for what felt like eons if he didn't push them to act quickly.

“Wait!”

He felt the smile creep in beneath his beard before he spirited it away, turning back to look at the elder once more, as the circle of elves gathered around them had only grown in number. “Yes?”

“It has been two seasons since we put up that flag, good Threadbinder, and since then, none of your particular skillset have come this way,” she sighed. “I apologize if my words implied anything but the utmost respect for you and your abilities. Please, I beseech you, lend us your mighty skills and solve our conundrum for us.”

“Who is it who petitions me for aide?”

“I do,” a young woman said, stepping from the pack. Her hair was silver, much like the metal he'd grown up around, swept back behind her pointed ears, running down to her neckline. She was certainly beautiful, but had a definite hesitation to her stance, even as she moved more closely to the two mages. She was slender, like most elves, but had a certain athleticism to her. He suspected she was one of those who went and hunted for wild game. “I am Zestry Honeydew, daughter of Elyria Honeydew, and I seek your aide, good Threadbinder, for this village holds no mate for me.”

“And you agree to pay your fair share of the costs?” he said, looking up at her. “There is no shame in changing your mind, girl, now that you know whom you will pay your tax to. I will bear you no ill will nor—”

“I know the cost, good sir dwarf,” Zestry said, “and I will pay it gladly. I would pay it gladly thricefold, if needed, simply to find that which the Threadbinders promise, which is to say an end to this solitude. I resolved to not go unbound any longer than I needed to when I told my mother to run that flag up in the spring after I came of age. It has been a long wait for one of your kind to pass our way. Wherever my thread may be bound to, it is not here, nor anywhere close to here, and because of that, I turn to you, Master Threadbinder, to ease my loneliness.”

Arkady chuckled a little, nodding some, as he turned his attention back to the village elder. “And the village is prepared to pay its share of the costs?”

“A week's worth of food and rations, a night's worth of housing, for all members of your party, as in accordance with the binder tradition. Would thirty golden aryou be enough to pay the difference? It's most of the money we have here in the village, but if it helps our beloved Zestry—”

“Fifteen aryou would be more than sufficient,” Yasha told them, “as long as the food and rations include something large and meaty for our friend Quiesh to eat.” She patted the griffon's haunches, and the village elder smiled a little.

“That is most kind and generous of you, m'lady. I will dispatch my hunters to bring the mightiest stag they can find for the griffon to feast upon this evening, as Zestry prepares for her departure on the morrow,” the elder said as the young girl moved to stand along side of her. “She has been looking forward to this for some time, but farewells still need to be made and affairs put in order.”

Arkady was amused by how his wife had chosen to set the price so low, but he understood her reasoning, being as this village did not seem to have the wealth to spare, and even the meager fifteen aryou was quite a sizable investment.

“Fine,” the dwarf said, adjusting his beard slightly. “Take us to where we shall lodge for the night, escort Quiesh to where she may lay down, and we will await your arrival later this evening, Zestry.”

“Thank you again, sir Threadbinder.”

He grabbed his satchel from the saddle, as his wife grabbed her own. Then they allowed the elves to lead the griffon over towards a barn, some place where the large winged creature could enjoy a night inside of warmth.

While normally they preferred to remain mobile and in motion, it was still important to take time to recharge and recuperate. A day's worth of relaxation would give them a chance to prepare, as Arkady suspected it would be a long voyage with the girl in tow, otherwise some local shaman might have been able to do a basic divining.

For much of the day, Yasha and Arkady chatted with the elves, giving them news from the frontiers, explaining what the two mages knew of in terms of development in extended politics, although Yasha did much of the talking, as she had always taken a much keener interest in such things than Arkady had. Elves did so love their politics, but dwarves often found the layers of social obfuscation annoying and unnecessary.

Most importantly, however, Yasha and Arkady both enjoyed a long hot bath, as the village had a hot springs they had covered, and the waters offered soothing release to the mages' well-traveled bones. Arkady felt like he did not want to leave the springs, and spent at least an hour or so simply soaking within the bath, as Yasha took the time to make sure all of his hair was cleaned.

Threadbinder life was never quite as glamorous as the mages had made it seem in Arkady's youth, but to constantly live a life in motion was a thing he would not trade for any price. In fact, Yasha had estimated that the three of them – herself, Arkady and Quiesh – had likely seen more of the planet than any other individuals upon it, a claim that Arkady could find no fault in, and had no reason to question.

It was the smell of the late lunch that finally coaxed the dwarf from the baths, as the elves had done their best to cook up some long forgotten dwarvish delicacy they had been taught long ago, the last time anyone in this region had seen a dwarf passing through. He suspected few of the elves in the village had ever seen his kind before, being as they were so far from any proper mountains. But whatever they had made, they had layered it in pepper, garlic, butter and spice, and it had a lovely aroma that stirred even the darkest heart into action.

Whomever they had learned it from, the elves had learned the way to a dwarf's stomach, and learned it well.

While they ate lunch, Arkady made it a point to dry his beard and to not get any food in it. His wife had referred to his beard as a soup catcher more than once, and Arkady, like any proper dwarf, had taken umbrage to it, his beard a proud reminder of his heritage. Once, when her teasing had crossed

from amusement to annoyance, he had threatened to cut it off if it bothered her so much. Never before nor since had he seen his wife quite so quickly crestfallen and ashamed of herself, and she went to great lengths to apologize to him repeatedly over the next week.

Into the early evening, the pattern continued, with elves coming to ask questions about what transpired beyond their forest, but also to come and politely examine the dwarf, the most excitement this village would see for years.

By the time dinner had finished, both Yasha and Arkady found their bellies full and their appetites satiated, and not one elf had dared ask how Arkady and Yasha had come to be wed, much to the dwarf's amusement.

One of the buildings in the village had laid dormant, its owner having died a few years ago, and during the day while they ate, a number of the elves had converted it into a makeshift inn for the night, a place where Yasha and Arkady could lay their heads down for the night and be on their way in the morning to continue their work.

As they walked from the dining hall to the converted cottage, the elder finally dared to ask the two mages a little more about themselves, having steadfastly avoided the subject for the entire day thusfar. "Do you find your services are more or less in demand than your wife's, good Threadbinder?"

Arkady bristled a little, stroking his beard with one of his massive hands. "Slightly more, perhaps, but not excessively such. Her work certainly pays more than mine, but I find mine more rewarding in the end, as I feel the toll upon our souls is less great."

"Do you find executing your tasks difficult, my lady?"

Yasha smiled, that subtle almost imperceptible hint of melancholy that was gone as quickly as it had arrived. "Everyone is important to some one, elder, but to require the services of a Threadbinder, your foe must have truly transgressed in some heinous way. That helps console me a little. But not much, as you might imagine. Ending a life is something never done lightly."

The elder nodded, as they arrived at the cottage. "Has anyone ever come to regret enlisting your services, Master Dwarf?"

Arkady scratched at his leathery cheek, shaking his head. "I'm not sure why everyone seems to ask this, but once a Threadbinder's business is done, they tend not to remain in contact with their patrons. That said, in our journeys we have doubled back upon locations many a time, and I have seen some of those whom have paid for my aid once more, later in their lives, and never once has anyone expressed any regret to me."

"In fact, more than a few times, a couple whom my husband has paired have invited us to return to help their offspring with their threads," Yasha said proudly. "They have always said it was the best decision they have ever made."

The elvish chieftain nodded once more. "Then I will believe our Zestry is in good hands, and we will arise with the dawn to see her off with your departure. You have done us a great honor with your presence, and we will endeavor to tell stories of this day for decades to come."

Arkady raised one of his large hands in salute, as he and his wife entered into the cottage. "We shall see you on the morrow, elder," he said, closing the door behind them.

The lodging wasn't much – clearly whatever furniture had belonged to the previous owner had been reclaimed upon their passing, but still a single bed remained, as well as a chair. The elves had even gone out of their way to construct a small series of steps to allow Arkady to climb into the bed, as it was too high above the ground for him to do so otherwise.

"They seemed nice people," he said to his wife, sliding the cap off his head, the cottage having a roaring fire to keep the inside of it warm. It was no molten iron furnace, but it would do for an evening, and was better than having to build a fire themselves somewhere.

"Do you think the girl's going to change her mind?" Yasha asked, as her husband took a small vial of red pigment from his satchel, setting it on the steps, starting his preparations for the upcoming ritual to begin shortly.

He shook his head, a wry smile on his face. "I thought she might when she found out I was the *Threadbinder* and you were the *Threatbinder*, but when she spoke... Nay, that is the determination of a woman who has decided that she is unhappy with the lot her life has dealt her up to this moment, and will not be stopped in her efforts to change it."

"When you took your clothes off for the baths, I thought some of the locals were going to faint. I always forget that some of these more rural elves aren't used to the amount of natural hair you have beneath your clothes."

He shrugged a little. "I suspected they were just as transfixed by our scars, both yours and mine, my love, but let them look and let them talk. They will have their stories to tell long after we have taken our leave of this place."

From the door came a quiet rapping of knuckles. "Seems she has arrived," Yasha said. "I'll let her in." She moved over to the door and pulled it in, revealing the girl, Zestry, standing on the other side of it, her fingers knotted together, her face looking down at her hands. She wore a dress now, whereas in the morning she had been dressed in a tunic and trousers, leather boots disappearing up underneath the falling fabric at her calves. "Come in, come in, no need to be shy, girl. This is as natural as anything else in our worlds, but I think everyone is nervous."

Zestry looked up at her, as if in sudden revelation. "You found each other through threadbinding?" she asked, as Yasha ushered the girl in, closing the door behind her quickly so as to not let any of the comfortable heat escape the room. "A dwarf and an elf? Isn't that quite unusual?"

"Unusual, I suppose," Arkady said, grabbing the vial, as he strode over towards the girl. "But *quite* unusual? Not hardly. Threads are complicated business, and while many a soul chooses to go the natural path, bound threads have a power unto themselves that cannot be denied."

"Who was the seeker in your relationship?" Zestry asked, walking alongside the dwarf over towards the bed.

"It was me," Yasha said. "My Arkady was still in training to become a Threadbinder when I enlisted the aid of a different Threadbinder, Valyria, to help me find whom my thread was bound to."

"Did it... was there..." the girl said, struggling to find a way to ask her question so as to not offend the dwarf.

"Did it cause a ruckus?" he chuckled. "Oh aye. An elvish princess being bound to a dwarvish war veteran attempting to change his course in life after a great injury? Much commotion was made in my wife's family. Her brother, in fact, insisted the Threadbinder had to be wrong, that it was impossible for someone so highborn to be paired with someone so... earthy."

Yasha rolled her amber colored eyes in amusement. "My brother has earth for *brains*, by my reckoning," she grumbled. "No insult to earth intended. My mother, however, knew better than to dispute a Threadbinder's reading, and besides, my heart leaped from my chest the moment I saw my husband-to-be. It was exactly how the stories tell it, only greater still, and never once have I regretted the binding. I thanked Valyria with all my might, and have never forgotten the great gift she gave me."

"Wait, a *woman* was your Threadbinder?" the girl asked, looking up at Yasha with wide eyes filled with curiosity. "And the payment...?"

"Was paid as any Threadbinder is paid, yes."

"What do you do when a young man comes to you seeking your services, Master Dwarf?"

"He pays my wife and she operates as a sort of go-between," he said, catching her meaning. "Some Threadbinders, many Threadbinders actually, refuse contracts if the payment is unappealing to them, but since I hold no shame in my profession, my wife aides me in those I do not directly partake in. Why, would you rather we go that route? I know many elves consider themselves too good to sully with the presence of a dwarf in their bed."

"No!" the girl said suddenly, her hand curling around his shoulder, as if in terror that she might have offended him. "I meant no disrespect in any way, Master Dwarf, and will be more than happy to pay my portion to you." She laughed a little nervously. "I supposed I was more wondering how you

reacted when some strapping young lad approached you in need of your services. You strike me as the type that prefers the fairer sex. I offered no judgment on if you partook personally or if there was a go-between. I had heard tales that some Threadbinders enjoy both sexes while others only one, and neither is any better nor worse than the other.”

He nodded. “Male flesh holds no appeal to me, but when Yasha and I were wed, we agreed that because of our particular professions, neither of us would get jealous of the other, and that we would both share in the bindings, both threat and thread, and together we would remain.”

“Basically, dear girl, as part of his trade, he lays a lot of women, and it's only fair that he let me dally with a boy now and then who comes seeking his counsel. They never measure up to him anyway,” she said with a wise smile.

Zestry giggled a little bit, holding her slender fingers to her mouth. “Well then, sire, I hope *my* flesh holds some appeal to you, as I wouldn't want to simply be a burden upon your skills without offering payment worth their time.”

He smirked a little bit, reaching one of his fat fingers up to brush across her jawline. “You're a cheeky one, aren't you, girl? Aye, your face is pretty enough, with straight teeth and a symmetrical enough face. I don't anticipate having a poor evening.” His voice was like distant thunder, low and rumbling, and it seemed to send a shiver down the girl's spine. “You've been with a man before? Or will I be your first?”

“I've been with a couple of different elvish boys here in the village,” Zestry admitted shyly, “when I thought that mayhap I would have a partner within these familiar spaces, but I felt like a player in a very poorly written play, reading lines that had no poetry in them, no soul. And the stories of love brought together by the Threadbinders... that is what I want, very much. What I have always dreamed of. From the moment I saw the symbols upon your tunic, I have thought of nothing else.”

“*Nothing* else?” he asked with a hint of mirth.

“Well, I would be remiss if I didn't confess a fleeting moment of concern about the stories regarding dwarvish anatomy, but I did say I would not be dissuaded by any cost, so I reminded myself of that, and then thought of nothing else.”

He took the vial between his thumb and forefinger, pinching it to secure it as he began to shake it, the contents within liquifying once more and starting to blend together from their congealed state having been unused for several days. “And the price, *your* price, you understand what it is, and are prepared to pay it?” He glanced inside of the vial, inspecting the liquid within, spotting large granules still floating within, as he began to shake it more.

“One orgasm given, one orgasm taken, and two years of vitae surrendered.”

“You're easy enough on the eyes,” Arkady said with a slight grin, “that I'll even lower the price down to a single year of vitae.”

“I wouldn't want to underpay you for your services, good sir Threadbinder. If the standard rate is two years of vitae, I should pay the standard rate.”

He shrugged a little. “Business has been good in our travels as of late, and the amount of vitae is a discretionary decision made by each individual Threadbinder. One year will more than suffice.”

“For particularly unappealing clientele,” Yasha said, “I have seen him charge as much as five years of vitae, simply to make sure the patron truly wants the service. In those cases, the taking of the orgasm can often be the tricky part, and so my husband merely wants to ensure we're being fairly compensated for the work.”

“Does... have you ever found that anyone whom you've brought for binding has been upset that you've had carnal relations with their new partner before they have?”

“Only the once,” Arkady said with a dry chuckle. “And even then only momentarily, as those emotions were eclipsed as soon as the man laid eyes on the woman who had hired me to bind her thread. I take great pride in the fact that I have always followed a thread to both ends correctly.”

The girl moved to toss another couple of logs onto the fire, clearly wanting to bring the

temperature of the room to a comfortable roast. She then turned back to look at him, swallowing a little bit. “So, not to be indelicate, good sir Threadbinder—”

“No,” Yasha exhaled in mock exasperation, “it is *not* true that dwarves have barbed cocks, and whomever started such slander does not deserve any kindness in their lives.”

Zestry giggled a little, holding her hand to her mouth. “That wasn't what I was going to ask, m'lady! I was going to ask...” she trailed off, her face darkening with blood and blush.

“Speak plainly and quickly, girl, or we won't have you threadbound until well into morning, and none of us will get any sleep,” Arkady said, humor undercutting his tone.

“Are dwarvish cocks any smaller or bigger than elvish cocks, sire?”

“They're different,” Yasha said. “But on the average, I would say they are not generally as long as elvish cocks, but certainly far thicker on the average. And while this may simply be personal preference speaking, I specifically have found them generally more satisfying.”

“Well, he *is* your husband, m'lady,” Zestry said with a smile. “Shall I undress now?”

Arkady nodded, gesturing with one hand as his other gave the vial in his hand a few more shakes. “I would hope so, otherwise the markings will be rather difficult to apply.”

The elvish girl nodded, reaching down to draw her dress up and over her head, setting it aside, leaving her in her boots, her underpants and a brassiere that looked rather expensive for a girl in a small village. The dwarf pointed at it, admiring the craftsmanship. “That's unexpected. That looks like gnomish handiwork, if I'm not mistaken.”

Zestry blushed a little, as she was reaching down to loose her boots so she could pull them off one after another. “It is, Master Dwarf. It was a gift from my aunt when she came passing through in the spring. She was the one who encouraged me to consider searching for a Threadbinder to help me find my one true mate, as she had done long ago. That had taken her far from here, and I am uncertain if my mother has truly ever forgiven her sister for leaving. Now here I am, following in her footsteps,” she said, tugging off the second boot, setting it aside. “Will I be bound to someone very far from here, or will you only know that once you begin?”

He smiled a little bit, as he uncorked the vial. “I know nothing about your thread until the ritual has begun, dear girl, so your mate could be just on the other side of the hill, or across several oceans. No need for concern, however. We will convey you there, as per the contract.” He saw her about to sit on the bed and clicked his tongue to summon her attention once more. “Fully nude.”

“Might...” the girl started saying before stopping a moment. Then she started once more. “Might I simply keep the brassiere on, sir?”

“Not how it works,” Yasha said, moving across the room to place her hand on the younger elf's shoulder reassuringly. “He will need all your skin as canvas upon which to paint so the magics can take hold and the thread can be visible to his eyes. But he is the kindest soul I know, Zestry. You have no need to fear of his gaze.”

The girl nodded a moment, resigning herself to the final steps. As a dwarf, Arkady had always found the difference between lifespans of the various races fascinating. The dwarvish lifespan spurted early, and a dwarf was basically of full maturity in terms of size and stature by only ten years time, whereas the elves were well into seventy years before they were considered adults. And yet, the two species lived generally the same length of time on the average, five hundred years or so.

The non mages, anyway.

Zestry reached in front of her to unclasp the front of the brassiere, a series of hooks undone one after another after another before she peeled the two cups away from her breasts, exposing her tender flesh to the two mage's eyes.

Yasha knew immediately why the girl had shown such hesitance, and it wasn't the presence of her husband. While the younger elf had two perfectly formed lush teardrop shaped breasts, one of them had a blotch of purple discoloration along the outer side of it, a large imperfection on the girl's alabaster skin, one that she clearly had yet to come to terms with.

"I... I am sorry to offend thine eyes with my marred flesh, my lord, but I have always been this way, and the healers know not for way to cure me of this affliction."

And then Arkady did the best thing he could possibly do in the circumstances, an action that made his wife very proud indeed. He wasn't attempting to put on false airs. It was his genuine natural reaction, and the sound blurted out from him before he was even aware of it.

The jolly dwarf *laughed*.

"Marred? Be gods, girl," he said, shaking his head bemusedly. "For an elf, you have a very lovely pair of tits, and if none of the elves in this village can see that, you're too good for them."

Zestry looked at him in surprise and astonishment, her eyes blinking repeatedly in confusion. "But, the mark, the blemish upon my flesh, the sign my skin is unclean..."

"No more of that, girl," Arkady said as he pressed his thumb to the opening the vial, flipping it over to make some of the liquid ooze onto his thumb, then flipping it back. "It is a birthmark, and it is no more a blemish than my beard is, and if you disparage my beard, I assure you, we will trek as slowly as possible to your threadbound. Am I making myself clear?"

The elvish girl smiled shyly, nodding a little, as he began to take his thumb and draw runes upon her body with the pigmentation he'd smeared on it from the vial. "Yes, Master Dwarf. I know well enough never to insult a dwarf's beard, and it seems a very *fine* beard, although I have seen few others to compare it to."

"Damn straight," Arkady said, leaning back from the girl so she could push her underpants down to the wooden floor, stepping clear of them to leave her nude to the two mage's eyes. Though he had lain with many an elf in his time, he still never understood how they managed to live with so little hair upon their bodies.

Elves bore only hair on the tops of their head, and brows atop of their eyes. That was all the hair any of them ever had. No whiskers, no fine coat upon their arms, legs or feet, no hair beneath their arms or upon their genitals, nothing upon their chests. Why, the greatest elf of all time was completely incapable of growing even the simplest of mustaches. No wonder, he thought to himself, the elves did so poorly in cold environs.

The fist-sized splatter of purple color upon her right breast was the only pigmentation upon her flesh, with toned, thighs and a neatly tucked in vagina. The girl did not cross her hands over her crotch, as many did, but instead kept her arms at her sides, as Arkady leaned in again to continue drawing runic symbols upon her flesh, one after another.

The fleshlighting was the most complicated part of the ritual, but Arkady had always been good at knowing which symbols would be required for which supplicant, and was able to completely mark up a patron in less than a quarter of an hour.

Behind her, Yasha was peeling back the covers from the bed, opening it up invitingly. Once the sheets were in place, she began to disrobe as well, which made Zestry turn to look suddenly, then look away, almost embarrassed. "Is... are you part of the ceremony as well, m'lady? I know frightening little of the Threadbinder rituals."

"My husband and I are partners in all things, Zestry, and I would no sooner leave him alone during this than he would me during a Threatbinder ritual," Yasha said, removing her clothes one at a time, folding them, setting them in a pile on a dresser near the bed. "When the ritual is done, we will all spend one night together, and the next day, we will convey you along your thread."

Arkady continued to apply pigmentation in shapes and swirls upon the girl's flesh, and he could see her pink nipples stiffen as his thumb brushed over them, the excitement of the moment clearly beginning to get to her.

"Might... may I ask a few more questions, Master Dwarf?" she said, nervously.

"Mmm. As my father once said, 'you may always ask and the worst that shall ever happen is that I shall not answer,' so carry on with your questions," he said to her as he applied three wavy lines stacked one atop another on her belly.

“Do... do you enjoy the gifted orgasms that power the ritual, or has it become rote at this point, simply something you go through the motions with?”

He chuckled a little, spinning her around, so he could begin to apply pigmentation to her back. “If a Threadbinder is bored with sex, then only the shortest of threads will be visible to them, and that level of cheap magic no one wants to pay for. Some are more enjoyable than others, but there is always at least a base pleasure to be taken from each experience.”

“What was your most enjoyable experience with a client? Was it with an elf?”

Yasha giggled a little as she slid out of her underpants, leaving her naked flesh exposed. Her breasts were larger than Zestry's, but so were her hips, and Arkady much more enjoyed his wife's plump ass than the almost flat ass the younger girl had. “Corienne, most assuredly.”

The dwarf chuckled deep and warmly, nodding his head. “Corienne indeed,” he said. “No, she was no elf. She was a dragon.”

“A dragon?” the girl gasped. “How... how is such a thing even physiologically possible?”

“Dragons are form shifters, my dear,” Yasha said, taking the girl's hand and giving it a squeeze, encouraging her to lift her gaze and look upon her naked form. Her family status often meant that other elves needed to be reminded that this was all part of the ritual, and that to look upon her form was not sacrilege, no matter how the nobleborn normally acted. “So she had not one form for the ritual, but several.”

“Made it a damnable time with the runes, but dragons have their own natural magic that amplifies all other spellwork, and Corienne insisted she make it an experience I would remember, as dragons so rarely seek out Threadbinders for their work,” he said, lingering upon the memory perhaps a moment longer than he'd intended to. “It was quite the honor for me, and quite the sexual experience for the two of us.”

“And what was the worst?”

Yasha clicked her tongue in disdain. “Weedthrasher?”

Arkady shuddered a moment, nodding quite emphatically. “Oh, aye, a thousand times over. I hate to speak ill of her, as it truly wasn't her fault, but...”

“But dryads leave splinters, even with the best of care applied,” Yasha said with a giggle. “I think your runes are done, dear husband, except for the ones upon you and I.”

The dwarf nodded in agreement and stepped around the girl, moving to draw a single circle upon his wife's right bosom, drawing two parallel lines inside of it, then a smaller circle between the two lines, completing the rune. “There's you done. Now to get out of this armor.”

With both elves looking on, he began to disrobe, a heavy adamantine breastplate the first piece removed after the blue tunic. He kept that single dense piece of armor always concealed, and in doing so had saved his life several times. Beneath that, he removed the undershirt, and Zestry got a look at just how hairy the dwarf truly was.

His skin was a deep golden brown, not far off the color of sun-baked mud, but there was a thick layer of fine red hair across most of his chest and arms, and all along his back. In removing the shirt, he had also removed his cap, exposing the bald dome in the center of his head, lined by a thick ring of dark red hair like cooling lava.

He kicked off his boots and then removed his trousers and his underpants, leaving him nude with the two nude elves, and he could hear a little gasp of surprise from Zestry, as she took in the sight of his cock for the first time.

His wife had been truthful, and for the most part, his cock was not particularly unusual for his species, although the thick girthy nature of dwarvish dick still seemed to astonish most elves the first time they beheld one.

“I am going to be one sore girl tomorrow, aren't I, m'lady?” Zestry said to his wife, who only giggled a little before replying.

“Oh buck up,” she said. “It's a good sort of sore, and it will help distract you from the voyage.”

Now that was fully nude, he could apply the two sigils he needed to upon his own body. The first was a symbol matching the one he'd placed upon his wife, which was transfer the vitae the girl had promised them into their bodies, prolonging their lives and keeping them youthful. The second was the three wavy lines, which he painted on his own belly, mirroring the markings he'd done on the girl's.

As he applied the sigils, Yasha noticed how the girl was appraising her husband, taking in the sight of a nude dwarf. Despite the fact that he was half as tall as either of them, he was much bulkier and significantly more muscular, his form powerful and more than a little intimidating in how strong it was clear the man was naturally.

Elvish men were agile, nimble, graceful, like dancers.

Dwarvish men were squat, chiseled, bulky and hefty, like brawlers.

The fact that Zestry licked her lips in anticipation might have gone unnoticed by the dwarf, but it did not escape the sight of the other elf.

"Your last decision to make for the night, dear heart," Yasha said to the younger girl. "Do you wish to take or be taken? Would you like to control the tempo, or to be controlled?"

Zestry shivered in excitement, reaching a single hand out to smooth her fingertips across the length of the dwarf's beard. "As exciting as it might be to be taken, m'lady, I think I would feel more comfortable if I could control the tempo, for the size of your husband's weapon gives me pause, if only with eagerness."

Yasha nodded with a smile. "He does not mind, girl," she said to her, as Arkady started to move up the steps before hopping onto the bed. "You are not the first elvish girl he's had who's afraid his mighty cock will split her cunt in twain."

"M'lady!" Zestry giggled. "Such language!"

Yasha clicked her tongue scoldingly again. "During this ritual, nothing is forbidden other than what my husband dictates is, so no words are unpermitted. I think you may find that level of freedom... exhilarating. I know I have."

Arkady moved to sit on the bed, scooting to press his back against the pillows that were wedged up against the mighty wooden headboard. "In your own time, my dear," he said to her, even as her eyes were transfixed upon his cock.

Zestry moved to the edge of the bed and reached one of her hands out, slowly curling her fingers around the fat oaklike shaft that protruded from the dwarf's belly. She had seen elvish cocks before, and while they were usually longer, none of them had looked as sizable or dangerous as this. Her long spindly fingers barely stretched around the width of it, and once they touched, she slowly dragged her hand down before sliding it back up, unable to look the dwarf or his wife in the eyes, unable to peel her eyes away from the weapon she held in her hands.

"I do not know that it will fit inside me, m'lady," Zestry whispered, even as her hands continued to jack along his shaft, having switched from using one hand to two, as she moved ever closer to the bed, her eyes almost unblinking.

"Oh it will," Yasha said. "It fits inside of me all the time."

Zestry moved to slide one knee up onto the bed before bringing up the other, crawling up onto it, as she couldn't help herself and leaned her head down to lick her tongue along the large curved head of the dwarf's cock, lapping up a single pearl of natural lubricant that had emerged from his slit, which gave the girl goosebumps all along her flesh.

"It's nothing like elf cum," she whispered reverently. "It's richer, more flavorful, like a well aged brandy than any natural fluid."

"You can have more if you like," Yasha said to her, stepping in closer, standing at the edge of the bed now, one of her hands holding her husband's, the other stroking along the girl's back, taking care not to smudge any of the sigils, which were beginning to set.

"As much as I would like, m'lady," the girl said as she moved her knees closer towards the dwarf, one on either side of his thick legs, "I cannot wait any longer to discover how this feels, both for

my own edification and to hurry along my interests.”

The matching sigils on the dwarf and his wife began to glow, along with many of the sigils upon the girl's body, as she moved to straddle his waist, one of her hands reaching down to steer his cock, the other resting on his shoulders, as if to stabilize her. Once she had lined the wide tip against her cleft, she pushed her pussy down onto his dick slowly, a sharp gasp of inhaled air cutting through the room like a knife, but the girl did not stop, and slowly forced her way down onto his fast shaft, her eyes rolled back into the center of her skull, as her strong grasp on his shoulder threatened to try and clamp the nerves into a wound.

When she was half way down his shaft, Arkady could feel the girl begin to spasm and quiver furiously, oozing as much slickness as she could onto his member, as orgasm after orgasm shredded through her body, a symphonic cacophony of lust blossoming inside of her, and finally when she slid down to encompass all of his cock inside of her snatch, the thick curved tip of his dick nestled against the entrance to her womb, she trembled in waves, and Yasha lost count of how many orgasms the poor girl went through.

For a long moment, Zestry stayed motionless upon his cock, her body undulating in brief fits, as her breathing matched in sudden heaves, gasping for air before forcing it out in one of the filthiest moans either the dwarf or his wife had ever heard, the very pornographic nature of it making his cock throb inside of the girl. Then after what felt like days, she opened her eyes and smiled at him, a nervous, almost giddy laugh escaping from her throat. “I do believe I've paid my orgasms in full, Master Dwarf, if not overpaid by a sizable amount,” she said, a fuckdrunk look upon her face, the thick fog of post-orgasm bliss clouding her poise.

He chuckled, tilting his head with a slight nod. “The given, perhaps, but not the taken. For that, there remains work to be done.”

The expression on the girl's face changed immediately, the naive and almost innocent facade dropped in lieu of a different mask, a wanton, sultry harlot, her eyes snarled with lust and intent, as she dragged her fingers down across his muscular chest through the mat of thick hair over it. “But sweet Master Dwarf, can you not feel how snug and clenched my cunt is upon your massive cock?” she purred at him with a voice layered with sex that surprised both mages. “How it yearns to feel your gift inside of it, completing our contract?”

Yasha smirked a little bit, squeezing her husband's hand as she flashed him a little wink. They had seen things like this before, supplicants so enamored with their release to the threadbinding that they became purely carnal beings, hellbent on finishing the ritual, all hint of pomp and circumstance gone in the wink of an eye.

“Can you not feel my nubile flesh craving your release, good sire?” Zestry said, as she shifted up on her knees, working to lift partway up his cock before dropping her ass back down onto his thighs, impaling her cunt upon his dick once more with a giggling groan, her tongue swiping drool off her own lips. “Where once I was a nubile stanza, now I am an entire whorish sonnet,” she moaned into his face. “I am your own little elven fuck puppet, upon strings like a marionette, desperate to see a look of pleasure upon your brow even one sliver as powerful as what you have wrought inside my loins a dozen times already. Take hold of my hips, Master Threadbinder, and use my inexperienced twat until you find your delight to savor.”

The older elf was a little surprised, as the girl continued to bounce upon her husband's lap, one of the dwarf's hands moving from the girl's breast down to her hip, pushing her slender body a bit more firmly down onto his cock each time she thrust herself upon it, making the head of his member rap against the door of her womb like a battering ram upon a castle's gates.

Zestry growled a bit, as she tried to whip her hips in a fierce snakelike motion, whimpering each time she slid up his shaft, as if the emptiness gave her an unbearable sensation of emptiness, only to have that stripped away from her each time she impaled herself on his cock.

“Fuck me, Lord Arkady,” she hissed at him. “Hammer my nubile cunt like a weapon upon the

anvil, like something you are attempting to sculpt into greatness. Gods yes. Yes! Fuck the shit out of me until I know only the shape of your fucking cock! Harder! Gods harder still! Plow me until I am wrapped around your cock and you feel ready to give me that which I so desperately want! Gods please cum into my body, sire! Fill your wanton fucktoy with your gift! Bind her! Bind the thread and give her meaning! I beseech thee! Cum within my twat, oh mighty dwarf! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck me, sire! Fuck! ME! RIGHT! FUCKING! THERE! OHFUCK!"

The girl's voice was loud, far louder than the mages had expected, and just as she saw that look upon her husband's face, knowing the moment was about to be upon him, she feared the poor girl would make a noise too sizable for any in the village to ignore, so she thrust her lips upon Zestry's, kissing her hair, swallowing the moan into her own mouth as her husband began to erupt molten cum inside of the girl's pussy, each blast of the steamy jism sending a crescendo of orgasm through the elf's body, as the sound that poured from one mouth to the other was one of the most carnal things Yasha had ever felt.

The runes upon all their bodies glowed a ferocious shade of fire, and as his orgasm crested and the final blast of semen drained into the young elf's pussy, Yasha slapped one hand over Zestry's eyes, the other on the back of her head, keeping their lips locked together in a kiss. She knew well enough to close her eyes, as did her husband, but they had forgotten to tell the young girl about the overwhelming surge of light that would fill the room upon the ritual's completion.

After the light had passed and he could open his eyes once more, Arkady helped Yasha slide the girl over and off of his cock, his hefty club softening enough to slip out from her with a sloppy slurping sound, the fruits of their labors seeping from her gash. Yasha decided she had clearly not approached her husband recently enough, because the dwarf had clearly been backed up.

Once the nearly unconscious girl was laid on her back on the bed, Arkady began to complete the final stages of the ritual, the sigils still holding some glow to them even as they were beginning to fade back towards just pigmentation.

He gestured through the air, his meaty hands twisting into odd shapes, peeling threads aside, one after another just above the girl's body, invisible to all the most trained of eyes, until he found what he was looking for, the familiar telltale golden cord, the purest of threads, that of true love, connecting this girl to another soul somewhere on the horizon.

Now that he had marked it, he would be able to see the cord again with a simple spell, and would be able to follow it, and lead the girl to the soul on the other end of it. It was a powerful thread, which meant the girl was destined for a powerful love, the kind that would never fade or break. The nature of the spooling, how it almost seemed like several threads woven together to form one large cord, meant that the woman would be extremely happy with her decision.

As he finished closing the tagging spell on the cord, he felt a tongue lashing along his cock, and looked down to see Zestry was bathing his dick, licking it clean, a sensation that was only more complicated when his wife joined in, her mirthful eyes looking up at him. "Eyes up, mister," she chided. "Finish your work and we'll finish ours."

By the colors around the base of the cord, he could get a rough estimate of how far their trip would be and was pleased to see it would only be a day's flight or so to get the girl to her perfect match. "We should have you in the arms of your soulmate before the sun sets tomorrow, Zestry."

The girl started to weep tears of joy, and climbed up into the bed to wrap her arms around him in a fierce hug, shoving her face into the side of his head. "Oh thank you, sire. I know I have paid for your services, but even now I think I have not done enough," she said, her voice exhausted.

"Sleep now, and in the morning, we will take our leave of this village."

He slipped down further as his wife snuggled up along the other side of him, drawing the heavy sheets up and over them, and before they knew it, all three of them were fast asleep.

The next morning, the girl made her final farewells, as several villagers loaded up much more heavily stocked saddlebags onto Quiesh, who looked reinvigorated from her night in the barn, her belly

fully with the entire stag she'd feasted upon the night before.

The elder gave Zestry a firm hug, and bade the girl to send word when she could of where she had ended up, even giving the girl a single aryou coin, to ensure that she would be able to pay for a messenger to ride to the village and relay a letter to her with information, which the girl insisted she would send, if she did not bring her soulmate to visit instead.

Yasha helped Zestry into the wagon part that sat on the back of Quiesh, as Arkady climbed into the pilot's saddle. He gave a light salute to the gathered villagers and then pulled back on Quiesh's bridle with a kick of his heels, coaxing the griffon to take to the air once more.

It was about six hours flight to the west, as Arkady followed the thread. It was far easier to do this by air, and he'd never understood why so many Threadbinders traveled by land, as it complicated the journeys endlessly. Of course, befriending a griffon was no slight challenge, so maybe that was why.

As they crested over a mountain ridge, Arkady could see the thread leading into a mage's enclave, much to his amusement. It wasn't a great academy, but it was a frontier school, where binders were trained to at least competent levels. Anyone who wanted to highly refine their skills would go to one of the bigger academies in a larger city, but there were hundreds of these feeder enclaves that could offer basic training to get someone to at least a passable level of ability, mostly Threatbinders, but the occasional Threadbinder as well.

Arkady brought the griffon down to land in the enclave's courtyard, as a handful of mages stepped out to see the creature land, a couple of elves, a handful of humans and a pair of dwarves. From the sea of bodies, a single gnome dressed in heavy robes pushed her way through, a wry smile on his face. "Ah, Arkady! You bring a new person to bind?"

"I do, Weesha, now shush." Arkady followed the thread through the air, both Yasha and Zestry remaining in the wagon, as the dwarf stomped into the crowd and grabbed one of the human men by the wrist. He was tall for a human, with a rounded face and a big bushy black mustache upon his face. He was in the training robes of a Threatbinder, but still had much to do. He was reasonably good looking, Arkady guessed, with a bit of easy charm about him. The dwarf would guess he was twenty five years or so old, but humans were difficult to pinpoint sometimes. "You, boy, what's your name?" the dwarf asked him.

"Chester Skyson, sir," the man said to him. "Someone has hired you to find to whom their thread is bound, and that someone is me?"

"Indeed. Do you accept the binding?"

The young man smiled shyly. "Mistress Weesha has spoken quite highly of you, Master Arkady, so if you have found a thread that leads to me, I would be a fool to refuse it. Of course I do."

"You can come out now, Zestry," Arkady called over his shoulder, hearing the girl dismount from the griffon's wagon.

As soon as she set her eyes on the man, her heart leapt from her chest, and she ran over to him, wrapping her arms around him, kissing him firmly, as Arkady saw the two threads fold together, sealing their fate in perfect union, the new thread a thousand times stronger than the individual two had been.

She looked back, her eyes filled with an endless joy. It was a look he never got tired of seeing, and even the dwarf's stony nature couldn't keep him from smiling a little at the expression on her face. "Thank you. A thousand times, thank you. He's perfect. *This* is perfect."

"You are welcome, little elf. Now enjoy your new life as you and your soulmate figure out where your lives will take you."

She nodded, her body a little taller than the man's, and the two headed into one of the buildings, as Arkady started to turn back towards the griffon. "Well, don't want to bother you too long, Weesha, so we'll be on our way again."

"Actually, Arkady," the gnome said, scurrying closer over to him, "I could use your aid, if you can spare a bit of time. I would be happy to pay you for the time, but I have to admit, I'm in something

of a conundrum.”

Weesha was a fifth rank Threadbinder, but Arkady had thought the gnome simply hadn't done the exams needed to be higher, so the fact that she was asking for his help intrigued him, so he paused and looked back. “What kind of problem?”

“I'm not sure how to say this, but we have a person here who's paid for Threadbinder services, but the rituals have... well, the results confuse me, and I wouldn't mind a second opinion.”

“Confuse?” The dwarf raised an eyebrow, his curiosity getting the best of him for a moment. “I understand some threads are harder to follow than others, but I've never seen a result I would call confusing...”

“This one may stump you then.”

“How so?”

“The woman in question... she has *four* major threads coming from her.”

Unable to say anything for a moment, the dwarf finally brought an answer to his lips. “I can imagine that *would* be confusing. Alright, I think we can take the time to see what's going on. I do so love a challenge. Yasha, I think we have a challenge ahead of us.”

“I do so love novelty,” his elven wife said, sliding out of the griffon's wagon.

“Then this will blow your mind, m'lady,” the gnome said, as the three headed towards the main building of the enclave.