

NaNoWriMo 2004

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Gnome-Way Train 476 was doing its last stretch of its journey to its final destination to the city of Curst. The passengers on the train unaware they were being observed above in the skies. For the train not only carried passengers but also plenty of cargo, whether it be food, raw ore, lumber, precious minerals, or enchanted trinkets and weaponry.

Two wyverns swooped down on the moving train as its track twisted though a deep barren canyon, which blocked the sight of the infinitely tall mountain known as the Spire of the Outlands. The wyverns landed and grasped the train cars they landed on with their talons. From one wyvern a man with a red cloak, horns and purple hair jumped off, a small viper slithered out of bag behind the wyvern's saddle. From another wyvern a large man wearing a black duster and black hat jumped off.

Sitting inside the train sat Annaerlitha Bharvatlan, she was a troubled woman raised by a family of nobles from Sigil. As a tiefling with the blood of Shadow Demons running through her veins, she was a sultry creature of the darkness. She had long dark green hair with a couple of braids which was neatly done, reflecting on her wealthy background. Her dark purple skin was marked with a variety of tattoos representing the powers of shadows and necromancy. She wore a long slinky black dress, with violet bodice. She was a beautiful and ravishing woman who happened to be an insane and twisted woman, and dabbled in the black arts.

Annaerlitha was anxiously waiting, for her companions to arrive as she helped planned this daring raid they were planning. It was fully their plan to storm this train and take the treasures it carried. She knew whatever it was they train had it belonged to the Planar Trade Consortium, an organization that occasionally troubled her and her companions.

Suddenly the skylight of the train car Annaerlitha stood in was smashed open. Jumping down of the opening stood the man in a red cloak, who bore a tattoo with the symbol of the plane of Carceri on his forehead. He sneered viciously at the panicked passengers who screamed as they saw him brandishing a pepperbox pistol. Annaerlitha saw her plan was being set in motion, and acted according to her plan.

She gave off a frightened scream and cowered away as her companion grabbed her by the wrist. He locked his arm around her and pointed his gun to her head as she gave off a terrified scream, and started to cry, "AAAAIIIEEE!!! Stop it!! AAIIIEEE!! You're hurting me... Please, let me go!"

She struggled against his hold, and cried some more, but the man held his gun closer to Annaerlitha's head and put his hand over her mouth. The purple-haired man was soon joined by his companion in the

black hat, who held a blunderbuss in one hand and a battle axe in the other who shouted, “Stay in seated, or DIE!!!”

Annaerlitha screamed some more for her façade, which came out as muffled. Her tears convinced most of the shocked passengers that she was in trouble. In one of the seats a tough and burly male hobgoblin passenger, almost got out of his seat in an attempt to rescue Annaerlitha, before the man in the black hat spotted him, his eyes shifted from blue to red as he said, “Don’t try to be hero! You’ll die for nothing, so sit right down now!”

Annaerlitha put up more of a struggle as the two men cautiously walked through the passenger car dragging her with them. The purple-haired man took his hand off Annaerlitha’s mouth, as she tried to struggle free convincingly. A violent jerk backwards, tore the sleeve from her dress revealing her firm naked right breast with a tattoo of a creature known as an Eyewing above her nipple. She cried, portraying a shocked expression that she was going to be ravished, “No please don’t!”

With a little bit more of a struggle Annaerlitha was dragged into the next car which contained the soon to be liberated property of the Planar Trade Consortium. The purple-haired man held her in front of him as he entered the eerily quiet and dark storage car.

“Don’t blame me for your ‘wardrobe malfunction’ Naerli,” the purple-haired man whispered softly.

“I’m going to punish you after this darling, and your going to beg for mercy for that dress you ruined,” Annaerlitha flirted.

“I should ruin more of your dresses then,” the man grinned, as his companion followed him in.

Stacks of boxes marked with writings in the languages across the planes, of celestials, of fiends, Illithids, K’r’r, giants, and many more. On the other side of the car, a human male and female orc wearing the uniforms of the PTC and brandishing muskets hid behind some boxes.

“Freeze right there you sods!” the orc guard ordered in a panicked voice as she recognized the man as Xian Dao Qian, the Purple Scourge and one of the most infamous bandits of the Outlands. She was just as shocked to see that Qian was with his partner in crime, Viggo Jotunsen the Blood Berserker.

Qian threw to the ground as he pointed is pistol at the guards, and Viggo had his blunderbuss ready. From behind the two guards a small viper slithered out from under some boards and soon grew in size, taking on more humanoid features. Until it became a finely dressed brown skin man, brandishing a tulwar which he held against the male human’s neck. He grinned and winked at the female orc, “Be nice lass and drop it, or your friend’s going to lose his head over this.”

Both of the guards dropped there muskets to the ground reluctantly. Annaerlitha stood up, and brandished a derringer pistol hidden within her bodice. She pointed it at the guards, “Be a nice pair of

darlings, and stand in the corner over there.”

“What are you grinning at Ravi?!” Viggo growled as his eyes turn green, at the brown skin man who was stroking his short goatee.

“You know Naerli...” Ravi pointed, as he pointed at Annaerlitha with his forked tongue darting out.

“Ravi Asurasti, didn’t your mother teach you anything about pointing and gawking? You naughty little boy!” Annaerlitha flirted, while running her finger down her breast. And then she shifted her attention away, “Viggo, please be a sweetie and look in those boxes.”

The boxes that they scattered along the floor were promptly opened, some bore jewellery, others contained ore and coal, weapons of all types lay in other boxes, and a few held bottles and vials. Ravi looked at the shipping address of the weapons, “They’re all to be shipped to Blood Marsh of Crushed Dreams, in Orthrys, Carceri. From what I’ve heard, there’s been an on-going battle there for the last few centuries between not only the Tanar’i and Baatezu, but also the Gehreleths and the bloody Yugoloths themselves.”

“I don’t think they be missing one fucking thing there.” Qian added as he looked into a box containing nothing but what seemed to be clear flasks of water. He removed the stopper from one of them, suddenly letting out continuous stream of water which sprayed the ceiling. “We got some Decanters of Endless Water, here! You sell these to certain water-poor worlds, and they give you almost any fucking thing you ask for. Those PTC bastards have enough here to completely change the economy of an entire world.”

Qian turned to the two guards and sprayed the stream of water at them, he looked at a document included with the decanters and uttered, “Kry’lizach” unleashing a powerful geyser. Then he muttered, “Zach’kryli” reducing the geyser to a light water flow.

Ravi gazed at the guards sprawled on the ground, and swayed their emotions towards his will. He smiled, “We’ll be quicker if you help, your boss won’t even know any better.”

They nodded in agreement, and asked, “You want the boxes sorted?”

“Yes, that would help.”

Annaerlitha examined box of vial, and realized that everything contained inside held powerful toxins which could be easily evaporated into massive clouds of equally potent toxins. Other boxes contained potions that could heal, and others that could bring harmful magicks upon any living thing who drank from them.

Ravi brought out two bags and said to the pair of guards, “Why don’t you load all of the bottles and

vials into these bags of holding here.”

Viggo and Ravi inspected the weapons contained in the boxes and found spears, glaives, swords, pistols and rifles of all types. A few weapons were quite well built, that they seemed to emanate mystical energies.

“We’ve got a load this time.” Viggo climbed on top of a few boxes and opened the sky roof of the car. He climbed up on the roof with Qian who dropped some ropes down, and readied the boxes to be lifted out of the car. Ravi and the guards stacked the boxes together and tied rope around them, while Annaerlitha worked out the final incantations of a ritual she prepared for this situation. The boxes became unnaturally light as she unleashed her magical energy. With a quick pull Qian and Viggo flung the boxes upwards on to the roof while beckoning their wyverns to come to them.

It took a few minutes to secure the boxes onto the wyverns, when Viggo spotted an armed group making its way on the roofs of the cars from the end of the train, as his eyes went pitch black.

Inaudible commands were barked at the armed group who were fast approaching them. One of them took a pot-shot at the gang and their wyverns. Viggo got a rifle from the back of his wyvern as Annaerlitha jumped on it. Viggo took his time firing a shot as the interlopers came within a few train cars of his position, dropping hobgoblin male to the ground. Qian and Ravi shifting into the form of a small viper quickly jumped onto their wyvern, which took off quickly with Qian at the reins. Viggo jumped on his wyvern and took the reins while Annaerlitha called forth a mass of inky tentacles of darkness, in the path of their pursuers.

Viggo made his wyvern fly off in the opposite direction that Qian’s wyvern took. Many of the angry pursuers all wearing uniforms of the PTC ran right into the tentacles which violently seized and tore at them. The others that stood back tried taking shots at the wyverns and their riders, but they were already too far for their shots to be effective.

A while later Viggo and Qian’s wyverns met on a cliff that they agreed to meet at, which was hidden away from the railway.

“The load on the wyverns is quite tiring. The spell wore off, almost ten minutes ago.” Qian muttered, untying the ropes holding the boxes of weapons.

Viggo now with yellow eyes, checked the boxes which they stacked on the ground; he looked at a rifle through a looking glass attached to it. He watched the skies, plains and the mountain tops not seeing a sign of any creatures except for a herd of rhino-like Kulduraths trampling through the dusty plain leaving a cloud in their wake.

“So how long do we have to wait here?” Ravi asked, the moment after he shifted back into his humanoid form. “And where’s that ship of ours?”

“They should be here soon, darling.” Annaerlitha replied as she cleaned off her clothes and fixed her dress with a cantrip she performed.

“So how long do you think those PTC bastards are going to hound us?”

“For a few weeks, as long as we are on this plane, or in Sigil, though if they’re persistent they’ll send a couple of agents after us. Personally I’d like them to try, the last one they sent she was quite a delicious treat.”

“You mean the one who you let capture and ‘torture’ you, before turning the tables on her and selling her into slavery?”

“Yes, that tart, Preleethia... I wonder how she’s doing on San’gius as a blood whore of the Vampyre Overlords there. Just thinking about her and what she might be going through makes me wet.”

“How about I help lick it better for you, as I display my wonderful talent I happen to have as a Pureblood Yuan-Ti?”

“It’ll be the first thing to do, when the Black Lotus gets here. Along with punishing Frelly’s naughty boy-toy back there for what he did back on that train.”

“What problem? Your dress looks fine.” Qian grinned at Annaerlitha.

“No it isn’t,” Annaerlitha opened up her bodice. “Just look what you made me do. See these right here, I’m going to bury your face in these for the rest of the night. I’m not going to hear another word from you, naughty boy.”

“Time’s up you three...” Viggo interrupted as he spotted the Black Lotus flying in from the distance. “You can enjoy your time there.”

“Darling, I hope your beautiful fiancé Vuyelwa has a wonderful surprise waiting for there.”

“Who, better to share my glory in battle with? I’m sure one day we’ll both join you, if that means anything to you.”

“You’re such a sweetheart,” Annaerlitha stood on her toes to kiss Viggo.

The Black Lotus or Hei Lian approached the cliff slide slowing its approach as they spotted the gang. The ship was a Type III Feng Huang class destroyer, which originated from a world known as

Swargamara, produced by a nation on that world known as the Imperial Confederacy of Long Guo. The Black Lotus was loosely built in the shape of a phoenix or Feng Huang, it had pair of large wings, a sleek design, and was coloured red and black. The ship was propelled by an elemental fire engine with a magnetic engine for back-up, had planar sails among its mechanical wings 'feathers', and carried an arsenal of cannons, bombs, and rockets.

The Black Lotus launched sky-sled from its lower decks, while the gang climb on to their wyverns and flew into launch deck. The sky-sled was promptly loaded with the boxes of weapons as Qian and Viggo put their wyverns into the pens. The launch deck of the Black Lotus was a cramped place, containing a number of pens for other wyverns, and enough room for a few sky-sleds and a small assault ornithopter. It had a cold grey metal floor, and red pillars, with intricate designs on its bulkheads.

Captain Zhang Ti Ke of the Black Lotus, descended down to the launch deck he wore black silk robes, with red lining, surveying the loot his associates were bringing back. He was a human, who had his hair braided into one long tail, eyes that portrayed his years of experience, and grin on his face.

“We’re going to make a lot of money this time!” Qian shouted.

“And it wasn’t too much trouble this time, Captain Zhang.” Ravi added.

“Great, there’s nothing, better than seeing, Planar Trade Consortium bastards suffer.” Captain Zhang responded. “*Mei-Mei*, you have fun this time?”

“Mmm, lot’s of fun!” Annaerlitha replied.

“Don’t worry Viggo, Vuyelwa been keeping herself busy, she help fix our problems.”

“Well that’s good to hear. How much do you think our spoils worth?” Viggo straightened out his hat.

“Yes that, well once we sell it, we see how much, we’ll really get. But to me, it look like at least 40,000 gold. We just have to move ship, to another plane now.”

Annaerlitha grabbed both Qian and Ravi together, smiling she said, “It’s always great to be a pirate, but I was hoping there be some raping with the pillaging... While I settle for these two here I guess.”

Viggo made his way up to bow’s observation room, to find is fiancé sitting in meditation looking out of the two round windows laced with intricate designs. She noticed Viggo enter the room, and slowly stood up to meet him.

Vuyelwa was a tall woman with a wiry build, dark brown skin, golden hair and pink eyes that gave off a soft glow. She wore a red wraparound dress containing colourful patterns, and a set of intricate neck rings. She gave a warm smile to the man who would one day become her third husband.

“The ‘children’ haven’t been giving you too much trouble, have they my love?” Vuyelwa embraced her fiancé who also stood at the same height as her. They stared into each others eyes, before locking their lips in a long kiss.

“None of us got any scars from this, physical or emotional, though some of our enemies fell in battle. There was glory in this battle, even for the fallen as unfortunate as they were. So how was your time without me?”

“I was busy working my magic, all around this ship. We took a lot of damage that time when we went through the Plane of Smoke. The Efreeti and Djinni fleets did quite a toll on us. And then I spent some of my time preparing magical healing herbs, with Te Huan and Nikolai. You know we’re heading to Limbo, as Kess happens to be in Shrak’tlor, and wanted to some of us to keep her company. She sent a messenger spirit our way, while you were out, and the Captain decided that Shrak’tlor a good of a place as any to fly to.”

“I didn’t think you’d be doing the hard work remaining behind here.”

“Well that’s just what you get, when you happen to be a competent witch.”

Ravi, Annaerlitha, Qian, and a number of the ships crew walked into observation room.

“Oi, nice to see you again Vuyelwa,” Ravi said as he entered. “I hear we’re making the jump to Limbo soon. Kess, she’s always a fun lass to be with, and a fine one to look at too.”

“Oh, I’ve had a lot of fun with our darling Kess.” Annaerlitha added.

The ship started to hum, the volume building up slowly.

“That’s it, we’re leaving the Outlands.” Qian looked on the windows seeing an ambient glow build up outside. Strands of energy soon snaked around outside the ship. And then a distortion appeared expanding outwards with ripples like puddle of water. The ship shook for a minute as everyone secured themselves.

The blue skies of the Outlands were replaced with a jumbled mixture of colours, fire with water, chunks of earth swirling in cyclones, and a school of amorphous masses of flesh which swam in all of it.

Captain Zhang Ti Ke sat in his quarters, and he had his mimir, which recorded the words he wanted tell it. His came in the form of a golden foo lion holding a pearl.

“Captain’s Log, Planar date Ysgard Cycle 374.4... We’re arriving on course to Shrak’tlor from the Outlands. Again, we’ve thwarted those PTC bastards. I know they send someone really vicious after us. However they go after Qian and Viggo, as they are really infamous. Those kids too much trouble at times. I hear them make too much noise now right next to my quarters.”

“Ti Ke, come back to bed,” Lili the ship’s first officer beckoned, as she lay naked in the captain’s bed with her legs wide open.

“I almost done... Tomorrow we trade with Dohwar merchants, when we reach Githzerai city. I don’t trust talking penguins, it make me feel drunk, but they better than giant blue Mercane, who run a lot of PTC.”

“C’mon, let’s fuck before we make it to Shrak’tlor.”

Ravi woke up beside Annaerlitha who was sleeping on top of Qian. Annaerlitha had Qian chained on her bed, and left many marks on his naked body; she used whips, crops and her claws on him. A few times she drew blood, a promptly licked Qian’s blood off. She teased him through out the night, drawing him close to a climax and backing away as she tormented him, while Ravi pleased her. At the end, she eventually let her victim have his release.

The aftermath left the three of them quite fulfilled, yet exhausted. Ravi shifted into the form of a viper, and softly slithered off the bed so he wouldn’t disturb the other two. Shifting back into humanoid form, he picked up some clothes and walked outside of Annaerlitha’s quarters. He wandered the decks until entering the mess hall, where the two cooks were preparing a large pot of rice congee.

One of the cooks Te Huan asked, “What’s with you and friends?” as he filled a bowl for Ravi.

“It’s what we do, we’re not only mercenaries, pirates and bandits, we’re adventurers. We do adventurous things.”

“Something the thirty of us crewmen, always miss out on.” The other cook Nikolai responded.

“Last time I recall, weren’t about ten of your crewmen lasses? I remember there’s Mei Yuan, Ivana, Sui Yi, Helga, and a few more.”

“Most of them think we’re idiots, and would have nothing to do with us in bed.” Te Huan replied.

“Then do you two blokes get out much?”

“How can we, we’re stuck on this ship all of time.”

“You’ve been on the planes for a while, and haven’t ever met many others outside of the ones from your world?”

“Yes. We have to be on the ship almost all of the time, and we never see much beyond what we see around the docks of wherever we go. You people are privileged, as the captain let’s you run around free wherever you go.”

“It’s probably because we pay him for the right to be on the ship. You know a lot of it comes from Annaerlitha being the rich spoiled girl she is. Anyways what’s with your world, what is it, Swargamara that you keep talking about.”

“There’s a major war happening right now, and just about all of us on this ship are deserters, who were lucky enough to find ourselves on another plane.” Te Huan explained.

“Our nations, which are the Kingdoms of Cossia for me, the Imperial Confederacy of Long Guo for Huan and the captain, not to mention the Republic of Sturmgaard and the Ashantai Empire for other members of this crew, are allied with each other, in a rather senseless war we have against another alliance of nations.” Nikolai added.

“It’s happens in millions of worlds across the multiverse. It’s all for things such as resources, territorial disputes, religion, and whatever other excuses they have. But it’s all the same; thousands of people are throwing their lives away.” Ravi replied.

“I guess that makes us a ship of deserters, and pirates too! Now just why isn’t our life that adventurous?”

“Pals, it’ll happen, you’ve been around the planes, and going to be doing so for years.”

Qian, Ravi and Vuyelwa stood in the observation room looking out on the cosmic mosaic that the plane of Limbo existed as.

“Ah, Limbo I like this plane, if only for the fact that you shape a lot of it to your will.” Ravi mused. “Kind of fitting that a fine lass like Kess would come from here.”

“Looking out there, it’s practically her state of mind.” Vuyelwa commented. “There’s millions of

Orisha outside swimming around our ship, many of them more visible to most eyes. It's natural that she has millions of different voices among herself."

"And the fact she's on drugs most of time." Qian added. "She's shaped the rest of the multiverse to be like Limbo to her."

"That would be her source of power, much like how I use interactions with spirits, or Orisha, Loa, Shen or whatever else they're known as."

"Or in the case of Qian and I, an enlightened understanding of reality," Ravi said. He paused for a moment, "We're in the plane that's supposedly the absolute of chaos, a pole on the scale of planar. At least as far as it with those who believe in the Cosmology of the Great Ring."

"Which still doesn't account for all of existence," Vuyelwa said. "As we know, and have been to many planes and world that fall out of what's been mapped out with the Great Ring. It's always a problem that there are some out there who'll try to classify all of existence into one neat little all-encompassing diagram that's easy to explain and categorize."

"Generalizations, they never try to get the whole picture," Qian commented. "Like how they try to categorize Aasimar and Tieflings like you and me. If there's one fucking thing for sure, I can't summon darkness like how many claim all Tieflings can do, nor do I or Annaerlitha or Frelassa or Eri have any problem expressing ourselves."

"Neither do I have any innate ability summon light, as they claim." Vuyelwa looked at the planar clock hanging above the entrance of the observation room. "We have some work to do. You know with this being Limbo, simple black-powder is rather unreliable."

"It's a good thing we got ourselves a stockpile of percussion caps filled with Liquid Karach, as you can imagine all of the problems normal percussion caps have."

"Well all it takes to fire a gun most of the time is a spark created by the firing pin, which ignites our highly flammable black-powder cap. This in turns expands some compressed gases outwards, which propels a metal ball down a tube. On this plane we want to release a liquefied chaos metal in an unstable form, down a metal tube." Vuyelwa explained, "But the one problem is that not every gun has the right firing mechanism for Liquid Karach. Also our cannons can be loaded with Liquid Karach, but our rockets and bombs can't."

"Let's go, we've spent enough time in here."

Annaerlitha took some time get herself ready, doing her makeup and hair just right. She decided to go

with wearing a long black cheongsam dress with an intricate design depicting thorn vines with roses, as she would blend in a little more with the ship's crew. With her she brought Trixy her fox familiar with a luscious red coat, anxiously followed in her wake, as she didn't she hadn't let her out of her room for a while. She made her way through the general crew quarters where most of the crew slept.

Sitting in the quarters were two of the ship's female crewmembers, the ones Annaerlitha recognized as Mei Yuan and Ivana. The two sat on a bunk quietly talking to each other, while a small handful of crewmembers were still asleep. Annaerlitha approached and asked, "May I join you two ladies?"

"Go ahead," Mei Yuan mumbled as she rested her back against the bulkhead.

"I'm sure us lowly members of the crew don't mind a 'lady' like you, trying to slum it with us." Ivana responded sarcastically.

"You know I detect a hint of resentment towards me, is it something I done?" Annaerlitha asked. "I thought you were a rather welcoming crew."

"Tell me something about all you 'adventurer girls', are all of you sluts?" Mei Yuan inquired, while Trixy who understood twitched at the comment. "Because what I've seen of you, not to mention your friend Kess and Frelassa who's been on this ship often, you definitely fit the description."

"In what ways does that make us sluts?"

"You're tendency to wear slutty clothes, and the fact that you're always sleeping around, whenever I see you here."

"Well first of all, I'm quite comfortable about myself, my appearance and my sexuality. It's nothing to be shameful about at all. Second point, there's nothing wrong in indulging myself, such as going into a new town and having a little fun with the locals. Male adventurers do it all of the time, and no ones said anything really bad about that. My sexuality is another aspect of me that gives me power; I'm not going to shun using it. And might I add that many of my other female colleagues certainly aren't as active as I am."

"But you still treat this as all being a game, you're a spoiled rich girl, a princess who plays around for amusement, while we toil and labour."

"Don't think that adventuring is all easy. I've gotten myself in quite a lot of trouble, almost died many times, suffered my fair share of wounds and I've suffered a lot. For example not every sexual encounter I've had has been done willingly. And then there are many horrors I've seen that no one was meant to have seen. Look darlings, I know you've spent sometime as soldiers on your world, but you've so far been rather sheltered to what's really out there."

“We just don’t know what to expect from you especially. I just get the impression you’re one of the most dangerous out of your group.” Ivana said.

“Indeed I’m quite a dangerous one; after all I’m someone who practices in the dark arts. However I don’t feel the need to rip out your soul, cause the blood to burst from your body or animate your corpse into a zombie. I like the two of you, and I’d certainly like to enjoy more of your company.”

It was sometime in the afternoon, in whatever passed for the cycle of days in Limbo. As Shrak’tlor came into view, the ship slowed its approach, and Viggo stood on the ship’s top deck watching for any signals from the city’s patrols. The gang picked Viggo to deal with Shrak’tlor’s sometimes difficult customs officials, agreed upon by a game of rock-paper-scissors.

A small ship built of three globes flew beside the Black Lotus, guiding it towards a dock, while group of Mra'lai'eth or ‘Monastic’ Githzerai glided past the ship.

At the dock they greeted the ship; they stood together with grim expressions on their faces. The Mra'lai'eth Githzerai were tall gaunt figures with yellow skin dotted with brown spots, they had flat noses on their faces, wore grey robes and had their heads shaved except for a single topknot. They coldly eyed Viggo and the rest of the crew and officers as they came off of the ship.

“What’s your purpose here,” one of them coldly asked.

“We’ve come here by invitation of a member of the Order of Zerthimon, Kesslaira Ayla.” Viggo now with green eyes, replied standing with Vuyelwa with his friends behind him, along with six members of the crew they decided to bring along.

“Wait here...” one of the Mra'lai'eth signalled another, to inform his overseer. Within a minute a Hralar or ‘High’ Githzerai walked onto the deck, unlike the Mra'lai'eth Githzerai, Hralar Githzerai looked closer to humans. This Githzerai had pale almost white skin, and an apparent nose, though she stood slightly shorter than her Mra'lai'eth colleagues and had a more delicate build. She was dressed in a simple crimson coloured dress, with a skirt that went to her knees, wearing knee-high boots and a pair of glasses, her chestnut hair was tied into two ringlets.

“Greetings travellers, I’m Ada’rina Nithaly overseer for the Kli’ranli Docks here in Shrak’tlor. You say you’re here to visit a friend of yours by the name of Kesslaira Ayka?” she announced, holding a pad with a set of records.

“Yes, she said she was here studying at the Shrak’tlor Academy of Arcane and Psionic Studies, as she’s both a warrior of the mind and a transmuter herself.” Viggo patiently waited for Ada’rina to search through all of her records.

“Indeed, I have a record of Kesslaira Ayla putting in a request for passes through the academy, to some visitors from a ship known as the Black Lotus, as well as one issued already for a couple of visitors from Sigil.” She brought out a record containing a picture of Kesslaira sticking her tongue out between two fingers.

“Yes that’s her.”

“She seems to be an interesting girl, if a little bit on the bratty side.”

“She is, while she’s quite immature, she’s actually quite intelligent and very amusing to be around.”

“So who’s getting passes?”

“Well that’s myself Viggo Jotunsen, along with Vuyelwa Starchilde, Xian Dao Qian, Annaerlitha Bharvatlan, Ravi Asurasti, Lin Mei Yuan, Ivana Taranov, Bao Te Huan, Nikolai Chekov, Hanz Reichmann, and Funmilayo Tutu.” Viggo pointed to himself his friends and the small collection of the crew that followed.

“Just follow me, and I’ll get your passes ready. Anyone else from the ship who wants a pass must check with my office first.” Ada’rina lead the group into office where cabinets and piles of paper floated about. A miniature pink toad-like Slaad, flew around the office folding some of the paper into shapes. Ada’rina yelled in stern voice, “What did I tell about playing around with paper!! Only the blank sheets!!”

She brought out an arcane stamp, and muttered a few arcane words, leaving an arcane mark on a set of documents. “She acts up, when I leave her alone. Anyways here’s your passes, don’t lose them. And welcome to Shrak’tlor, enjoy your stay here!”

They gang met with Kesslaira shortly after, she was staying at her mother’s house for her time in Shrak’tlor. Kesslaira’s parents were separated, and she never seen much of her father who resided somewhere in the Floating City. Kesslaira had two older sisters who haven’t lived with her mother for years.

Unlike many of the members of the gang, Kesslaira didn’t have many problems with her family, as they never abused her, treated her badly, or were never brutally murdered either. Kesslaira was in her mother’s house alone entertaining a guest that the rest of the gang never met before.

Annaerlitha being a close friend of Kesslaira had a key to get into Kesslaira’s mother’s house. It was much to the surprise of Kesslaira, that they saw her cuddling with a wretched looking humanoid creature, with tattered hair and a flexible neck. He was dressed up in clothes that Kesslaira designed, as she fancied herself a seamstress in her spare time.

Kesslaira was a tall woman and slender woman like most Hralar Githzerai, she has shockingly pink hair which contrasted her pale skin. She always acted with a manic energy to her, and had a fey-like quality of beauty to her. Her ears had many piercings, and with a new piercing on her nose. She wore a pink and black outfit, composed of a frilly skirt, a sheer blouse with wide sleeves and a lacy bustier underneath, with a pair of mismatched stockings with one striped and the other fishnets.

“Oh hi there!” she giggled.

“Kess!!” Annaerlitha screamed, as she jumped into Kesslaira’s arms. As the two hugged each other, Annaerlitha stumbled on her back, lying on the couch Kesslaira was lying on. Kesslaira was lying on top of Annaerlitha, which Annaerlitha responded with, “Oh Kess! I’ve been anticipating this! Take me now darling!”

“Sure thing,” she said, as she kissed Annaerlitha and grabbed her by the wrists.

“Ahem, sorry to interrupt the both of you ladies,” Ravi approached, “but first how are you doing sweetie? Second, who’s this fellow over there?”

“Hi there, Ravi! I’m just ecstatic! As for my new friend, that’s Yuloc we found him in the city Down Below. He used to stalk Frelly and her ex-girlfriend Kallisti, but we decided to bring him back, after we caused a lot of trouble down there!”

“Kesslaira, didn’t your mother tell you anything about bringing strange men back?” Vuyelwa commented, “I know I’d tell my own daughters not to do the same thing. Besides, is he like a lost baby or something?”

“No... hruughhkkk, just a Lost One,” Yuloc responded as he twisted his neck around.

“A Lost One you say,” Ravi said, “Don’t they stalk the night, steal food, rape and pillage the City Above, and eat babies?”

“No, he’s actually quite harmless,” Kess answered, “And he lost his home, after a bunch of big nasty things killed almost everyone there.”

“You’ve been causing trouble Down Below with my Frelly?” Qian asked, “What actually happened, and where’s Frelly?”

“Well, first of all we got some mail from that evil eevill Zareena bitch, about Frelly’s ex Kallisti. Then we went on the Gnome-Way train to Down Below, met Zareena, agreed to rob a museum for her, while Frelly slept with her. We slaughtered this cult that we thought had Kallisti, a bunch of Lost Ones attacked this cult and snatched Frelly. We mounted this rescue mission while Frelly escaped with Kallisti and Yuloc here. We met up, and then the cult and their allies from the Far Realm massacred the

Lost Ones, so we went and massacred them.” Kesslaira attempted to explain in one breath. “As for Frelly, she’s still in Sigil, spending some time with Kallisti and her husband Anatoly. They have a bunch of issues to resolve.”

“You know, I didn’t completely get that... Oh well, everything’s mostly all right. So what are you doing with Yuloc there?”

“Well I was thinking of keeping him around, but he wants to try living on Limbo for a bit. He thinks he can stay in the Chaond Quarter, here in Shrak’tlor.”

“I thought they only allowed Cansin like me to stay in large numbers here,” Viggo commented.

“Well the Cansin Quarter, now has the better looking Tieflings and Aasimar staying there too, with some Spirit Folk and Feytouched. All of the ugly looking Planetouched and Mongrelfolk have sort of being grouped with the Chaonds, along with the Neraphim refugees. The Foreign Quarter is still the large Foreign Quarter that it is.”

“Kess, you should show us around Shrak’tlor, darling,” Annaerlitha who was still underneath, Kesslaira said. “And if this is your mother’s home, where is she?”

“She decided to stay away for most of the day, while she concentrates with her job at the factory as an overseer. Eri’s also somewhere here, he came with me when I left Sigil, and you want the tour of Shrak’tlor don’t you?”

Kesslaira spent about three hours showing her friends around the Shrak’tlor beyond the walls of the Foreign Quarter, and the neighbourhood in Gha’daerli Quarter that she lived in. Shrak’tlor was a varied city, which seemed sinister and imposing to many. Large fortresses took most of the cities structures, with many smaller buildings sprawled and squished in between often at many different angles. The orientation of every building wasn’t always in the same direction, as a neighbouring building could have its floors, perpendicular to another.

The Githzerai eyed the gang suspiciously as Kesslaira guided them around this city. Shrak’tlor was still quite a militant city, even after the revolution against the Great Githzerai God-King Zaerith Menyar-Ag-Gith. Most of the Githzerai who lived in Shrak’tlor were of the pale-skinned human-like Hralar subrace, though small orders of the yellow-skinned flat-nosed Mra’lai’eth subrace inhabited the city.

A network of crystalline ‘Wind-Tubes’ ran through out the city, making it easier to travel quickly. Inside a wind-tube, a traveller would just need to concentrate on moving forward in their mind, and they would be able to fly through the tunnel. This was mainly an effect of Limbo’s nature, where

gravity was subjective. The psionic construction of the wind-tube, made it so that harmful collisions were less likely to happen.

It was only in the An'nahk District that most of the other Githzerai subraces lived. The mysterious Kler'shrith or 'Shaper' and Ul'thal or 'Umbral' subraces along with the Bhe'lar or 'Wild' subrace took up most of the residences in this district which contained the An'nahk or Anarch's Guild and the Limbo Expeditionary Guild.

Chaond Quarter was an area of Shrak'tlor that was generally in shambles, as it was built over the ruins of fortresses and buildings devastated by the revolution. The attitude in that quarter was somewhat tense, as the wretched inhabitants of the quarter were concerned about survival and gangs of criminals which ruled the streets.

The Cansin Quarter had quite a different construction, as immigrants to Shrak'tlor lived here. The architects here were more concerned about the artistic appearances of the buildings. The culture there was somewhat elitist, and many of the Githzerai were also among them.

Shrak'tlor was still the military centre of the Githzerai; it produced most of the weapons and vehicles. However since the revolution it was more open outsiders than it was ever before, and was slowly becoming a trade city, as it was now the industrial centre of the Githzerai.

Kesslaira was a contrast to most of the generally grim Githzerai, as she was quite spirited. Eventually they settled in Shrak'tlor's Trade and Entertainment District, where the Githzerai weren't generally grim. Taverns, brothels and clubs dotted this growing district, and theatres made from converted fortresses took up this district. The largest number of non-Githzerai outside the Foreign, Chaond and Cansin Quarters resided here.

The gang looked up in the 'sky' above Shrak'tlor as a fleet of globular Githzerai assault ships flew in the distance to conduct a raid against the Githyanki in a plane far away. However most of their attention was fixated on the colourful district around them.

"I spent most of my time here when I was growing up," Kesslaira explained. "My friends mostly lived here, and we partied a lot. This is also where you can get the best drugs, and there's always plenty to do!"

"It looks fun here, but as one of the locals, can you help separate the good from the bad places?" Ravi asked, "I can see a few places here that might either be superficial and overpriced or just outright dangerous to outsiders like us."

"Well you can always stay around me, as I like you after all." Kesslaira cheerfully replied.

"We're here to party, so let's fucking get to it!" Qian said, "Kess, where can I buy myself some good

Faerie Mushrooms?”

“At Yrthak-raider Thahl’s House of Wonders. Ravi, you can come with Annaerlitha, Vuyelwa and me.”

“It’s just Viggo, Yuloc over there and me, out on the streets here. We’ll try to meet you later at Teratomorph Club, if I can find it.”

“It’s not too hard to find, it looks like a giant Teratomorph as it’s that big amorphous building you passed by sweetie.”

“If you find my pet and darling Eri, Qian bring him along with you.” Annaerlitha said.

Qian was feeling the effects of Faerie Mushrooms on him, as he felt a little more energetic and had a distorted view of the world around him. Viggo had got himself quite drunk, as he was drinking at every place they visited. Yuloc was less edgy as he smoked quite a lot of hashish.

The trio wandered into a theatre where there was yet another play, about the Shrak’tlor Revolution. They watched as actors depicted a mob of angry Githzerai civilians charged a line of the Wizard-Kings soldiers. An actor depicting revolutionary hero Jor’ran, with his companies Dak’kon and Ha’nila ran past the line of soldiers with muskets, up a set of stairs where the Wizard-King Zaerith sat. Then a musical number started as the actors depicting the mob and the soldiers, lined up as extras in a choreographed dance.

“This looks so fucking ridiculous enough, I might stay here.” Qian exclaimed, watching performance.

“What is a Wizard-King but a Lich-Queen.

What are the disciples of Zerthimon

Without his wisdom

Without freedom

What have we become if we continue to live this waaay...?”

The actor depicting Jor’ran sang.

“Your freedom comes with a price

Security is more than just what's nice

Without my rule the people are weak

My demise is not what you seek."

The actor playing the role of the Wizard-King Zaerith in sang in response.

"Our people have suffered under you.

Your ways have brought us distrust.

For what we crave is something new.

Competition crushed to suite your lust.

Must we fight to end your dangerous reign?

Your ways are belong to that of Githyanki.

The Githzerai people have you as their bane.

Only without your unending ways, can we be."

Jor'ran's actor sang in response.

"Yeah, I know where the fuck this is going." Viggo said as he watched. "They'll 'fight' and by 'fight' I mean dance, and then sing some more of their argument."

"And then Zaerith, will agree to peacefully step down, and live in exile." Qian responded. "It's like I already know the ending, and we never really paid to get into here."

"Hruughhk! How do you, hrughk, know the ending?" Yuloc asked.

"It's called paying attention to Planar affairs, and reading and knowing history. Fuck, I don't know what it is with some people today."

"Remember he's been living in a cave for years." Viggo replied. "You know, you Lost Ones should have considered stealing newspapers when you did your raids on the Sigil Above."

The trio watched the musical number go on, until Zaerith in the play agreed that it was best for the

Githzerai people if he lived in seclusion. The play ended soon after that, as there was nothing left in the story except that Jor'ran and his companions became part of the council that now rules the Githzerai nation.

The trio walked out of the theatre and noticed a familiar face. He had purple skin, dark green hair in dreadlocks, had multiple piercings and wore a long black sleeveless coat.

“Eri! What the fuck are you doing here?!” Qian yelled.

“Oi! It's you two idiots! And you brought little Yuloc along!” Eri Fhaal replied, and then he paused for a moment, grabbing the arm of another man. The man had brown skin and dark hair which went to his shoulders, with reptilian eyes and some subtle scales covering his skin. He looked vaguely familiar to Qian and Viggo. “This here is Kabir, he happens to be my date for tonight... And well, he happens to be the brother of one of our pals.”

Ravi and Vuyelwa sat together watching an attractive and brightly dressed female Hralar Githzerai dance in a stage set in the centre. She moved with a graceful fluidity, depicting what was known among the Githzerai as Dha'Limb'hala, or the Dance of Limbo's Tides. Kesslaira and Annaerlitha were seated at a table behind the two as they watched.

“Somehow I'm expecting Kess and Naerli to jump down there, dance, and start taking their clothes off.” Ravi mused.

“They're behaving themselves right now, and they would need Frelly to help them along, with Xi Na to encourage them.” Vuyelwa responded. “Besides the girl down there's quite a beautiful and talented one, they wouldn't want to get upstaged by her.”

“How long have we known each other? It's almost like we're one big family.”

“Almost two years by now. Considering that many of us haven't met under the best of circumstances.”

“Yes, I remember you going after Qian and Viggo, back when they and their gang of raiders were creating quite the name for themselves.”

“It seems so long ago, considering that I'm fifty-four.”

“And you don't look like you're older than twenty-seven.”

“That was about when I stopped aging, and had only my first husband and one daughter.”

“And now Viggo will be number 3. Quite something for the man you were trying to capture a couple of years ago. How did it all get to that?”

“Fate, it has a strange way of making things happen. How come I never hear much about your family?”

“Well, it’s probably because they don’t approve very well of what I’ve been doing.” Ravi explained, pausing for a second to think. “In fact they don’t quite approve what my brother and sister have been doing too. I’ve been away from the nest for years without telling my folks much of what I do. It’s probably because they were too overprotective, and tried to have their fangs in everything I do. And then there’s that issue of me rejecting the one they promised to me. I don’t take quite well to the idea of arranged marriages, even though I completely understand that among Yuan-Ti it’s more important for the make-up of the brood.”

“What do they really want you doing anyways? I know you belong to one of the more benevolent Yuan-Ti cults, the Brood of Vasuki if I’m correct. Did they your parents give you too many responsibilities, and had too many expectations?”

“Perhaps, they wanted to me to be a holy defender of the temple, and a Keeper of the Amrita. But the point was I had my sights set out on the planes even when I was barely past a hatchling myself. Pa wanted a son he could be proud of, at least to the rest of the brood. You’ve had some children Vuyelwa, exactly how did you raise them?”

“I cared for them a lot, taught them how to fend for themselves, how to be good girls. Honestly it’s different for every parent, as I was concerned about the safety of my daughters, I did teach a little on how to fight and a little bit on magic. Though I mainly left it up to them to learn what they needed, and where they wanted to go in life. I’m proud of what Nyarai and Ngoni are doing now, and we understand each other quite well.”

“When I think about it, my Pa wasn’t the really pushy one, it was always my Mum. She was always nagging on me. Wanting me to feed the serpents, clean the pool, go to dance lessons, go to fighting practice, meditate, and help cook dinner and about twenty other things all laid out on an exact schedule.”

“Well us mothers always want we see as best for our children, but it requires at least that we understand each other. I admit that my youngest daughter Nyarai didn’t originally take a path that I approved of, as she wanted to be a planar scout, but I came to understand that from her.”

“I wish my parents would try to come to terms with what I’m doing, but they also don’t like much of what my brother and sister’s been doing. My brother did most of the things they asked of him, but he just happens to be gay, and they don’t approve of that. My little sister did a lot of clubbing, drinking, doing all sorts of drugs, and sleeping around. She eventually left the brood and joined the Sensates, where she’s doing much the same.”

Kesslaira and Annaerlitha floated in the middle of the mutable bubble that made up the Terratomorph Club. The two girls danced with each other in this bubble which was one large dance floor. A varied collection of individuals danced and floated through the air of this large bubble, caught up in the music coming from a collection of drummers of all varieties, who mixed with singers and instrumentalists who each took turns.

The two were awash in a sea of colours and sounds, among a mass of dancers not paying heed to those around them as they kissed and embraced each other passionately. Using strands of ectoplasm as scarves they twirled and spun around, Ravi and Vuyelwa danced with fluid movements vaguely paying attention to Annaerlitha and Kesslaira.

As Qian, Viggo, and Yuloc entered the club, they were quite taken by the sights they were seeing around them, as they started to look for their friends. They were quite impressed at the fact they were able to bounce off the fluid walls of the club. It took them minutes, before they caught sight of Ravi, Vuyelwa, Annaerlitha and Kesslaira.

They floated near their friends, while Annaerlitha and Kesslaira held their passionate embrace.

“So did you three boys have fun?” Vuyelwa asked cheerfully.

“Well it was certainly amusing; we didn’t cause too much trouble, and were only asked to leave one place.” Viggo replied.

“Hey, you know who Eri is dating tonight?” Qian inquired.

“No,” Ravi replied, “It isn’t green-haired Sensate lass, who was a Githzerai Seer he was with more than a month ago?”

“No, it’s your brother Kabir Asurasti. He’s some big playwright and writer apparently.”

Ravi made a short expression of shock, before returning to his normal suave composure and asking, “How the fuck did that happen?”

Kabir met his older brother Ravi eye to eye for the first time in many years. “Ravi! How’ve you been doing lately, no one but Jarita’s heard from you brother!”

“And rightly so, as you know how mum and me haven’t been getting along too well.” Ravi gave a slightly distasteful look at his brother. “I thought you were mum’s little favourite, what are you doing out here in Limbo?”

“Well to tell you the truth brother, when you and Jarita left the brood, mum wasn’t too pleased with a lot of my ‘indiscretions’. I took the brunt of all of her criticisms, and she tried to set me ‘straight’ herself. So I took to travelling the planes just like you and me little sis.”

“Sure I can see that happening, but what were you doing when you went out on the planes?”

“I went searching for a new purpose in my life. I tried my hand at being a mercenary, a merchant, an explorer, a musician, and many other careers across many planes of existence until I found my true calling. It all happened one day when I was staying in the World Serpent Inn, I met this strange traveller who told me stories of this world he came from. It was a world of technological wonders and hidden terrors, where a force known as the Red Death or Dark Matter is trying to reassert its lost influence caused by planar breaches, in a great battle hidden away from the eyes of most of its clueless inhabitants.”

“I’ve heard of such a world described, mainly from lass named Frelassa, a very good and close friend of mine. Only that outsiders to this world are known as Shadowkind, and their exists factions such as the Illuminati, Invisible College, Knights of the Silver Dragon, the Qabals, Final Church, Hoffman Institute and Infinity Serpents fighting to secretly control this world.”

“Anyways he described of this technological wonder, something that combined a camera and a phonograph, to produce moving pictures with sound. He was a playwright and they used this device to record plays, to send out to millions. He described a great city from which he came from, known as Mumbai where he used his art in an attempt to inspire so many people.”

“And so becoming a playwright, became your new calling? Can’t say that’s your best choice, so how are you trying to reach out and inspire millions without the aid of this wonder device?”

“Well that’s where I’ve taken to travelling the planes myself. I formed a theatre troupe where I’ve integrated many of the music and dances of our brood into plays. I have a bunch of skilled performers working under me.”

“Well that’s good for you and all, brother.” Ravi glanced at Eri for a moment. “But you know your boyfriend their Eri Fhaal, who’s one of me buds. Well he’s a notorious slut, now how many of you here have slept with Eri?”

Annaerlitha and Kesslaira raised their hands, followed by Vuyelwa who also reluctantly raised hers, as Eri grinned mischievously.

“Yes, he told me of that.” Kabir answered as Eri embraced him from behind and lightly kissed and bit down his neck.

“I have to say your brother’s yummy.” Eri announced. “He’s been nothing but fun.”

“One thing brother, is that we need to have a family reunion. I’ve already sent a planar messenger spirit for Jarita. We’re going home back to the brood, because we need to resolve our conflict.” Kabir said with stern determination, to Ravi who looked displeased.

“Just wait one fucking minute,” Qian said, “You’re actually going to follow your brother’s suggestion?”

“I’ve become experienced enough; I think I can handle it.” Ravi replied barely standing, after his night of revels where he did his best to not to think about his brother. For most of the night, Ravi danced with his friends other than Eri nearby, until he met a Githzerai girl that caught his eye and spent the rest of his night with her. “I’ve spent my last four years forgetting about them.”

“So you want to get back on the Black Lotus, following your brother’s ship the Starfall, through the Deep Ethereal, and into Naga-Loka.”

“Yes, what else do we have to do but hang around with Kess here?”

“I don’t know... We could go hunting for Chaos Beasts or something else stupid like that.”

Kess’s mother walked into the den, a room she let some of Kess’s friends use as all the other rooms were taken. She was serious looking in contrast to her unruly daughter, with dark red hair tied back into a bun, wearing a striped grey dress with a petticoat over it. Kess’s choice in friends did indeed puzzle her, but she knew she had to put up with her daughter’s crazy ways.

“My daughter hasn’t been causing any of you trouble now?” she asked the two.

“No, just Ravi here,” Qian replied. “He’s going back to his family who never wanted him, as he was such a nuisance.”

“How can he be any worse than my Kess?” Kess’s mother retorted. “How often did he try to reshape the very structure of his own room, leaving the entire house a mess? And where’s my daughter

anyways?”

“Last time I checked she was tied to her bed by Annaerlitha as part of a very passionate night.” Ravi calmly gave his answer.

“That I didn’t need to know!”

“Why thank you.”

Kabir stood beside Eri with his arm around his waist as he talked to Ravi, Qian and Viggo. Eri was in a blissful mood with Kabir cuddling him.

“Look brother this is important, as I want to bring others to understand each other through my art. It would be hypocritical if I couldn’t do that with my own family.” Kabir explained, “I know it’s more about me than you, but you’ve spent the last four years avoiding the issue.”

“And this I’ll go, just to not have them hound me anymore.” Ravi replied.

“Good then my brother, I plan to leave Shrak’tlor in two days. There’s one more performance my theatre troupe has to do. We’ve been doing a play on the Shrak’tlor Revolution, it was actually a commission I did from one of the governing council members.”

“I’ve heard all about it.”

“Well they like it well enough, that some folks here in Shrak’tlor want me to write some more plays. And it’s a good thing that I was able to find myself a talented contingent of Githzerai actors.”

“And I’ve seen it, you know, I have to say it’s a little cliché.” Qian commented.

“I’ve heard that criticism before, but it’s always my attempt to work around the tried and true you know.”

“But it’s something to write such a play here in Shrak’tlor, where you’ll face your biggest critics. I know most Githzerai might not look on something that well.” Viggo added.

“Most of them have taken it well, and I get more positive reviews than negative so far. Of course I have a few mercenaries in place in case, there’s a real negative critic who wants to use violence to express his distaste. Thought honestly if there was anything I’d show here in Shrak’tlor, it would be a play based on the legendary tales of Councilmember Dak’kon and his companions Nordom the

Anarchic Modron, Morte and Annah.”

“That would be more interesting...” Qian contemplated. “But just how well do you do on other planes?”

“Well the audience on each plane is always looking for something different. One thing for sure is that my plays on Elysium are very different from those I’ve done in the Abyss.”

“I saw one of your plays in the Abyss. It certainly had a lot of bloodshed, and on stage sex scenes. I really loved it.” Eri said as he tilted his head towards Kabir’s.

“Perhaps I’ll do it for you personally,” Kabir whispered in Eri’s ear, and explaining, “Though at least one time the bloodshed was real, one of the Tanar’i actors did it without me knowing. Let’s just say it was one of the most problematic productions I’ve done.”

The following night the gang spent another night out in the Entertainment and Market District of Shrak’tlor. They all met at a small diner known as Jor’lan’s at one point in the night.

“I’m going to Bhogavati, in Naga-Loka with my brother, and if there’s one thing about it, I want to rest of you to come with me if you can. I don’t think I can take the wrath of my family completely alone without help.” Ravi explained to his friends.

“You know I’m coming along,” Eri responded, “I’m not done with Kabir just yet.”

“And honestly Ravi, you need help.” Qian added, “I’m going with you.”

“The same from both of us,” Vuyelwa responded as she held Viggo’s hand on the table.

“I’m staying; you know the whole thing with me and the Order of Zerthimon. I’ve been neglecting that for years.” Kesslaira explained. “I’m really sorry I can’t come along.”

“However I’ll go, as it’s something else that’s amusing for me to do.” Annaerlitha announced.

“Then it’s settled, well let’s have some fun now before we leave tomorrow!” Ravi said.

The gang waited at the docks as the Black Lotus and Starfall were preparing for their voyages. Kesslaira and Yuloc stood at the docks with their friends who were departing.

“The most I can say Kess, is be a nice girl.” Ravi said, “Don’t let any of this training get to you in a bad way.”

“I’ll be all right!” Kesslaira ran up to Ravi and kissed on the cheek.

“How about a kiss for the rest of us?” Eri asked.

“Sure, I like you too.” Kesslaira replied as she kissed Eri and the others, “And you too Qian... And the two of you as well... And last of all especially you my darling, Annaerlitha!”

“And farewell to you too, Yuloc,” Ravi said.

“Hruggghk! Bye!” Yuloc replied.

The gang slowly made their way onto with Black Lotus, with the exception of Eri and Ravi who went on the Starfall. The two ships slowly pulled out of dock with Kesslaira and Yuloc waving goodbye, as a bunch of Githzerai port authorities carefully watched the ships.

The Starfall was a larger vessel designed for transporting passengers and goods; it was wide ship with two keels at each side. It was coloured crimson with intricately designed gold highlights, powered by a set of Elemental Air Wheels on both of its sides which each contained one large and two smaller wheels. The two ships drifted away from Shrak’tlor slowly, before opening their planar gates in a flash of light.

The chaotic jumble of Limbo faded away in the light before subsiding into the misty form of the Deep Ethereal Plane. Bits of protomatter drifted and were swept by the currents of this sea were all that could be seen.

The ships drifted for days in the Deep Ethereal, guided by their planar compasses which set the course of Naga-Loka, before reaching their destinations. They pierced the wall of an enormously massive green bubble which was as the plane’s borders from the Ethereal side.

Flying through the border brought them thirty feet above the ground of the plane Naga-Loka. It was a world covered with rich jungles, seas and great cities built of stone, gems and gold. As the ships headed in the direction of Bhogavati, Ravi standing on the observation deck of the Starfall mumbled, “It’s more beautiful than I remember, but still I did all I could to get away from this world.”

In a few short hours the Black Lotus and Starfall finally reached Bhogavati, the unbelievably expansive capital of Naga-Loka where massive buildings embedded with gems stood. Half of Bhogavati was submerged in water, and much of the city was built around large rock formation which rose from the water dotted with natural caves which blended in to the buildings.

An enormous Naga flew past the two ships, curiously examining the sudden arrivals to the city. As the Black Lotus and Starfall pulled into the skydocks located on a towering building shaped like a massive coiled serpent, they could see that the streets of Bhogavati were filled with ophidian inhabitants of all varieties. Naga of greater, common and elder varieties slithered through out the streets, along with Yuan-Ti, Ophidians, Couatl, Lillendi, N'koll, Mariliths, Dragons and many other such creatures.

The crew of the Black Lotus and Starfall waited for a moment for Ravi and Kabir to step on to the dock to greet a collection of armed Tainted Ones and Ophidians guards.

“We’ve returned back to fold,” Kabir announced to a Tainted Human who let them pass.

“We welcome you here faithful one,” the Tainted Human said, “And your associates are welcome in this city if they commit no offences against the sanctity of our holy city.”

“Not quite the greeting I was expecting,” Ravi commented as he gave the signal for everyone else to come down.

“So where’s everyone going?” Viggo asked.

“My friends, you can stay at my family’s estate,” Ravi explained. “Everyone else, I’ll have to arrange some lodgings for the rest of you to stay at... Say, you wouldn’t have some places for about sixty of the folks here to stay at, now would you?”

“From what I here there’s the Asp’s Nest Inn which is open to a lot of visitors.” The Tainted Human replied.

“Excellent, now I’ll just have to call some coaches to get everyone here where they need to go.” Ravi then mentioned to his friends, “For the most part we get around using either Drakes or Vinama Skycoaches.”

“I haven’t let little Trixy off the ship for a weeks now, you think my fox is going to be safe here, darling?” Annaerlitha asked.

“You should probably keep your familiar with you, if you’re walking through the streets, otherwise she should be safe at my family’s home the snakes there are well trained.”

“Thanks, you’re such a dear.”

The gang sat in a Vinama Skycoach, piloted by a Greensnake Naga psychic who held the psionic control crystal closely to body. The Vinama was essentially a well decorated platform with railing, seats and some crystals. Like almost everything else the Vinama had a serpent motif. At Ravi’s request she was to give them a good aerial tour of Bhogavati as they flew in the direction of the Asurasti family estate.

Bhogavati was an ancient city, as many of its buildings stood for as long as anyone could remember. Yet in a few places it showed signs of the industrialization that was spreading across the multiverse, for also as long as anyone could remember. Statues of snakes and serpents of all varieties stood on both sides of many streets and paths. Snakes hung from the massive trees that dotted the city. Canals ran through the city, and in many places were the streets.

Due to the fact that many of its residents didn’t have legs, Bhogavati didn’t have stairs. All stairs instead had ramps and slopes in their places. Gems and crystals of all varieties covered every building, and in some cases they bore magical or psionic qualities. Most of the streets at night would be lit by the many Everbright Lanterns which stood on iron poles with coiled serpents sculpted around them.

Temples and noble palaces made for many of the massive buildings through out Bhogavati. And they were all well defended by vanguards of Ophidians and Serpent blooded humanoids.

“Just about every Yuan-Ti sect has a base in this city rather it be mine the Brood of Vasuki, or the Children of Sessa, Ananta’s Watchers, Manasa’s Guardians, the Serpents of the Light, Infinity Serpents, Mucilinda’s Vanguard, or Nidhogg’s Spawn; they’re all here.” Ravi explained to his friends, “Though the most significant Yuan-Ti sects over here are the Naga-Disciple sects.”

“Do they all get along?” Vuyelwa asked.

“No, from time to time, there’s the occasional conflict that spills out into the streets. The council of mediators has their forces to keep the sects under control should their wars bring too much ruin to the city.”

“So what you’re saying is Bhogavati is basically the Sigil for anything remotely serpentine?” Eri asked.

“Yes, that’s basically it. There’s a lot of traffic in this city, from all of us Serpent-kind, and plenty of portals to places such as Shekinester’s Court or the World Serpent Inn.”

“So darling, just what does you’re family do here?” Annaerlitha asked.

“Well Kabir and me, were both minor nobles in this city. As we’re Yuan-Ti, we happen to be a bloodline of mortals mixed with that of the Divine Nagas that rules this city. Ours is distantly related to Vasuki, one of the supposed rulers of this city. He was coil that churned the seas to create the divine elixir, of the Amrita.

As for what they actually do, well they run some businesses here controlling some of the industrial interests. They own a couple of textile factories, and handle the sale and export of whatever they produce. They’ve tried as hard as they could though to get themselves in a better position and status here. And that’s why I have a problem with them.

It’s not as if there’s a set caste system such as the Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra system. It’s more of a system based on the strength of Naga blood, and the closeness to the powers such blood can bring. They’ve been long trying to bring our family closer to the blood, as all of us are just Purebloods last time I checked.”

The gang finally arrived at the Asurasti estate, and already Ravi and Kabir both gave off rather tense looks as if they were preparing for a brutal battle. Kabir brought along his assistant and co-playwright a female Changeling named Lux who wore a white dress of an elaborate design, with a layered skirt and frilly petticoat taking attention off her almost noseless natural gray face with large white eyes.

“You go in first,” Ravi muttered as he motioned his brother forward.

The estate was of a modest size for many of the buildings in the city. I had a set of spires at the front, with serpentine sculptures coiled around them. Across all of the walls were depictions of the sea and the stars, combined with imagery of churning and ascension. A lone Yuan-Ti Pureblood servant at the door greeted the gang as they approached, “Hello, you’re parents have been expecting you Kabir. They’re just anxious right now, to see you and brother.”

“I know. Thanks you’ve been very helpful.” Kabir replied.

Ravi and Kabir cautiously walked into their family estate’s main courtyard, which was a wide open space with floors decorated with many tiny tiles each forming segments of many different snakes. A pool with a fountain sat at the centre of the courtyard, small trees grew from the floor where actual snakes hung, and the corners of the courtyard were lit by continual flames which gave off a soft green glow.

Walking into the courtyard were Ravi and Kabir’s parents. Ravi’s father was a Pureblood wearing a long greyish blue shirt, which fit loosely over his body. He was a clean shaven man, with some wrinkles and greying hair who had a cold penetrating stare. A tail about four feet in length protruded from his back, which was something he gained since last time Ravi saw him.

Ravi and Kabir's mother was an aging woman with a somewhat more frantic look on her face. She wore a dark red sari with gold serpentine decorations all over its design. Underneath her sari she wore a dark blue skirt, and bronze coloured blouse with loose sleeves. She hissed almost menacingly, and coiled around both her arms her asps that hissed with her. They were also new additions to her that Ravi noticed.

“Why is it now, you come back home?” Ravi's mother asked. “We had just got over the strain you put on both of us. Is it that you now bring what misfortunes you got on other planes here?”

“Are you asking for our help now, after all these years?” Ravi's father added.

“No, I've come to show you how far the both of us have come!” Kabir raised the volume of his voice, “We've succeeded in different ways!”

“Doing what? Being beggars and criminals across the planes?” Ravi's mother snapped back.

“I resent that word! I'm not a criminal! I'm a renegade!” Ravi hissed.

“You're what?!”

“Look calm down, mum...” Kabir interrupted. “We were here to be civil to each other, and not start bickering. Let's start this over again, with a proper greeting.”

Mrs. and Mr. Asurasti paused for a moment, looking at each other before saying coldly and reluctantly, “Hello sons!”

“Why, hello Ma!” Ravi and Kabir replied just as reluctantly. “Hello Pa!”

“How've you been?” Mr. Asurasti replied.

“Quite all right, myself.” Ravi said.

“And me to.”

“Who's those friends you've got with you?” Mrs. Asurasti looked as if she finally acknowledged the presence of the others in the courtyard.

“Why, these are my buddies!” Ravi replied and then pointing to each of his friends, “This is my best buddy here Xian Dao Qian, another good pal of mine, Viggo Jotunsen. This lovely lady here, is Viggo's wonderful fiancé Vuyelwa Starchilde. And this really sweet lass here, is the beautiful

Annaerlitha Bharvatlan. And right over here is Eri Fhaal.”

“Hi Mrs. Asurasti,” Eri waved and smiled. “I’m also like the current boyfriend of Kabir too, for about a week.”

“Yes, and here’s my primary associate Lux.” Kabir pointed to his Changeling companion. “We both happen to be highly successful playwrights. Lux here is in fact also an actress too.”

“And about the renegade part your son mentioned.” Qian interrupted, “Well actual we get a lot of wealth from going to strange places, and either looting them or finding some enlightenment while we’re at it!”

Mrs. Asurasti rolled her eyes as her darted out bitterly.

“Really, it’s not as bad as it sounds I assure you!” Ravi added.

“Look just get to your rooms, which our servants prepared, show your new friends to the guestrooms, and talk later, okay?” Mrs. Asurasti sternly requested.

The gang settled themselves in their rooms, Qian and Annaerlitha were paired in one room, Vuyelwa and Viggo were together in another, Eri and Lux also shared a room. Each room was well furnished and bore tapestries of serpents ascending to the stars. Cushions were placed over rugs of each room, and windows with good views of the metropolis outside.

The Asurasti parent stormed off after the meeting in the courtyard and hid themselves away as they took some time together to determine what to do about their children arriving. Jarita the one daughter of the Asurasti family was also on her way, arriving from her latest journey and revels with many of her Sensate friends in the Beastlands.

Qian and Annaerlitha sat together on the cushions provided to them by the household, smoking hashish out of a hookah lying in the room.

“So what do you think of Ravi’s folks,” Qian asked.

“They don’t seem much different from my family, with the exception of the whole incest thing my family does.” Annaerlitha pondered, “Though I guess you could say though my parents are quite proud of me. My father especially was so proud when he learned I would be studying Necromancy at De’rais University. And my mother wept tears of joy, it was so happy.”

“But the Asurasti don’t seem, well as fucked up as your parents are.”

“Watch your tongue naughty boy; it’s Eccentric that’s the proper term.” She paused as she took a hoot. “Though I guess you could say my parents are more welcoming, and not as restrictive as our dear Ravi’s parents are. But then again I still stay at my family’s home most of the time when I’m in Sigil.”

“And yet you stay at the Sorority of Discord’s Headquarters, with me and the rest of us just as much…”

“You Qian I haven’t heard much about your family either?”

“What’s there to say, I was born and raised in Carceri. My parents taught me a few things when I was little but mostly left me on my own. I lived in a city where backstabbing and deceit was common place, and learned to deal with it. It came as no surprise to me, when I was orphaned at later age because some of my parent’s enemies killed them. Yes, I paid my respects to them, and eventually killed my parent’s killers.”

“Well that shows you love them.”

“I barely remember them, anyways we all have our problems, and I just hope Ravi can fix his. He shouldn’t have to put up with his mother always having to bash every fucking thing he’s saying.”

“Qian enough with this talk,” Annaerlitha turned and looked at him. She reached for him and pulled him close, “We have a lot of time to waste, my dear. Why don’t we do something more productive?”

“Yeah, I had enough of talking about the problems. Let’s go do it!”

“That’s good, my darling,” Annaerlitha whispered in Qian’s ear as she kissed him on the neck, and then started a series of bites getting progressively harder down his neck. Qian sighed in ecstasy as Annaerlitha bit him, and slowly started to remove his clothes.

Kabir had the largest room of the Asurasti family’s children, as he was the eldest. When Kabir lived here, he did some art and some writing on his own time. His studio was still in tact along with the books he kept in his room. Yet his absence from his room for the years he was away made it feel empty. He sat and pondered looking at the mandala on a tapestry that hung on one of his room’s five walls.

Quietly he was joined by Eri, who crept in to see what his current love interest was up to. He saw the Kabir didn’t notice his presence at all, “Boo!”

“Aagh!” Kabir screamed shocked, “What the fuck are you doing?”

“I just wanted to see how you were,” Eri replied as we sat right in front of Kabir.

“I could be better, I see that my parents are just as stubborn as before. And Ravi almost as bad himself, they really did like arguing with each other back then, and they still do now.”

“It’s your mother that’s the pushiest.”

“Well that because she’s the matriarch, and wants her family to be perfect. Nagas you know, tend to be a little matriarchal, and us Yuan-Ti follow their examples. My Pa, does get a bit pushy at time too.”

“How much worse can this get with your sister on the way?”

“Worse, she never gave a damn about what my parents said to her all the time. And they’ve called her a lot of bad things. She’s a free spirit, and much more like Ravi then she is to me.”

“She’s a Sensate from what I hear. So what’s she like to be around?”

“Probably a lot of fun for you and your friends, and yes my parents most certainly had a problem with her promiscuity, even more than they did with Ravi’s. She would always be partying or doing something outside the estate, and hardly had any time for the family.”

“She sounds like trouble, you told me she also lives in Sigil like I do. So I guess whatever she’s doing now, might even anger your parents some more.”

“You’re right on that, love,” Kabir grinned at Eri, “Will you help me take my mind of these problems?”

“Yes that’s what I’m here for.”

“Why don’t we try something a bit different?” Kabir grinned, as he shifted into the form of an eighteen foot snake right before Eri.

He quickly coiled around Eri, who struggled for a bit before surrendering to grasp. Eri liked his feelings of helplessness as he lay at Kabir’s mercy. Kabir’s tongue teased Eri, as it flicked out of his mouth. Eri almost melted away to the sensations Kabir causing him. As Eri slipped away, Kabir shifted back into humanoid form with his arms grasped around Eri, as he slowly removed his shirt and toyed with his nipple ring. “Now the real fun begins...”

A couple hours later, Vuyelwa stood in the courtyard with Viggo observing the scene that went on. Annaerlitha's mischievous familiar Trixy prodded some of the snakes who snapped back at her, as she deftly avoided them. Vuyelwa's companion Shangor the Hawk perched on a tree and looked at Trixy disappointed.

"They're acting like children too." Vuyelwa commented.

"So what are we waiting for now?" Viggo asked.

"For Mr. and Mrs. Asurasti to come to terms with their son's arrival, and to wait for their daughter to show up."

"It could take awhile."

"Well actually no it doesn't!" a woman walking in the courtyard announced. She was a pretty Pureblood girl, with her hair tied in pigtails with hair extensions added. She wore a yellow skirt with a small blue bustier under her orange sari. "Hi you must be one of my brother's guests. I'm Jarita Asurasti, their little sister!"

"So you're the little sister I've been hearing a lot about..." Vuyelwa said. "The family reunion is complete then."

"It's not going to be a pleasant one," Jarita replied. "I've gone through enough of me mum's baseless ranting, senseless criticisms and insults about me. I only agreed to this, as a means of putting all of it to an end."

"Aren't you bringing a bunch of your friends with you?" Viggo asked.

"No, I decided to face this crisis by myself. I don't want to bring any of my friends into this, unlike my brothers. I can certainly see Ravi trying to hide behind all of you, and distract my parents away from him."

"I'm letting Ravi handle this himself mostly, unless it really, really becomes a problem too big for him." Vuyelwa explained, "I happen to be a mother myself, with two daughters so I can relate best to the situations. However I don't believe that I should be talking to his parents in his place."

"You want to be mediator in all of this?"

"Precisely, it's the best thing I can as his friend."

The night around the Asurasti estate was tense as both sides didn't sleep very well in anticipation over what would happen. The Asurasti children agreed to all avoid their parents for the night, and the parents they didn't want to see their children to the morning. It even caused even some tensions among the servants, as if they could feel the strings pulling on them.

Ravi, Kabir and Jarita all met together in Kabir's room. Ravi proposed, "We're all rather successful now, with the paths we took? So lets all drive that point through."

"I think it's more of a case that we have to make them accept what we do." Jarita put her point across.

"That's not going to be easy at all. Mum's very stubborn, and still wants things her way. She'd have all of us performing temple and house chores, while marrying us off to other powerful families."

"I personally believe she's more open to reason now, as it's been years since we left. I'm sure having all three of her children turn on her, and basically run away from home, as set the point that she has compromise now." Kabir opined.

"But let's go over the points here, Kabir you're a playwright, and everyone has their opinions on what's good and bad art. I don't think mum's too proud about your work. Jarita you're a full Sensate, employed by the faction itself as one of its representatives and agents. Mum I don't think was ever pleased at the ideas behind that faction. And then there's myself, I loot and pillage for a living, kill people who get in my way on a not that uncommon basis, and spend a lot of my time indulging myself when I'm not doing the later. I personally think Mum doesn't like that at all."

"Well you're a bit of a mercenary too," Jarita commented. "That means you could at least help Mum with problems, by killing them if she asked."

"You're all about self-indulgence." Ravi said.

"No, I'm more about finding enlightenment on my own terms. I'm using my experiences to extend my understanding of reality; it's just that often it seems to be shameless fun and makes me look like a slut. Bad experiences are also experiences themselves, and I've been through quite my share of them, such as this one."

"You know the both of you have very similar professions. It's something I think the two of you should put together." Kabir devised.

"And really what can you say about yourself being a playwright, and being gay to Mum?" Jarita asked.

"Well as a playwright I've brought many of the influences of the Brood of Vasuki to audiences all across the planes. It's more of a subtle duty to the Brood. As for my taste for men, well that's personally none of her concern." Kabir explained. "I was always the one who did the most of what she

asked of us.”

“And it wasn’t good enough for her. Personally I think the problem she has with you is the fact that you also don’t want to be a part in our Mum’s breeding program.” Ravi added in.

“You know she wanted us to produce some Halfblood children for the Asurasti family.” Jarita admitted, “She doesn’t like this whole being near the bottom of the Yuan-Ti social ladder as a family of only Purebloods.”

It was the next morning that the Asurasti all met for breakfast, where their first obvious war of words would take place. Ravi brought the gang with him, and Kabir brought Lux with him to breakfast. They started out quietly not saying a thing as they ate.

“You’ve been living among the non-scaled too long,” Mrs. Asurasti mumbled. “I’m surprised you’ll still eat our food.”

“What makes you think, we wouldn’t?” Ravi snapped back at his mother.

“You have no respect for our ways anymore, all of you. I can’t see where I went wrong.”

“What makes you think we don’t respect the ways of the Yuan-Ti?” Ravi asked. “But the problem is your fault; you’ve pushed us way too hard.”

“It’s not that we don’t respect the ancient values of the Naga and the Yuan-Ti. It’s you and Pa that we have a problem with.” Jarita added. “You know that we live among outsiders, because you made all serpent-kin seem rather repulsive to me.”

“None of us have liked being crushed under the weight of everything you put us through. We all had no choice but to despise the direction you sought for us, and to scorn you for every insult and attack you directed at the three of us.” Ravi asserted.

“You may think of Jarita, Ravi and myself as failures, but we all went our own directions and succeeded.” Kabir admitted, “If you even took some time to see where we’ve all gone too, you’ll see that we’ve all went farther than we could ever be under your direction. I have a lot to say for my own successes, as I’m sure that both Ravi and Jarita can say.”

“Doing what?” Mrs. Asurasti expressed in disgust. “All I see is a bunch of charlatans, harlots and criminals in front of me. All of you are a disgrace to me!”

“You’re certainly an ignorant one, mother!” Ravi raised his voice. “I can see you can’t conceive of how I formed a bond with many strangers from across the plane, strong enough now that they are my family. Or how I’ve become to understand how truth comes from within what one understands after seeing reality from many different angles! I doubt that you even understand the concept of love or free will, with the way you go on about how we should behave and what we should do!”

“It’s always being about what you want, and not about what we want!” Jarita shouted. “Did you ever care to ask me how I felt about having to bare and raise some Halfblood children, to someone I didn’t even like myself? I don’t care if that would have made me a brood mother over some other family. It was never something I wanted for myself.”

“I’ve heard enough of this!” Mr. Asurasti burst out. “Come Padma, we’ve had enough of this; we don’t need to hear anymore.”

Mr. and Mrs. Asurasti walked away quite disappointed at their children. The remaining Asurastis and their guests sat for a moment in silence, before Qian said, “Well it went better than expected. Round one, is over.”

It wasn’t long before Mr. Asurasti arranged for one of the servants to tell his children and their guests to meet him at his factory located in a central part of Bhogavati. Apparently he was going to describe some of his more reasonable terms away from his wife who was still quite disappointed.

Ravi and Viggo saw it as a good time to contact some of the crew of their ship. They met the Asp’s Nest a massive inn, developed for the many varieties of outsiders who came to Bhogavati. The inn was coiled halls that ran between its many rooms, which went over more than sixty levels.

Captain Zhang and his crew were on the thirty-third level which Ravi and Viggo reached by taking a levitating elevator lift. As their rooms were all close together the crew gathered in one of the many lobbies of the inn to meet the two.

“We’ve got some trouble with my folks, but my Pa wants to meet a bunch of us at his factory.” Ravi explained. “Says he got his share of problems, that some of us might help him with. From what I know, the PTC doesn’t like the potential competition his operation might bring him. There might be some sabotage going on, as he’s recently experienced some production problems.”

“I figured it’s best that you know what’s going to happen before we start blowing up buildings and having half of the city going after us.” Viggo announced.

“Yes, that seems bad.” Captain Zhang replied. “But, I don’t like PTC bastards at all. You give me signal if they become too big of problem and I get some help for you.”

“That’s always good to know, Captain. We’ll always appreciate you help!” Viggo expressed.

The Asurasti factory was a modestly large building that had many workers toiling away. A collection of weavers, dyers, cutters, folders and packagers worked busily at their factory. Unlike many other factories on other worlds where the interior and exterior reflected a cold and featureless machine, this building contained a rather spacious structure. It was decorated with coiling serpents like many of Bhogavati’s other buildings, but it contained large and narrow windows with organic looking patterns which brought in a different feel to this factory.

It felt more like a community who lived and grew inside the factory. The craftsmanship and design of textiles were of quite a unique and creative design compared to many other such textiles built across the multiverse. The workers didn’t seem to be frantic, and demonstrated the fact that they were all quite skilled.

“I have more than forty different designs being manufactured here everyday.” Mr. Asurasti explained to Ravi and the gang. “I even tried some limited designs which I have made here for a short time, before discontinuing them. You could say we’re quite a big business here in Bhogavati.”

“And your problems were?” Viggo asked.

“Yes, a few of my machines were broken a week ago. Now it may be that they were overworked, but I just recently got them. Anyways its cut my production down. On top of that a few of my workers were attacked not long after they left here after their shifts.”

“You still have broken machines around?” Qian asked.

“What about your workers, where can we find them?” Vuyelwa added.

“Well the machines are down there, as for my workers, well two of them have come back to work since they were last attacked.” Mr. Asurasti replied, looking through his workers down below, trying to pick out the two he mentioned. “One of them would be Anati right down there.”

“Good, we’ll be able to fix this.” Ravi said.

It was a weaving machine that was conveniently broken on many of its wheels. The axels with some inspection were taken out of the rolling wheels and broken into pieces. By Annaerlitha’s and Vuyelwa’s observation, there was no way it could have been caused wear and tear of the machinery. In

fact they saw that the caps holding the axels in place were pried off by the simple fact there were dents around where the axels were inserted.

Vuyelwa finished off the final words of a spell she prepared for such a situation, calling upon on a spirit. It was a lesser spirit, the very spirit of factory itself as it was a young spirit since the factory was a newer building. She asked it, “What have you seen here in your very own walls, which happened to this machine?”

“Strange mortals dressed in black came in and ruined it,” the factory’s ephemeral and unseen spirit replied. Yet to Vuyelwa it was a vague presence in a cloudy form that manifested itself in front of her.

“Did these strange mortals discuss anything?” she asked.

“They argued over the baubles they were receiving as a reward, how they were to go about their plans, and who it was that sent them here.”

“Who was it that employed them?”

“One that they said had many riches for them and their brothers.”

“Thank you great spirit that watches over here.” Vuyelwa concluded, “You may go now, as I have learned all I need to know here.”

“So what can you tell us, darling?” Annaerlitha asked.

“That it was destroyed by mercenaries dressed in black, who employed by someone with many riches,” Vuyelwa explained. “It sounds to me more like it has to do with the PTC. What do any of you know about them here?”

“I know they have presence here, they own some buildings and have a few marketplaces under their control.” Ravi answered. “Though they keep a lower profile here then they do in other places.”

Eri sat beside the woman that Mr. Asurasti pointed out was Anati was she took a break from her work. She was a young Goblin woman, with some serpent blood as she had a few scales over her turquoise skin. She had a swollen lip, a black eye and moved with a limp.

“Don’t worry about me, I just want to know who would do such a thing to such a lass as yourself,” Eri expressed to her.

“I don’t know who would do such a thing to me myself. I happened so quickly I barely know what happened...” She tried to remember her ordeal. “I remember I just finished my shift and I was going to see my betrothed. And then suddenly I found, I don’t five, maybe six or seven big ones surround me. They grabbed me and beat me as I screamed. The next thing I know I was lying in a hospital bed.”

“Let me try to make it feel better for you,” Eri said as he examined her bruises, and kissed her on the cheek, as he lightly applied some healing salve on her. It caused some of her bruises to noticeably fade away, as her pain lessened. “Do remember what they looked like?”

“I think they were completely dressed in black, head to toe, they were humanoid... I seem to remember one of them had the symbol of two crossed kris knives on their belts. But why are you asking me these questions?”

“I just want to be as helpful as I can, I just don’t want to see someone like you have to suffer this badly. And if I can do anything about it, I want to ensure they won’t do it to you again.”

“So we got the symbol of two crossed kris knives and a bunch of attackers and saboteurs in black, who were apparently doing it because they were being paid.” Eri mentioned to Mr. Asurasti. “Does that mean anything to you?”

Mr. Asurasti thought hard for a moment before saying, “You know, I think I’ve heard of a group known as the Black Venom Fangs. They’re a brotherhood associated with the Merrshaulkites.”

“But what would the Merrshaulkites have against you?” Ravi asked. “Other than the fact they never really liked anyone associated with the Brood of Vasuki or any of our allies?”

“I don’t know, but if it was a holy war they were trying to carry out against me I would have thought their attacks would be more lethal, and they would have tried to directly attack my household by now.” Mr. Asurasti then narrowed his eyes, “And when did they ever need money for reasons to attack any of us, it doesn’t make much sense.”

The gang met in a crowded marketplace in between the Asurasti Estate and the Factory. It was busy as the buyers and merchants walked and slithered in all directions. Four large statues of cobras marked the boundaries of this bustling area, which sold food both local and exotic, pottery, rugs, furniture and various herbs and alchemical mixtures.

“The Black Venom Fangs?” Jarita asked. “I might know where they are, during those last few years I spent in this city, I went around to a lot of places, many of them dangerous ones. From what I know

they like to hide away in the catacombs and cave, in the Pit district.”

“I heard you spent quite a lot of time there,” Kabir said. “Probably one of the major problems mum had with you.”

“It’s not as bad as everyone says it is, once you know how to act in such a place. There’s some of the darker cults that reside there, and there’s more of the criminal element of this city, but it’s not something that you, Ravi or your friends can’t handle.”

“Isn’t that where the PTC has some of their market located as well?” Ravi asked.

“I think it might be.”

“We should definitely check them out.”

The gang accompanied by Jarita travelled to the Pit by a vinama skycoach. They arrived in a region of Bhogavati, where many of the serpent imagery took on a darker more aggressive and sinister tone. The waters which covered a lot of the Pit were of a darker colour which gave the whole district a darker tone. Many of the residents hid their faces away and eyed the gang with suspicious looks, as they travelled around on a gondola they rented the moment they landed.

The snakes which swam in the dark waters all gave menacing hisses as the gang passed through. It wasn’t long before Jarita directed them to a small dock where they stood a dark abandoned temple. It was ruined for what seemed like centuries, covered in rubble and soot.

They took a walk inside and saw that there was another market place that openly sold highly lethal poisons of many varieties along with a wide assortment of slaves. A Snake-tailed Yuan-Ti Halfblood dragged a male elf in chains onto the stand, and announced, “Male Elven slave bidding starts at 50 gold. As you all know elves aren’t good at all for manual labour, but they make fine artists if pushed right, or make very good love slaves should you need to satisfy those needs.”

Eri wanted to say something about the slave he saw being sold, but knew he had to hold himself back, as it would only hurt their efforts in finding those responsible as well as make it worse on many of the slaves still left behind.

Jarita quickly spotted a particular merchant wearing red robes with his face wrapped in a red cloth. She approached him and quietly whispered, “Can you find the Black Venom Fangs for me?”

The merchant nodded and pointed to a dark tunnel located in a corner of the market. He whispered, “Look for the swallowed world.”

With that information the gang went down the dark tunnel. Due to their varied heritage from different planar creatures or serpents everyone possessed the ability to see the shape of things even in the dark. The tunnels were a cramped place with the walls containing many cracks caused by years of decay.

It wasn't long before they spotted the sign of a world being consumed by a serpent, followed by another sign containing a massive lump in a serpent.

“Well it looks like we made it here, now what?” Qian asked.

The gang slowly approached the sculpted symbol of the serpent that consumed a world and felt around it. Eri pulled on its tail; the sculpture and the wall it was attached to, moved to the side to reveal an opening. The gang cautiously walked down another passageway until they found themselves in a room lit by green burning torches with a giant statue of a serpent consuming a planet in its mouth.

A figure clad in black stood at one end of the room and greeted them. “Greetings, you don't look like your lost, or tourists here. So what are you doing here?”

“I was going to ask that to you as well,” Qian snapped back.

“This place belongs to us, the Black Venom Fangs of Merrshaulk. We live here, as it's one of our sacred grounds. Don't play this game with me. Why are you here?” The figure clad in black asked as his tone got angrier.

“You wouldn't happen to have anything to do with the attack on the Asurasti Factory's equipment and workers now would you?”

“We hate them but we wouldn't resort to such petty attacks against them if wanted to attack them!”

“Do you really know what the fuck is going on?”

“I don't we have some interlopers here in our sacred abode,” the black-figure signalled as he as joined by many of his other brethren all clad in black.

“Would any of your people you resort to such petty attacks if someone paid them to?” Vuyelwa asked, saw that they were surrounded.

“No! We don't work for anyone but ourselves and the chosen of Merrshaulk!” the black-clad leader yelled.

“Just wait one fucking moment, how are we supposed to trust you?” Qian interrupted. “There's

nothing but your word to go by.”

“You’ll just have to.”

“We’ll take your word, but if we find out you’ve been fucking lying to us, I’ll move the entire Brood of Vasuki against you.” Ravi threatened. “Now we’ll leave this bloody sanctuary of yours, but if you sods try anything later against the Asurasti’s property, I ensure you’ll suffer horribly.”

It was evening at the Asurasti estate; only Jarita, Kabir and Lux were there with Mrs. Asurasti. She looked tense as she noticed that they were the only ones to appear for dinner, and even her own husband was absent.

“What’s the meaning of this?” she asked in outrage.

“Everyone else is dealing with the problems at the factory mum.” Jarita calmly answered, “I’m going down there after dinner, as I much rather be waiting for saboteurs and thugs to show themselves rather than have to set through another argument tonight.”

“Damn, that Ravi! He would have to do something like this, and feed his outrageous ways to even Chandra himself!”

“It was Pa’s own choice that he’d also stay and watch,” Kabir explained. “Personally I don’t blame him for wanting to help. Since it seems like we have some really horrible problems revealing itself. Someone probably wants to start a war against us.”

Qian peered through his looking glass as he stood on top of the Asurasti Factory. Nightfall was coming and most of the workers were leaving as their shifts came to the end. Mr. Asurasti just hired some guards to protect his factory at night, but the concern was the saboteurs would try a different approach, possibly a more violent one.

Vuyelwa sent her companion Shangor the Hawk to fly around the area to look for any group of people approaching. He constantly flew back to point out a few groups of passer-by’s to the factory.

Eri watched the streets down below snooping around corners and down alleyways for the signs of anyone suspicious, other than himself. Annaerlitha sat in one of the neighbouring buildings with her fox familiar Trixy, watching with her looking glass for interlopers.

Ravi slithered around in snake form following many of the workers as they left. While his father kept watch inside the factory for anyone who might suddenly appear. Finally Viggo stood on top of another building armed with his looking glass rifle ready to shoot anyone who matched the description of clad completely in black.

A couple hours went by almost completely uneventful.

Jarita decided it was time to head to the factory. She quickly ran down to there making sure she brought with her a pair of katars and a pair of pistols. She entered a psionic trance of awareness to her of anyone with hostilities near her. As she approached the factory she felt the presence of hostilities, and quickly drew her pistols.

She spotted a small group of individuals dressed completely in black at the end of a wide alley, and instantly fired her pistols at them emptying both of her double and single-barrelled pistol. Only one of her bullets managed to hit its target as one of the figures dressed in black stumbled back from a shot in the chest.

The sound of gunfire was heard by all of the gang who quickly rushed to action. Within a few seconds Viggo also spotted the saboteurs, and fired a shot bringing one of them to the ground. Ravi shifted into his humanoid form and ran around the corner armed with a pistol and a tulwar, to see his sister spewing a glob of green ectoplasm at the group. The glob of ectoplasm stuck to one individual completely entangling them.

Ravi responded by summoning a globe of darkness on a throw stone through his natural psionic abilities onto the saboteurs. Qian quickly ran from rooftop to rooftop as he heard the gunshots with his dao sabre in one hand and a pepperbox pistol in the other. Annaerlitha quietly muttered the final words to her enchantment giving her the ability to fly.

Vuyelwa called upon the assistance of spirits to help her, before she aimed her rifle at a lone figure who charged out of the darkness. She caused the individual to stumble for a few steps with her shot.

Ravi and Jarita charged at the figure from separate sides. Ravi brought his tulwar through the left side of the lone figure with a very swift swipe as he ran, while Jarita pierced the right side with a thrust of one of her katars. The lone figure fell to the ground bleeding from wounds which spilled all over the ground.

The globe of darkness vanished, as revealing that there were six figures standing. Except that they were wearing black robes or crimson armour with spiky shoulder pads. They still had their faces hidden by cloth wrapped around them. One of the threw a gem to the ground behind, unleashing a flash of light which created a flickering wall of light.

From the wall of light hordes of humanoids dressed in tight black clothing jumped out to overwhelm Ravi and Jarita.

Qian, who was running towards the advancing horde from the rooftops above, noticed what these humanoids were, muttering to himself, “Ninjas, I fucking hate Ninjas.”

He lay his dao and pistol down as he stood on the rooftop above the alley to draw a grenade from his belt. Quickly he lit the fuse of his grenade and dropped it down below on the advancing horde of ninjas. With a loud explosion his grenade sent as many as six ninjas flying through the air in pieces. He quickly prepared another grenade.

Ravi and Jarita took a step back as they both used their natural psionic abilities summoning quasi-real translucent membranes around them as a defence mechanism. The membrane made it difficult for others to see exactly where Ravi and Jarita were, however it gave the two of them no such problem with seeing where their opponents were. Ravi brought down two ninjas with his pistol leaving him with only one of his barrels full.

Eri popped around the corner firing his pistol into the crowd of ninjas killing more of them, before he ran out of bullets and went back around to reload. Ravi fired the last shot from his bullet killing another ninja, as Qian dropped another grenade into the advancing horde that had yet to reach Ravi and Jarita.

One of the armoured figures at the rear of the horde fired a beam of green sickly energy at Ravi. It grazed his arm leaving a sickly looking burn on it.

Viggo charged into the alley after making his way down the building by sliding down a pillar. He had a small blunderbuss in one hand where he fired indiscriminately into the crowd of ninjas killing many more. In his other hand his battleaxe stood ready as it cackled with lightning.

Vuyelwa joined the fray pointing a wand made of bone and wood at the ninjas unleashing a blast of flame. Then she took a couple of shots with her repeating rifle, as the ninja horde began to surround them. Sheathing her wand she drew out her thick curved sword and stared grimly at her opponents.

Annaerlitha flew above the fray and summoned forth her black tentacles of darkness which claimed many victims, while Qian dropped his last grenade into the crowd. Picking up his dao and expanding his awareness with psychic powers, Qian ran down the walls and began hacking into ninjas as he came to the ground.

The six figures at the back of the horde continued to watch their battle unfold as they saw scores of their minions massacred brutally by the gang. It was their plan to wait a bit more before deciding to act.

Eri unleashed a wave of mental energy disrupting the minds of all the ninjas around him, making stand

in one place halting their attacks. Viggo tore through the dazed ninjas with his battleaxe cutting scores and scores of them down. Ravi and Jarita struck quickly at the ninjas that didn't fall to Viggo's axe or Qian's dao.

Annaerlitha called a ghostly hand into existence as she flew above the ninjas who barely paid heed to her presence. She directed the hand forward upon the piles of ninja bodies as she delivered her next spell. Every corpse touched by her ghostly hand began to move again. The ninjas screamed in terror as the corpses of many of their fallen companions attacked them, as ferocious ravenous zombies.

Eri ducked under a sword swipe as he quickly stuck his rapier through one ninja, and withdrew it to stab another. Qian did a back flip in the air and landed on a ninjas shoulders as he continued to slaughter more of them with his dao. In a few more seconds all that remained were six ninjas which were finished off by Annaerlitha's zombies and a few shots from Vuyelwa's repeating rifle.

The six figures looked at the gang and gave them their applause. Then two of manifested glowing blades in their hands, while a third unleashed a blast of energy from its hands. Among the other three figures, two of them wielded heavy blades with serrated edges while the third unleashed a blast of psychic energy at the gang.

Qian and Viggo took the blast of psychic energy the hardest and stumbled back dropping their weapons. The two figures with glowing blades charged at Qian and Viggo and caught them off-guard as they buried their blades through their ribs. Eri recognized the two as soulknives, a special type of warrior who wielded weapons formed by their own will. He knew from experience that they could be very deadly combatants and cautiously approached as he directed a thrust at one of their heads.

The soulknife dodged Eri's rapier withdrawing his soulblade, as Eri pressed his attack forward while Qian came to his senses. Vuyelwa rushed the soulknife who attacked Viggo, and blocked her sword with his soulblade.

Annaerlitha quickly shrouded herself with a blurring illusion as she recognized one of the figures down below as a warlock who could innately wield eldritch energies as a weapon. She flew behind a serpentine gargoyle near the top of a building for cover.

Another figure which the gang realized was a wilder, an innately talented psychic much like Jarita and Eri to an extent, unleashed a bolt of fire at them. Eri easily dodged out of the way along with Qian who took the time to retrieve his dao, while the others found themselves scorched from the attack.

Ravi slashed at one of the soulknives, as the two other warriors joined the melee. Jarita barely dodged a downward slash from the warrior's serrated blade as she placed a well placed blow through the warrior's armour.

Viggo recited a battle blessing upon himself and his allies before he flew into rage at the sight of

seeing Vuyelwa take cut to the midsection from a soulblade. Eri concentrated on unleashing another wave of mental disruption on his enemies, dazing the soulknives and the warriors.

Viggo buried his battleaxe into one of the soulknives followed by Qian taking the opportunity to push the soulknife into the writhing black tentacles. Ravi unleashed a series of slashes on a warrior with Jarita and Eri who poked his rapier in some vulnerable places. Most of Annaerlitha's zombies were destroyed by the blast of fire from the wilder, so she directed her spectral hand at the wilder to deliver a spell with the touch of a ghoul as she avoided blasts of energy coming from the warlock.

The wilder was frozen in place by the spectral hand, and quickly took on a deathly smell as their skin shrivelled from the negative energy. Qian parried a blow from the other warrior, as it regained its senses. Eri was hit in the back by a blast of energy from the warlock, as he stumbled to the ground. Viggo swung his axe at the other warrior, giving Qian the opportunity to slash the warrior's neck with his dao. The last remaining zombie tried to take a bite from the warrior, but was dispatched as an afterthought.

Vuyelwa called another spell to increase her companions fighting prowess as they ferociously fought against their opponents. Annaerlitha unleashed a bolt of black energy from her wand at the warlock draining away life energy. Qian hacked down the remaining soulknife while the soulknife slashed Viggo's leg.

With the two warriors left Viggo, Qian, Ravi, Jarita and Eri surrounded them and cut them down brutally.

Qian then ran along the walls of the alley and hacked apart the wilder as soon as he reached him. Viggo charged at the warlock as he took a hit from one of the warlock bolts of energy. He swung his axe into the warlock's abdomen and paused, as his head began to clear. Viggo pushed the warlock to the ground and held his axe to the warlock's neck.

"The battle's over, you've been defeated." Viggo proclaimed.

Qian looked around and saw the entire alleyway was covered in blood and that bodies were piled up all around them. "All in a good day's work, now how many did we kill?"

Annaerlitha flew down to join the rest of her friends, she quickly scanned the area looking at every body on the ground. "We've killed 83, in this alley and happen to have one prisoner. We should be proud of ourselves, darling!"

Vuyelwa unmasked the bodies of the more skilled enemies, while Viggo tore the black head wrapping off the prisoner. What they saw on the bodies were humanoids with vaguely cat-like features, and one thing that didn't catch their eyes was the fact that their hands could bend the other way.

“They have Rakshasa blood in them!” Ravi was shocked at the revelation. “This means that somehow there’s full-blooded Rakshasa involved in this!”
