

NEVER TOO MANY

Chapter One

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This calamity is not limited to our god.

I have reached colleagues and Blessed in devotion to other divines. Tenash and Fray, Khíra, Revel, the Sorceress, even Larsen—none of them answer the call of their most faithful. Spells fail. Blessings fade.

The divines of nature appear either spared or unaffected. The sun and moon turn and the weather holds. Acolytes sent to check on the farms tell me of no disease or blight, at least thus far.

Yet last night, the High Priestess of Vesper stepped out of the shadows of my own chamber to demand explanation. I feared some attack, but she only wanted answers. Beneath her façade of strength, I sensed worry and fear. The goddess of shadows has vanished, too.

Bandits, petty lords, and worse have already taken advantage. Disease and roaming monsters cannot be far behind.

I fear something terrible has happened.

—Octavian Greenfell, High Priest of Erudh the Wise

Four months ago

Chapter One

“‘*Only a porter job*’ my ass,” Callan hissed. Arrows, spears, and magic flew wild across the broad underground temple. Shouts, screams, and clashing steel drove his sense of vulnerability deep into his bones. Lightning struck the masonry wall inches above his scalp. Even here, at the shadowy edges of the battle, Callan found plenty of danger.

Fighting raged across an open chamber large enough to contain half a village. At its center stood a platform with a great orb of glass and steel that glowed with swirling colors. Blessed priests of some dark god surrounded the orb, throwing out magic and orders to their minions. All around them, sword and claw drew blood and screams. A mob of black-robed cultists and monsters fought Callan’s six employers—now five, with the early demise of the warlock. The wizard had conjured up a few spectral beasts to counter the enemy’s numbers, but they wouldn’t last.

The Daring Blades had armor, fine weapons, powerful sorcery, and years of experience. Callan had a tan heavy cotton tunic and faded blue pants. He trained with the local militia when they remembered the monthly meeting. He was literate and curious, but wielded not a sparkle of magic. Twenty-two, able-bodied, and healthy did not make him a match for real warriors. Callan had only been hired to carry gear and tend the camp. As much as he wanted to help, he’d be lucky to get out alive... and he didn’t see that happening.

A second bolt of lightning arced higher above Callan into a winged shape hiding in the tall shadows. The gargoyle crashed and shattered in a spread of embers. The orange glow briefly illuminated his short black hair and passingly handsome face before he shrank back into the shadows. He didn’t need to be mistaken for another threat.

“Dumbest move I ever made,” he muttered in search of shelter. “*It’s a couple days of hiking and camping for some coin. They probably won’t find anything, and you’ll still get paid.*’ Fuck you, Uncle Lang. And fuck me for listening to you.”

Callan could’ve said no. Hell, he could’ve just left the market when Roderick, Blessed of Erudh the Wise made his pitch for a hireling. Though not devoted to Erudh, Callan was partial to the Loremaster’s clerics. Perhaps more importantly, Uncle Lang was right there to encourage him.

Thirty years ago, Uncle Lang portered for the heroes who cleared the cursed and haunted manor east of Sunderford. He bought a house with his pay. Callan had humbler ambitions: the last storm had left Old Man Hugo without a ferry and no money to pay for a new one, putting a drag on the whole

village. The Daring Blades only wanted to explore some old ruins. Maybe it would be nothing. Maybe he'd come back with a few coins for his trouble.

Now it seemed he wouldn't come home at all.

A glass orb flew up from the scrum, sailing toward Callan with a frosty white shimmer. He ducked behind a pillar and narrowly escaped its explosion of sword-length shards of ice.

"Fuck you a *lot*, Uncle Lang."

"Try harder, scum!" Thurnor roared near the center of the battle. His hammer spoke louder. The mighty dwarf swung his weapon in a wide circle over his head, cracking skulls and slamming foes into one another. A grey, hairy ogre in naught but a tunic hopped out of the hammer's way, meaning to retaliate with his great club. Instead, a cloaked and dark-armored shape darted in behind Thurnor's swing. Naexi slammed the club aside with her shield and drove her sword into the ogre's belly. She didn't wait for him to fall before moving to the next enemy.

One more dead ogre seemed to make little difference.

It didn't help that she and another of the Blades lacked their normal divine might. Naexi was a paladin of Tenash, Brave and Just. Roderick served Erudh the Loremaster. Their skills and knowledge still mattered, but they clearly missed their magic. The lightning and the orb of icy blades hadn't come from either of them.

"Was that your best shot? A trick of frost?" The taunt startled Callan mostly because it was so close. A cultist in black darted to the stone pillar that hid Callan, carrying a staff and wearing runes on black jewels. Here on the edge of battle, no one could threaten the cultist. He conjured flames from his staff with clear intent to hurl them to lethal purpose.

Callan lacked armor or a real weapon, but his common belt knife was still a knife. An enemy caught unawares was a fight he could handle. He wrapped his hand around the cultist's mouth and shoved his knife into the man's neck.

The cultist screamed and struggled. Callan held on for dear life, cursing himself for expecting any less. A fortunate crack of thunder covered the noise, and then Callan dragged his victim into the shadows behind the pillar. Blood drenched his arm from shoulder to hand.

"There," Callan huffed. "I helped."

It was more than anyone expected of him. The Blades had planned to keep him in the hallway, by the great double doors, when they first ventured inside. That had been a good plan until the pair of ogres came charging down the hall. At that point, Callan dropped his pack and ducked inside to find a hiding place.

He looked over the first person he ever killed, feeling like he should feel *more* about it, but he didn't have time. *Man's a lunatic*, Callan decided. The cultist's jeweled and iron-decorated staff was better weaponry than a belt knife. Callan carried it to the next pillar and its shadows, even if it meant going deeper into the temple.

A fight like this was beyond him, but helping felt better than hiding. He looked around for the next way to help.

"Push them back," boomed the unnaturally loud voice of the cult leader by the big platform. Like Callan's victim, the man wore black and carried an ornate staff. "Keep them away from the orb! Kill them to honor Lord Sovor!"

Sovor? Callan winced. That explained much. Sunderford had no library, but the shrine of Erudh had a few books. Callan read their copies of *First Dawning* and Amund's *From the Ashes* more than once, first out of curiosity and then a desire to master what learning he could. In both works, the Lord of Lords rose to power more than once, vying endlessly to dominate all he could. Every time he was vanquished, he claimed a new name and new symbols for a new generation of power-hungry fools.

Callan didn't like the thought of such maniacs only two days from home. The great orb behind their leader didn't look like good news for the area, either... and it was the enemy's priority.

With a longer look at the orb, Callan saw shapes within the swirling colors. A hand pushed against the glass from inside. It disappeared as soon as he saw it, replaced by the glimpse of a face. Then the lights swirled back over every recognizable feature again.

Another crack and flash of lightning brought new screams from the battle. "Thurnour! Hold on!" cried the wizard Ezora. The dwarven warrior at the center of the fight listed on his feet, smoke drifting from his blackened armor. Then one of the ogres sent the dwarf flying with a swing of his great club. Thurnour Stronghelm landed near the exit without his helmet.

Ezora punished the ogre with a magical barrage of bright green daggers. The ogre staggered and winced with pain, but the robed elf didn't put him down. Only two phantasmal badgers remained at her sides to cover her flanks. "We need to retreat!" she shouted.

"No!" Thurnour's brother, Brusul, leaped onto the ogre's back and stabbed with a dagger in each hand. While Thurnour had been a gruff and disdainful employer to Callan, Brusul came off as untrustworthy altogether. He was good with locks and shadows, though, and good with those daggers. The ogre staggered and fell to his knees. Brusul pulled his blades and stabbed again.

Thick ropes of fire lashed out from the central altar, ending both the dwarven burglar and the ogre. The cult leader cackled and waved at his followers. "Have no mercy! Finish this!"

With Maximilian the warlock and the dwarf brothers down, the Blades were half gone. The wizard and Roderick the cleric were both a little stuffy, but they seemed like good people. Naexi was sincere and brave, if distant. Callan didn't want to see them killed. He didn't want to get caught here alone, either. He had to do something.

The fight closed in on the Blades, opening the edges of the temple. Callan saw a shadowed path to the platform, the steps, and the orb, all out of the leader's sight. He doubted he could take out a priest of Sovor by himself, but if the orb was so important, it might make for a good distraction. He might buy time for the others, or give them a chance to escape.

"Probably die trying," Callan muttered. "Better than dying without trying at all."

Callan slipped around an odd, abstract statue for cover, bringing him to yet another bad turn of events. Roderick was struck low by the claws of a grey gargoyle and fell at the feet of another robed cultist with a staff. Reflexively, Callan leaped from cover in hopes of saving Roderick, but he wasn't close enough. The cultist slammed his staff down hard enough to crack Roderick's skull even without the awful black energy it channeled.

"No!" shouted a woman's voice. The cultist laughed until Callan thwacked him hard upside the head. Staggered, the cultist turned. Some radiant flash made the gargoyle howl, but it was too much for Callan to track. He shoved the cultist toward the radiance merely to keep the enemy off-balance.

A glowing blade pierced the cultist's chest. Naexi appeared behind him, her chain mail covered in blood and her shield cracked. She kept her hood up so often Callan rarely saw her delicate, dark grey face, pointed ears, and white hair. Battle left her expression desperate and fierce. She looked surprised to find him there, too, but her quick eyes told her the situation. Callan had done what he could. It wasn't enough to save Roderick.

"I'm going for the orb," said Callan. He didn't know what he'd do when he got there. That was more complexity than they had time for, anyway.

"The—?" She made some fast and grim calculation behind her eyes and nodded. "You were a fine worker and—I enjoyed your cooking." Something hesitant tripped up her words, but urgency kept her going. "I am sorry we did not speak more. Die well, Callan of Sunderford."

Naexi spun and pushed back into the battle with a war cry.

My cooking? Callan blinked. He didn't think it was that special, but he'd tried. He'd also tried to talk to Naexi, timidly and respectfully. He thought he had stuck his foot in his mouth with the attempt. She seemed to prefer her privacy, yet she at least remembered his name, unlike some of her companions. "Not how I wanted our first real conversation to go," Callan muttered.

And of course, she's beautiful. Of course, this is my first real look. Not that it matters.

Ezora conjured a pack of phantom wolves at the center of the battle, drawing the attention and power of the enemy. Naexi dove in to protect her flank from the cultists. With the enemy focused there, Callan reached the side steps and slipped up onto the platform.

Light swirled inside the big orb. Closer up, Callan saw more faint glimpses of hands, faces, even kicking feet. They varied from men to women, light to dark tones, sometimes armored, sometimes bare. The orb vibrated with power.

Callan heard another scream. A woman's scream.

"Foolish elf!" the leader cackled. "Your blood belongs to my god!"

"Ezora! No!" shouted Naexi.

"You're the last, little paladin," called the leader. "I won't ask for your surrender. I don't want it. Lord Sovor wants your blood and your soul."

A final burst of radiance from the battle defied the leader's last words, followed by another scream. Like the light, it was defiant, but Naexi's pain was clear.

Though Callan seethed with anger, the cult leader surely had defenses. He also seemed like the second most important target. *Whatever this thing is, a bunch of asshole Sovorites probably shouldn't have it.* Callan wound up his staff for the hardest swing he could muster.

"Lord Gareth! Behind you!" someone shouted too late. The leader whirled as Callan slammed his staff into the glowing orb with all his strength.

The glass broke, as did the jewel at the end of the staff. For half a second, nothing happened, and Callan thought it was all pointless. Then the orb rumbled and shook, and that colorful light reached out like a hand. He heard Gareth gasp, "No!"

Everything exploded.

Knocked to the floor, Callan lost his bearings and his sight. His vision cleared to an armored boot landing on the masonry in front of him. Another followed. The wearer emerged from a huge gap in the shattered orb, over seven feet tall and covered in steel and blood.

Callan would have recognized him without his reading. He knew from the songs. He knew from the prayers. Everyone knew.

Fray, the god of battle snatched Gareth by one shoulder and then the other. Gareth had just enough time to scream before Fray crushed his shoulders together and flung the mess to either side. Then the war god charged off the platform. Callan heard more screams, but this time, none came from anyone on his side.

A dusky woman with long, dark hair and a shimmering emerald gown followed the war god. “So exuberant,” she murmured. A casual wave of her hand brought forth a greater flash of lightning than any the battle had yet seen...except, Callan realized, the lightning flowed *to* her. More lines of power joined in, draining every cultist of their power in a single gesture. With that one display, Callan knew she was Lyra, mistress of magic and the arts.

Other gods followed. Like the first, Callan had never seen any in person, but he recognized them all. Tenash appeared in armor. Erudh looked every inch the librarian in tidy clothes. Revel, goddess of compassion and joy came out in an ivory dress. Vesper emerged in clothes as dark as the caves and shadows she ruled. Someone else swept out of the orb and through Vesper’s shadows, ducking around the wrecked orb and out of sight... and then Callan saw the spider leg step out of the orb, and then the clawed and scaled foot, and then the tentacle. Aragha, mother of monsters wore a tattered robe that barely covered her frightful and inhuman body.

Like the last escapee, Aragha turned from the orb directly into the shadows without even noticing her battered rescuer. Callan clung to that detail with hope and relief. These were not all gods of good. Even a glimpse of Aragha and Vesper was more terrifying than all the fanatics and monsters of this entire ordeal.

More stepped out from the orb.

“Fear nothing here, mortal.” Tenash looked down at him with a grin of quiet pride. “No harm will come to you now.”

His dark brown features were handsome, strong and kind. He seemed younger than Fray or Vesper, yet a god was a god. The words of encouragement banished Callan’s fear of darker powers, but not his intimidation and awe. Callan at least recovered his wits. “Naexi,” he blurted. “The night elf. She’s one of your paladins. She was hurt! Can you help her? And their priest followed Erudh!”

“Rest, Callan. We will take care of our own.”

Tenash stepped off the platform, leaving the young man behind. Callan didn’t even wonder how Tenash knew his name; he had prayed to more than one god in his life. The one he prayed to most hadn’t emerged from the orb like these others.

Callan hoped that was a good sign.

* * *

Fray slaughtered the cultists and monsters in seconds. Even then, Callan saw more anger than haste in the god's movements. Lyra banished most of the bodies and blood with a wave of her hand, leaving behind only the fallen Daring Blades.

She looked to her fellow gods and goddesses, beginning a conversation that passed in glances. Callan didn't hear a word, nor see more than a nod, before Lyra, Fray, Erudh, and Tenash each spread their arms out wide toward the fallen. Golden light enveloped each of the Daring Blades, shining brightly enough to make Callan wince until he saw Naexi stir. Thurnor propped himself up on an elbow. Ezora crawled to her hands and knees.

The Daring Blades stood whole and healthy before the gods, but seemed hazy and bewildered. Lyra whispered words Callan could not make out. His six employers looked on in a daze, apparently not seeing the gods before them. The band turned for the exit in that same trance, leaving their porter behind as if invisible and forgotten.

Lessons and legends rushed through Callan's memories as he watched them. Tenash and Fray were sometime lovers, but often split when Tenash's principles of protection and justice clashed with Fray's pure thirst for excitement and victory. The god of learning and wisdom had once been husband to the goddess of the arts, but then Lyra discovered the secrets of magic Erudh hid from her and the whole world. The history showed in their body language as Erudh watched her with a mix of longing and frustration, while Lyra barely looked his way at all. Revel, bright and beautiful and exuding joy and warmth seemed almost out of place with all the tension.

Then the gods spoke, none seeming too friendly yet strangely chatty.

"Sovor will pay for this," rumbled Fray.

"Sovor did not do this alone," whispered a god in hiding.

"So you said," conceded Vesper, "when you weren't stepping on my hand."

"Oh, but you were so courteous about personal space in our prison?" Lyra scoffed.

"We're out," said Revel. "Let's not fight. The world has suffered from our absence. Can't you hear them calling for us?"

"I can," said Tenash. "We have much to repair. We should also think before we act and learn what we can of this debacle so it isn't repeated."

"Agreed," said Erudh. "Look at who is here and who is not. Sovor exempted the gods of nature, of death, of crafts. He wanted the seasons to turn and the crops to grow. He had a plan."

"Exempted? Or did they bow to him?" Vesper scoffed.

"They are the oldest of us. Have they ever bowed to anyone?" asked Erudh.

“Sade isn’t here either,” snarled Aragha. “Or Oron. They’re as dark as Sovor. Darker. I wonder if they are in league with him in this.”

“Darker? As opposed to yourselves?” asked Revel.

“We’re here, aren’t we?” asked Vesper. “Some darkness has a purpose. Even you know that with all your parties in the night.”

“We should also consider...” Erudh looked around the temple, seeming to take in every event with a simple look at their surroundings until his gaze fell to Callan. “Ah. Our escape. This mortal freed us when all was lost. His companions stumbled into this and lost themselves to the chaos of battle. I’m disappointed in my disciple among them. Callan here saw clearly. Not a warrior, nor a wielder of magic. Only a hireling...and dedicated to Khíra.”

“What?” blurted that voice hidden from view. Several other gods looked up in surprise at the name of the goddess of love and beauty.

“So he is,” rumbled Fray. “Look closely. Not a warrior, but good enough.”

“That’s not why I laugh. Khíra? Pathetic,” hissed Aragha.

“No one asked you,” Callan snapped, just like he did whenever he heard that from any scoffing jerk back home... and then he remembered who he was talking to. All the monsters in the whole dungeon couldn’t create a more fearsome image than their goddess. Yet he swallowed and stammered through his fear. “E-ev...nearly everyone yearns for love. It’s worth more than power or riches.”

“You know of neither.” Aragha’s spider leg came forward, putting the fear of goddesses into Callan’s heart.

Armored boots stepped between them—two very different boots. Tenash and Fray blocked Aragha’s path. It was enough to stay whatever Aragha intended. “He will go unharmed if he minds his tongue,” she said.

With protection from the others, Callan’s voice steadied—carefully. “I have prayed and given to many of you, but a mortal dedicates to only one god. Every priest says to hold to your greatest values. That led me to Khíra. If a mortal dedicates to one patron, the choice shouldn’t insult all the rest...should it?”

“Too many of us see insult anyway,” said a new voice. “Sorry, I wanted to get myself together before stepping out.” She emerged from the ruined stone and iron prison in a gauzy white gown, tall, shapely, and flawless, with flowing black hair past her shoulders. Her beauty almost hurt to look at, and that was before her dark eyes found Callan’s and her lips twitched with a grin. His heart pounded with yearning; his body had other natural reactions, including the respectful sort. “Don’t kneel, darling.

You're not an equal here, but you have rescued us all from the direst peril in centuries. Our debt merits a little respect."

"Our peril isn't ended until Sovor is brought to justice," Tenash reminded the rest.

"Our peril kept us locked together on top of one another," said Vesper. "I've had enough of all of you. Go handle the rest yourself, if you're so motivated."

"Do you think I am not searching for him already?" Tenash replied.

Callan looked from one to the other. "I don't understand."

"Gods are not limited to one place at one time... unless imprisoned," conceded Erudh. "We have already left. We also remain here. This matter is not finished."

"Agreed. We are all free thanks to this mortal—my follower." Khíra flashed a grin that could have melted Callan, but she turned it on the rest of the assembled before he felt too self-conscious. "You all owe me."

Aragha scoffed angrily. "That is ridiculous! We owe you nothing!"

"The ancient compacts between us say otherwise," said Erudh. "Callan is her follower, and he took personal risk in direct service to us all. Our oaths of recompense apply. We owe her for his service. I can quote your own oath if you need," he added for Aragha.

"Let's make this simple," said Khíra. "Some of you already hold debts over me. Shall this clean the slate? I believe it's more than I owe any of you. Obol, Peth, Yisao, Domis? Are we agreed?"

Respectively, the gods of commerce, vengeance, and of travelers and sailors agreed in nods or curt words and vanished without flash or flare. The goddess of hearth and family sauntered out of the chamber, beautiful and amused. "Gracious as always, Khíra. Thank you. Everyone have fun with this... especially you, dear sister. Farewell," Selune said on her way out.

"Bitch," Vesper seethed. Though elegant and beautiful, she was just as ominous and intimidating as Aragha. She quickly turned back to the discussion. "Khíra did not summon him. At worst, we owe *him*. We owe her nothing."

"That is perfectly acceptable, and works in your favor," said Khíra. "Let's consider: a mortal lifespan creates natural limits to this matter, and to what you owe...as long as we all agree to let him live as he will, without arranging an early end. The obligation must be honored, not cheated. I see you in the shadows, Larsen. You know what I mean. No tricks, no loopholes. In fact, let's exempt Erudh so he can adjudicate impartially. His service can be in establishing an ironclad agreement between the rest of us."

Callan glanced to the shadows as Khíra called out Larsen's presence. He knew at least one god stayed out of sight, but he hadn't expected the god of secrets and thieves. Now that he considered it, perhaps that was natural.

Most of the gods murmured agreement. Vesper waved in impatient assent. Aragha hissed, "Fine, if it gets us out of here."

"Then it is preliminarily agreed," said Erudh. "I assume you have—?"

"Wait!" Larsen stepped from the shadows, his head and face covered by a black hood. "His life must not be prolonged, either!"

"We are preliminarily agreed, little brother," Erudh repeated with emphasis. He seemed to like it, too. "You should be quicker with your tricks. Our ordeal has worn on all of us." He returned his attention to Khíra. "I sense some mischief from you, too, but your claim is valid. I assume you have some idea for his reward?"

"I do," said Khíra, glancing to him.

Her glance carried more than heart-stopping eye contact. Callan heard her voice in his mind, speaking with the speed of thought. "You have done profound good for many by freeing us. I sense a warm yet lonely heart. You feel unfulfilled, though when needed, you risked yourself for the good of others. I would ask you to do further good in my name. It is a good that will bring love and joy beyond your wildest dreams. Will you trust me?"

Callan had no idea what she planned. Out of habit, he nearly said nobody owed him anything. Despite his uncertainty, he wasn't about to turn down anything from the goddess of love. With a shaken voice, he managed: "Yes."

"Ugh. Telepathy with the mortal already," grumbled Aragha.

"Of course," said Lyra, unbothered. "Khíra, what do you propose for this mortal?"

"Love, of course," answered Khíra. "I will match him with a mortal lover, faithful and true, from among your dedicated—each of you. *Any* of your dedicated."

"What?" scoffed more than one god.

"Wait, what?" Callan looked around at the gods—seven gods, apart from Khíra and Erudh.

"You can't be serious," hissed Aragha.

"Do not mistake my joy and humor, mother of monsters," said Khíra. "This includes you, too. All of you. Allow me to match him with one lover from among your faithful, no matter how outlandish. And yes, I will likely choose some of your favorites, and yes, it may disrupt your agendas in the mortal realm. That is a bargain compared to what you owe."

“My lady... you can’t just *choose*...” whispered Callan. “...can you?”

“Shh. Trust. Listen,” said her voice in his mind.

“What if the chosen mortals refuse?” asked Erudh.

“You know me better than that, darling. Love is born of consent. If it is not consensual, it is not love. I would never choose those who would not want this, or him. On the contrary, I will choose *because* the match will work out. This is my domain. Matchmaking is my specialty. I only propose each of you get out of my way and that you accept the results. Oh, and let your follower know you approve. No tests of faith or loyalty.”

“Seven matches? All at once?” Revel laughed, but not in objection. Of course, the goddess of joy found this amusing.

“Mm, not to start. That would be crowded. I’m not saying anyone must be entirely exclusive, either,” said Khíra. “But otherwise, sure. Why not?”

Callan’s jaw was still open. His heart pounded as his eyes scanned the assembly. The implication of so many partners was crazy enough, but even that wasn’t his first concern.

“You believe any of my followers would want *him*?” asked Aragha.

That, Callan wanted to say. *That is my first concern.*

“I doubt you have to worry about any of your precious cult matrons and queens of the underworld,” Khíra came back with an even drier tone. Then she grinned. “But if I find one who makes a good match? You can bet your webs it’ll happen.” Her eyes flicked to the others. “And it will be to your chosen followers’ greatest happiness.”

“Pah! Happiness? Like I care—um,” Vesper faltered.

A hush fell over the room. Everyone stared at Vesper.

“Wow,” said Callan.

“Indeed,” said Fray. “I am the god of war, and even I want my followers to be happy.”

“All the more reason for me to take this into my own hands,” said Khíra.

“Bitch. Shut up, that’s not what I meant,” Vesper snapped. “You’re only doing this to strip us of our faithful. This is a power play.”

“I do not ask them to break faith with you. On the contrary, I ask that you not hold this against them—and if they need your reassurance, you give it. Or let them go, if they so choose. Let them know this is not a conflict with you, and then let the rest happen naturally.”

“You know this will conflict with their service and faith,” said the mother of monsters. “You mean to steal our worshippers this way.”

“Why Aragha, do you believe *love* is so powerful?” Khíra laughed. “In this moment, you all take the same gamble, for I have chosen no one. Yet I know you all have countless followers to choose from. With those numbers, *someone* will match, even from the darkest shadows. You will accept this, no matter how far it leads them from your agenda.”

Callan didn’t dare disrupt or disrespect his goddess. Even a whisper would be heard by gods. Hoping she still touched his mind, Callan thought clearly: *Do you really want me to take a lover from Aragha’s faithful? Or Larsen’s? Vesper’s? Some of these gods are evil and monstrous.*

“Their love will be wicked and decadent, I’m sure,” Khíra answered in his mind. “Larsen isn’t all that evil, really. Anyway, it will be good for them. You will be good for them, and keeping them with you will be good for the world.” Through her telepathy, Callan knew the twitch of her grin was just for him. “Worry not. These matches are for *you*, too.”

Fray didn’t seem bothered, but he was curious. “This is no small number of lovers.”

“I take my obligations seriously,” said Khíra. “As I say, these will be happy matches. All will be more than satisfied. Leave that to me... and my follower.”

For the first time in all this, Callan blushed. He did not want to misinterpret what Khíra meant by satisfaction.

“Oh, you have not,” she assured him silently. “I should warn you, this will likely take up most of your time.” It didn’t exactly sound like a warning.

“If this arrangement is to end with him, there can be no children,” said Erudh. “Such a legacy would prolong the matter.”

“Ah.” Khíra glanced at Callan. “Is that a problem for you?”

He shook his head vigorously. Callan had no yearning for children before today. That didn’t change as he tried to avoid eye contact with the mother of monsters and the goddess of shadow and dread. “Then we are agreed,” Khíra said on his behalf.

“How soon?” asked Lyra.

“Oh, I’m already looking,” Khíra assured with a grin.

“I’m fine with it,” said Revel. “This sounds like fun.”

“Of course, you’re fine with it,” muttered Vesper.

“Must you be like this?” asked Revel.

“Yes.”

The goddess of joy dismissed the exchange with a shake of her head. “Then we are agreed. One lover of your choice,” said Revel.

“Fine,” whispered Larsen. “Agreed. One lover of your choice.”

Callan’s heart beat hard. It felt like it beat harder as the agreement continued.

“Agreed. One lover of your choice,” said Tenash, god of valor and justice.

So said Lyra, goddess of magic and the arts.

And Fray, god of war.

Vesper grumbled, but relented. “Agreed. One lover of your choice. No tricks. Let this be done.”

“Thank you,” said Khíra.

All eyes turned to the shadows. Aragha’s white eyes narrowed.

“You can be on the inside of this, or on the outside,” said Erudh.

“Agreed,” said Aragha, suddenly much more approving in tone. “One lover of your choice. I give my full favor.”

“Oh, excellent,” Khíra told Callan privately. “So much better than I hoped.”

How is that better? he blurted in his mind. *That sounded evil!*

“Not the way you think. Aragha wants to make sure no one has an edge over her. Even if it goes against the rest of her agenda, she wants to outdo the others. She’s committed now. This is so good for you.”

Good how? Doesn’t this invite a river of jealousy and deceit?

“No, of course not. I wouldn’t set you up for that, darling. Trust me.” Then her grin bent again. “Although a dash or two may add spice without pain or ruin for anyone. Have faith.”

I have faith. I wish I had your confidence. He’d trembled from the first sight of the gods. Though his first tremors of godstruck awe had diminished, they were hardly gone.

“Even the strongest paladin would need all their courage to face this assembly. You’re doing fine,” said Khíra.

As if from some pocket in his robe, Erudh produced a scroll for all to see. “Then it is agreed. This matter is settled. We need not address it again unless one of you violates it, and then we will all reassemble to deal with the matter.”

“Ugh, you can’t be serious,” Larsen complained. “We’re all sick of one another already.”

Tenash grinned. “That is another incentive to hold to the agreement.”

“Are we finished? Can we go now?” asked Vesper.

“Yes,” said Erudh. “The matter is closed.”

“I’ll be in touch with you all very soon. Before the sun sets here, for some of you,” said Khíra.

Vesper enveloped herself in a cloud of darkness and vanished.

Others departed just as quickly. Lyra waved her hands and disappeared in a sparkling flash, as did Revel. Fray stalked off in a blood-red haze that vanished in his wake. The stealthier gods withdrew into shadows before Callan knew it.

“A moment, Tenash.” Khíra touched his armored shoulder before he moved away. Only he and Erudh remained, and even Tenash waited only to nod at some whispered suggestion from her. With that, he walked into the debris of the smashed temple and soon disappeared.

“And here I thought you came to this world to begin anew,” said Erudh. He didn’t quite chuckle, but it was close in his voice.

“I did. I have. Whatever are you implying?” she asked, clearly unbothered.

“Others may think you whimsical and silly. I know better. You’re as cunning and calculating as the rest, when you want to be. Perhaps more.” His beard punctuated his smirk. “All that time imprisoned together, and as soon as we’re out, you start trouble.”

“They annoyed me,” said Khíra.

“They?” he chuckled.

“You, too, but I can let you off the hook if it nails the rest of them.”

“And that’s all you want? You could have pressed for more. A mortal solution was generous.”

“Reaching for more would turn fun into a fight. Strife has its place in love, but it’s hardly my preference. Doing good is important to me. Tenash and his allies do a fine job of combatting evil, but pleasure and joy must exist to make that worthwhile. Our friend here knew that when he chose his patron,” she added.

“Inevitably, he has further adventures ahead,” said Erudh.

“Much sexier adventures,” Khíra agreed.

Erudh bowed. “I leave you to him.” The god left with no flash and no movement. Callan wasn’t even sure he had blinked. One instant Erudh was there, and then he was gone. Only Khíra and Callan remained.

“Finally. It’s about time we were alone.” The goddess of love smiled at him.

Even if he followed her, loved her, and found shelter in her teachings, he was still intimidated. “I don’t... Lady Khíra, know what to say or where to begin,” Callan confessed.

“Start by forgetting the titles and all your worry of offending me. Today, right now, you are my favorite mortal in the whole world, and I know the truth of all your feelings. Nothing you would ever say to me will diminish my love.” She made a simple, arcing gesture of her fingers under his chin. “Relax, and be yourself. Let it out.”

The assurance and familiar tones left him breathless until that gesture—and then the awe left him as if lifted from his shoulders. It made room for other emotions to escape.

“What the *fuck*?” Callan burst, not at Khíra but certainly beside her as he looked at the smashed room and defeated foes. “What the shitting fuck? This was a job! This was a couple days of carrying shit for coin! We’re down the road from home! All my life, these ruins have been here the whole time? These cultists have... what the fuck?”

Khíra looked on, holding back a laugh but not her amused smile.

“I could have died. Everyone else did die. Obol’s ass, this was...” He looked over the cavernous battlefield again. “I killed someone. More than one. I met gods. I...” He turned.

Khíra smiled. “Yes. And you came through it all, by luck *and* by courage and wit. Don’t forget the luck, but give yourself some credit. Now let the rest sink in.”

“Seven lovers.”

“That’s what I wanted to nail down here and now. We may not stop there.” His eyes widened, drawing out her laugh.

“How...?”

“You did fine in your trysts with Juliana. Aristen remembers your first kisses fondly, too.”

Callan blinked.

She knew—of course, the goddess knew about his humble runs at love with village neighbors. Those moments had largely driven him to Khíra, both in the longing and hope and then the aftermath. She smiled softly. “You and Aristen shared attraction, but it was mostly curiosity. Juliana liked you, but she wanted different things. Not greater, not better, just different. It’s why she left Sunderford with another man. You don’t want to live your whole life in Sunderford, either... but you wanted different lives.

“It’s alright to still hurt. It’s fine to have all your feelings. You know when to act upon them and when to keep them to yourself.”

“Is she—are Juliana and Aristen both happy?”

“Yes. Their lives and loves have ups and downs like any other. You did right by them. That’s all there is for you to do.”

“Okay,” said Callan.

“And that brings us back to your question.” Khíra smiled again. “They aren’t the only women you’ve ever wanted. You’ve had crushes and longings for others, and so have they. Every one of them. *Most* love only one at a time, but not everyone wants only one. Not everyone wants their lover around

all the time. Some do well with distance. Some truly don't mind sharing, and some learn to love sharing *very* much.

"This moment offered a unique opportunity. Matching lovers is my purview, but the agendas of other gods can make that messy. This lets me choose and work without interference. As I said, I'm sure to pick some they would rather keep focused on their pursuits. I may also pick those who waver in their devotion and might be better fulfilled with a new path."

"Why?" he wondered. "I mean no argument, but..."

"Many reasons. Above all, it is because you ache to love and be loved, Callan. You keep your yearnings private, but I am your chosen patron. I see directly into your heart, at your invitation. I know your longings. You may speak freely with me, and don't worry about me taking anything the wrong way. Beyond your own desires, I see ways to do great good in the long run. Also, I would not lie to Erudh—this will be fun and pleasurable for me, and much more for you and for your matches."

"Is that your only goal?" he asked. "Erudh said you were starting trouble. If you have some greater agenda... I believe in you, but I am no hero. I came as a porter."

"This may bring peril, yes," said Khíra. "You will leave here blessed as one of my paladins. Such power takes time to grow, but it will grow. Some I match with you will be powerful in their own right. Perhaps all of them. Yet I charge you with no quest and no mission other than to care for them and enjoy this life."

"Those followers of Vesper and Aragha will love me?" he asked. "And I will love them?"

"Many of their followers are beyond redemption. Some need only a doorway out of darkness. Ask yourself this: how much good is done for the world if a follower of Aragha or Vesper finds happiness and contentment in the arms of a good soul? How much evil is averted?"

A single word came from his confusion, meaning five different things: "How...?"

"How? Love at First Sight is always good," mused the goddess. "Probably a lot of that ahead. It's my favorite, except for Enemies to Lovers. That one is so hot. Friends to Lovers is good, too. And I'm always a sucker for Only One Bed. Slow Burn Realization may not fit here, and I guess the godly bargain sort of undercuts the literal meaning of Forbidden Love, but I'm sure the vibe will still be there. Not sad that we preempted Secret Baby with the rules, though. Hm? What?" she asked, seeing his face.

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about. How do I live up to the needs of seven lovers? We're not talking about brief flings here. This isn't some sex fantasy."

Khíra fixed him with an amused grin and a new shine in her eyes. “Oh, that’s very much how you will hold all this down. Yes, maturity and responsibility and honesty are important, too, but I know the sort of love and romance you yearn for. Don’t worry about stamina or satisfying your lovers. I mean to gift you with more than a paladin’s might.”

“Um. I mean...” Callan stammered. The soft, intimate, dirty turn stole his breath all over again. Khíra stepped closer.

“There are many kinds of romance and pleasure, Callan. Some are warm and bright. Others are low and lustful. There is comfort and joy to be found as equals, and also profound pleasure in embracing power and submission. None of your loves will want only one form of love. You will enjoy their range, as they love yours. Every day and night you fuck and play with your lovers will honor me and my ‘agenda.’ Never forget that.”

She was close enough to touch. “This will be intense,” she warned. “You are only mortal. Feel no shame for your body’s reactions. I am glad for the pleasure this brings you.”

Gentle fingertips stroked his jaw and cheek. He stood straight and still despite the sudden drain of all his strength in a tremor of delight. Her touch made his skin sensitive. He felt the brush of stubble falling away. “Let’s have a smooth face from now on,” Khíra murmured. “Softer lines, a warmer tan. You are still yourself, but I like this better. So will they.”

She was the goddess of beauty. He wasn’t about to argue with her preferences. It brought an unguarded question to his lips. “And them?”

“Oh, I always prize beauty and sensuality,” she conceded almost dryly. “The greatest problem you and your lovers face may be the envy of others...but you’ll handle that.”

Answering a prayer from his soul, Khíra’s perfect red lips brushed his. That faint, briefest yet endless contact turned his tremors to an earthquake. He didn’t know how he stood until he realized she held him up with one arm around his waist. She had him hard from the moment their eyes first met, but now the yearning strain against his pants almost hurt. Almost.

“This gift is one for sharing, dear Callan.” Her mouth was still close enough to touch him with her breath. Callan stayed upright, but helpless... and felt helplessly good. Her gentle hold around his waist and the touch of her body against his was incredible. Her other hand came down from his jaw to his neck and then his shirt. “You will give more than you receive.”

The goddess traced her fingertips from his neck down his chest. Clothing fell away without tearing or parting. His tremors got worse, and therefore better. His mind clouded over. “Trust in my gifts,” she whispered. “Trust in your desires. Enjoy.”

The tremors overwhelmed when her hand reached his groin and his hardened cock. Spasms of pleasure and release wracked him down to his soul.

Callan clung to consciousness as best he could, but he was only mortal.

* * *

“Perhaps we should count ourselves lucky for escaping with our lives.” Ezora lit the campfire with a gesture and a word of magic. As soon as the flame caught, she sat beside it.

“No.” Naexi stood close, hood over her head as usual despite the fall of twilight. It wasn’t cold and she was alone with her companions, but now she felt a wariness that usually came only among strangers. “We left something behind. Something important.”

“We left behind a lot of loot,” grumbled Brusul.

“We’re not going back,” said his brother, Thurnour.

“It was more important than loot.” Naexi wanted to pace, but that would take her away from the others settling around the fire. “It wasn’t like some simple thing. It was more important than that. Like *someone*.”

“We’re all here. Who else is there?” said Maximilian. The warlock wet his hands with his waterskin and rubbed his face. “If anyone else was there, they should’ve left with us.”

“We don’t even remember what happened,” Naexi snapped.

“We remember getting our asses kicked.” Thurnour glared at Maximilian. “What was that shit at the doorway? You disrupted my whole charge.”

“I don’t even remember the fight,” Maximilian shrugged.

“Yeah, because you went down right away,” said Brusul.

“It seems we were all overpowered,” said Roderick, always the peacemaker. “Let’s not cast any blame. Our minds are clouded. I’m sure a good night’s sleep will help.”

“Didn’t we have more supplies and gear than this? And better food?” Thurnour complained.

“Yes,” murmured Naexi. The detail tripped on the gap in her memories. “We did.”

“We probably left it behind with all that loot,” said Brusul.

“I’m not going back there. I’m never going back,” said Maximilian.

“Agreed,” murmured Ezora.

Though their indifference frustrated her, Naexi saw at least some wisdom in Roderick's advice. Her mind was troubled and clouded. She claimed a spot a few feet back from the circle at the fire and knelt to meditate.

Ezora cast warding spells so everyone could sleep without setting a watch. The band turned to mundane things like food and bedding. They still didn't see a problem they needed to solve.

Naexi chanted a prayer to Tenash to gather her focus and block out their chatter. She often felt reservations about the Blades. They could be fractious, irritable, unhelpful. Sometimes she doubted their friendship, too. How could they settle in when she felt so wrong?

Meditation and prayer helped. Naexi felt Tenash watching over her from the moment they left the ruins. She told the Blades, and wanted to rejoice, but her devotion to Tenash and her duties as his paladin undercut that response. She was *missing* something.

Roderick seemed to have the same renewed connection to Erudh, but weariness undercut his excitement. He didn't seem to notice the same nameless absence that worried her, either.

Naexi focused on the last few days, slowly clearing her memory. Ezora found a map, they came to a small town, they came out here... and something in between hid from her thoughts. Something about the journey. It was two days before they found the hill and the hidden door into the complex. She kept her hood up along with her privacy, but why would she do that among the Blades? They knew her. They weren't all great people, but the "sketchy dark elf" suspicions were long buried. Why the distance?

She focused on the the ruins, the well-built halls, the sentries, and the sense of powerful magic. She remembered the battle with the mob of cultists and sorcery. Some bright, swirling light hovered in the background. She remembered steel and blood. A flash of lightning, a rending claw, pain, and then nothing until she stood with her friends and heard the words: "Your fight is ended. Leave this place."

Tenash's voice echoed in that instruction. She heard it unconsciously then, but recognized his voice now. His approval. It should have left her in awe, except for that unanswered absence.

She breathed deeply, prayed, and tried again. She remembered the battle. Steel and blood. The flashing magic. The face. His face.

Naexi's eyes snapped open. A wave of emotions and thoughts crashed through her. He was the reason she hid her face. Unlike so many others, he seemed to respect her privacy. He didn't pry. Over two days, he had to know her heritage, but he showed nothing but respect and kindness. The battle wasn't his to fight, yet he jumped in with little arms and no armor, and showed more sense than all her companions. "Callan!"

“What?” Roderick propped himself up from his bedroll.

“Who?” Brusul grunted, laying on his side.

Only Ezora was still upright, sitting cross-legged in a restful trance. Everyone else laid under blankets, half asleep if not already out.

“The porter. The man we hired in Sunderford!” Naexi explained.

“Oh yeah, that guy,” Maximilian remembered casually.

“We didn’t find a body. I’m sure he ran off. He seemed bright enough,” said Roderick.

“If he wasn’t, he’s too stupid to be our problem now.” Thurnour rolled over.

No one else said anything.

Naexi snatched her pack and her shield off the ground. She strode into the dark woods back the way they came.

“Where are you going?” called Roderick.

“To find better company. I need new friends. Goodbye.”

Churning, aching emotions and thoughts of Callan’s face added to her needs. She needed much more than a friend.

* * *

Callan awoke on bare masonry. He wasn’t sure how long he had been out, but he felt fully rested and not at all sore. The temple lay quiet and dark except for his tiny spot by the shattered orb. Light came from a glowing trinket hanging by a chain on the orb’s framework. The little silver charm of intertwined roses met his hand with a comforting warmth.

If not for the glowing holy symbol, Callan might have thought everything after the orb exploded was a dream. Those last moments felt amazing, so good he wondered if... no. No, she didn’t go *that* far. If her touch and her faintest kiss had him so overwhelmed, more would have probably destroyed him just like the orb.

Yet the moment he rolled to his side to rise, Callan realized he was incredibly hard and erect. He felt sensitive, potent, *good*... and glad for the moment of privacy. No one needed to see him blush or adjust his pants. Callan claimed the symbol with a soft breath of grateful prayer and looked around.

The cultists and monsters were all dead. He knew that with the certainty of math or the rise of the sun. He walked off the platform not with courage, but rather no reason for fear. The battle, though

wild and insane, left him without trauma. Apart from Khíra's plans and promises, Callan's only worry now was a two-day hike home alone. A day and a half, if he pushed.

Once off the platform, the light of his holy symbol revealed the remnants of the battle. Lyra banished the bodies and blood, probably to avoid a grisly and gruesome setting while the gods got themselves sorted, but she didn't erase everything. Weapons, bits of armor, candles, lanterns, and random gear were strewn everywhere. At his feet, Callan found a belt with a dagger, a loop with an inkpen and a vial of ink, and a small coinpurse.

Callan remembered who fell here. He decided not to think about how the cult leader's belt buckle had broken. At least the mess was gone. "And that's how I became a grave robber," he murmured to the shadows.

The dagger bore a smooth black stone in the pommel. The coinpurse held at least a couple dozen gold marks and some silvers. He doubted the Blades would've paid him as much.

Prudent scavenging paid off in the form of a warrior's hand axe and a good spear, a silken rope nicer than any for sale in these parts, and a few more purses adding up to somewhat less coin than the first. To his greatest relief, he found his own backpack in the corner where he initially hid. At least he had food for the trip home.

Callan limited himself to what he could carry and use. He knew better than to touch some crazed Sovor cultist's wand if he wasn't desperate. There might be more of use or value, but he had no idea how long he'd been here already. The coinpurses could probably buy Hugo's new ferry. The added gear was a bonus. It was time to move on.

His holy symbol lit the way through still corridors and quiet stairs. Coming down here required an effort of courage, and that was in the company of six seasoned adventurers. Now he knew it was safe. He was alone here... until he wasn't.

Twilight skies opened up at the top of the last sloping tunnel. Ezora had found the secret entrance on some old map. A silhouette appeared in the doorway as Callan came near. He couldn't make out more than a hooded head under a cloak holding a sword and shield, but her voice was familiar when she spoke his name. "Callan?"

"Yeah. Hey." Callan met her concern with gentle calm, but questioned his instinct as soon as he spoke. Naexi was the stalwart paladin. Callan was only along as hired help. His heartbeat picked up and a tremor ran through his nerves at the sight of her, but not in fear. When his light reached her armor and her dark grey face, that instinct rose again. He lowered the holy symbol. "Is this too bright?"

“No, it’s fine. You’re alright?” Naexi whipped her black blade up over her shoulder and into the sheath on her back. “You look, ah... unharmed.”

“I’m fine. Better for seeing you.” He didn’t say it to flirt, but his driven good look at her face stole his breath. Naexi’s hood shrouded one of the most beautiful faces he’d ever seen. Her pale white hair had to be pulled up under that hood. Soft red eyes held his gaze without trying... no, he realized. No, he saw some of the same emotion in those red eyes he felt, too.

His heartbeat hardened. His breath softly ran deep. He hoped she wouldn’t look away again, and she didn’t. He knew these feelings. Then he remembered who ruled them.

Dear goddess, already? Callan wondered. He couldn’t be worthy. *Her?*

“I was so worried.” Naexi sounded sincere, but unsure of herself—something he hadn’t seen from her until now. “We shared a strange vision and wandered out in a daze. I didn’t remember you until two hours ago. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m not mad,” said Callan. “Are the others with you?”

“No. I came alone. I... wanted to come alone.” She seemed like she might blush if her grey skin tone allowed for it. “We came out of here in a strange daze. I only remembered you once I meditated. The others shrugged it off. It wasn’t right, and I... I wanted to find you. Alone.”

Naexi bit her lip. She wasn’t used to this. “We barely spoke. You were so patient and kind to me, and then brave in the fight.”

“You’re amazing,” Callan replied.

She smiled shyly. He never would have expected shyness. She caught herself, remembered their surroundings, and noted his glowing trinket. “Did you find that below?”

“It was given to me by Khíra. The missing gods were in that orb.”

“Yes,” Naexi gasped. “When I meditated, I felt the presence of Tenash for the first time in months! If Khíra gave you that, did she speak to you?”

“Yes. That was a prison, and we freed them. Khíra said... um.” His lips pressed together. He didn’t know if he should speak of it, but if they both felt so unsure, shouldn’t she know? “She said she’d be, um. Matchmaking for me. Love at first sight, sort of thing.”

“Oh good,” Naexi exhaled. Her shoulders fell in relief and her shield hit the ground beside her, but it didn’t remove all the tension.

She closed in and kissed him.

Excitement and yearning overcame them both. Their lips only brushed together once before opening and kissing deeper. Naexi’s soft skin and faint scent of lavender turned away whatever

emotional guard Callan had left. For her, the moment ran even deeper. The first touch of his tongue against hers sent an electric rush down her throat. The pulse begat an unconscious moan, pleading for more. She shivered without feeling cold and kissed him harder.

Both of them had kissed others before. None of it felt like this.

His arms were around her almost from the start. His spear clattered to the stones. Naexi's leather and chain armor made for an odd barrier, but they both still welcomed the embrace. When Naexi let up on her kiss, her lips didn't move far from his. "Better. This is much better," she said.

"We barely know each other."

"I'm a paladin. I know what divine guidance is like." She kissed him softly again, then leaned her forehead against his. "Tell me you want this. Tell me this is real."

"Yes." Another kiss. "Naexi, it's not just this. There's a lot I need to tell you."

"Later."

"Waiting might change how you feel."

"Are you the person you seem to be?" She clearly knew the answer. "I would know if you were undead or some fiend in disguise. Has anything about you been an act? A ruse?"

"No, nothing like that. It's not evil. But it is complicated."

"Then I don't think I'll care." Her next kiss left no room for pause. Her moan returned, this time with less surprise and more willingness. "You feel so good," she said against his mouth. "I want more. I want all of you."

Callan felt the same. His eyes opened and he tried to think while her lips mashed against his. "We don't want to go back in there."

"Mmh!" Naexi's excitement rose with his embrace of their desires. "No. Not inside. The ground here isn't that hard." Gripping his shoulders, Naexi pulled him out into the night. She kept him close as she walked backwards. A dexterous step kicked her fallen shield through the open doorway.

Outside, she pulled him into the overgrowth near the ancient doorway. Her pack lay at the corner, dropped there when she first detected movement. A roll of dark purple silk laid across the top of her pack, bundled like a bedroll but thinner. She pulled the ties loose and unfurled the sheet in graceful moves. Then she returned to Callan's arms and his mouth yet again.

"We're safe here. I'm sure of it." She pulled the pack from his shoulders and let it fall beside hers.

"Yes." He probably knew it better than she did, but she didn't want explanations now.

"Safe" didn't mean completely gentle. Naexi pivoted and spun him around herself, catching him by the belt buckle before he fell. Even that turned out to be a planned move when she deftly loosened

the belt. His pants suddenly felt loose, too. Callan fell onto his back against the silk cloth, finding it more comfortable than its thin nature implied.

Naexi grinned at him, dazzled and eager. Her belt came away as fast as Callan's. Her armor and knee-high leather boots seemed to require a little fuss, but to his shock, she practically brushed them away with a gesture and a word of magic. Leather thigh guards, bracers, shoulder guards, and even her boots fell from her body. That same magic word let her pull the chain shirt over her shoulders with ease.

Beneath it all, a tunic of black silk clung to her, barely reaching past her hips. She tugged some string beneath its hem and pulled away another silk fabric between her legs.

"Easier to get the rest if I'm on top," she said before she straddled him.

"We don't have to..." he began to reassure her, but she was already at work again. Gentle and swift fingers found their way into his pants to pull him free, and with that came a wide-eyed look of realization from his partner. She didn't get off him, and she didn't bend or bow her head to see, but touch told her everything.

Warm and wet skin welcomed the first brush of his length. Naexi gasped with new vulnerability. She rose up higher on her knees to guide him in. Callan held her legs gently, hands feeling the smooth skin of her thighs, but when she first sank down on his cock his mind ignored every other sensation.

Their eyes locked. Their breath shook. Naexi trembled, shocked by how good he felt; he wasn't far from that himself. Callan's hands found her hips. *More*, his whole body urged. He rocked her a little, gently at first, and drew out a moan from them both. He did it again.

Naexi's eyes fluttered. She joined the grind first without conscious thought, but soon it was almost all she could think about. The rest of her attention turned to pulling tunic over her shoulders and head. Exactly enough moonlight bathed her to impress her naked beauty upon him. He couldn't believe how her armor had muted such curves.

"My thoughts are wild," she breathed. "I want you. This. All of you."

Though taken by the sights of one another, touch meant more to both. She helped his shirt off and finally laid against him, her naked chest against his, able to share a new deep kiss while he slowly thrust deep inside her.

"Ahh," Naexi pleaded. "More. Yes. Mmf!" Callan gripped her ass. She delighted in his claim, begging for more with grunts and gasps and being rewarded every time. "I want you," she hissed against his neck. "Fuck me. Fill me. Mmmh!"

They weren't quick. Tension and need built into urgent pleasure. Naexi's first tremors ran from her core to her thighs and almost startled her, but Callan kept fucking her without changing a stroke. She clung to him as the meltdown arrived. Spasms rocked her body and left her whimpering against his neck. Wild feelings of sexual triumph and the grip of her sex set Callan off before she finished. Callan came hard within her, giving his lover an unexpected delight.

Naexi's eyes widened and she gasped in shock at the pleasure flooding her within. Her red eyes rolled back. She settled against his chest, grinding without conscious thought once again as her body savored every sensation. The euphoria in her core spread through her body, leaving her beyond satisfied... except for how she couldn't wait to do this again.

Post-coital bliss turned into an affectionate grind, and then deeper desires. Callan rolled her onto her back and penetrated her yet again. This time, Naexi could relax and enjoy him.

It was even better the second time, and through most of the night. They couldn't get enough of one another. A deep, newborn intimacy encouraged their desires.

* * *

Callan eventually awoke wrapped in her silk blanket, laying on his side with his head on her backpack. Trees and the hillside left him in the shade once the sun came up on a comfortably cool summer morning. All of that came into his brain before his memories clicked in, snapping his eyes wide and pushing him upright.

Naexi sat upright beside him, legs crossed and posture straight in meditation, fully nude except for her cloak—draped open at her shoulders as if to invite his eyes. She felt wonderful all night, but he hadn't truly seen her body; now her nudity made an emphatic impression. She had slender grey curves, athletic muscle tone, breasts to make any man swoon. The mere sight of her felt like an intimate gift—confirmed when she smiled at him.

"You're awake," said Naexi.

"I'm... am I interrupting?" He noticed the little charm wrapped in her hands. She was a paladin, after all. He looked down. "Did I take the whole blanket myself?"

She laughed. He had never heard her laugh before and immediately wanted more of it, like he wanted more of the rest of her. "I was in your arms until I wanted to meditate and pray. I had my cloak. And now I have you." She pushed him onto his back, slid into his arms, and kissed him softly. "We clearly started out all wrong."

“We did. Things were different.”

“I am Naexi Thazaldi,” she smiled, “paladin of Tenash and exile of the underrealm of Exxandat’l, far to the east. Nothing about home and my culture ever felt right to me, so I came to the surface world twelve years ago, shortly after my hundredth birthday. Tenash called me to his service within my first few days of wandering. Not everyone welcomed a dark elf, but Tenash’s faithful recognized me and took me in. I adventured with the Daring Blades for a little over two years until I left them last night.”

Nude, full-body contact did nothing to trip up her reintroduction, though it did keep her voice soft and sultry. Arousal built once more. They were calm enough to talk, but this conversation already seemed destined to end much like their last.

“Wow,” Callan breathed. Her red eyes shined brighter at his appreciation. “I’m... twenty-two. You’re a hundred and twelve?”

“In the perspective of my people, our ages are fairly close. Once you put aside their prejudices and sense of superiority, at least.” She kissed his jaw. “I don’t feel that way.”

“I’m glad.”

“And what about you?” She propped herself up on one elbow, still lying very much on top of him. “Who are you, Callan of Sunderford?”

“Not much more than that,” he answered. “I’ve lived near Sunderford all my life. My mother weaves and tends a small garden. My father died when I was young. The cleric at the shrine of Erudh tutored me with other children. I handle wagons for the mill when there’s work and I drill with the militia a few times a year. I haven’t traveled farther than the neighboring towns, but I’ve wanted to. Mostly I haven’t had the chance. It’s a quiet life until yesterday.”

“Tell me about yesterday,” she said.

“I wanted to tell you everything last night,” he said. “I hope you aren’t hurt by this. We were both...” He shook his head. She felt so good against his body, and the connection between them so real despite being so new and unfamiliar.

He told her everything. He told her about the orb, the gods, and the end of the fight. He told her about seeing her and the others get revived and sent on their way. He told her of the gods and their bickering, and then Khíra and her plans.

Naexi asked no questions. She stayed on top of him, watching and listening with interest. She stayed as he told her of Khíra’s conversations with him alone, and only stopped him at his last moments with the goddess.

“It was intimate,” said Callan. “She didn’t... it wasn’t like we made love, but...”

“Leave that between you and her,” said Naexi.

“I don’t want to hide anything from you.”

“I can tell,” she almost laughed. “Intimacies are for the intimate. I know all I need.”

He let out a breath. “Then I woke up. I scrounged a little, I headed out, and then we found one another... and now that I’m telling you all this, you haven’t moved.”

“No.” She quirked an eyebrow in curiosity. “Are you attracted to men, too? Others? Only women, then. Alright.”

“Seven, Naexi. She obviously has some plan, but I can’t wrap my mind around how that works. Now that you’re here and I’m explaining it to you, I feel like knowing that would only drive anyone away. I wouldn’t blame you at all. You deserve better.”

“I can handle six other women.” She smiled at his look of surprise. “I told you last night I felt this need to find you. I felt a sense of duty, but also something else. Something deep. If Khíra has taken a direct hand in your life, I know all I need about that.

“I meditated and prayed while you slept. Even a paladin rarely hears the voice of their patron, if ever, but Tenash made his will clear. I saw us make love within a shrine, and I felt the presence of others. No disaster fell. No sign of ill omen. We were passionate and even lewd, and it felt good. It felt right. I saw seasons change outside while we remained. The lands surrounding the shrine bloomed.

“Tenash has given me more than his blessing. He’s given me a quest.”

“Khíra said there’s no mission,” said Callan. “She gave no quest. What is yours?”

“You.” Naexi smiled. “You are my quest now, Callan. One lover is a blessing for anyone. Two is an exception. Seven of such a wide range is the agenda of a god. She told you as much. Even if they all truly love you, this won’t be just about them. It’ll be whatever they bring with them from their lives.

“You will be in danger. You will need protection and help. You will have me.”

She planted another kiss on his mouth, as deep as any and longer than the rest. Her breath rose and fell with vulnerability. Naexi seemed to draw energy from it now along with pleasure. Her body writhed against his.

“You’re not my first,” she said softly. Her mouth roamed his neck. “I’ve explored before, but little came of it. I wanted so much more. I *loved* sex. I loved enjoying my body and those of others. But couldn’t find the right partner, and Tenash called louder and clearer than my desires. I thought love might be far in my future, if ever. But you are loving. You are safe. You are good. I can share all of

that with you. This every dream come true, Callan.” She smiled with a thrill in her whisper. “I can have my duty and vows *and* be a lustful slut with you.”

Another kiss. Another embrace. He kissed back with his feelings rising. His hands caressed her back and her ass...until she pulled back. Her chest trailed downward along his, followed by her lips. One hand wrapped around his hard cock as she slid to her knees between his legs.

“Naexi,” he breathed. “You’re so beautiful.”

“So are you. You feel so good. I want this so much. I want it all.”

Her kiss descended over the head of his cock, lips spreading to draw him into her mouth. Callan gasped hard as she enveloped him with pleasure. She moaned as if sharing his thrill. Her mouth slid back and forth, with her hand matching the motion at the base of his shaft. The sensation nearly paralyzed him.

Then she stopped. Naexi rose up halfway, still between his legs and gripping him but with her eyes wide in realization.

“What’s wrong?” Once again, Callan worried this might be going too fast.

“Men are seen as lesser in my homeland,” she explained. “They are not valued. Women of my people treat them with disdain. It never sat right with me, but it is common there. It is hardly challenged.”

“I’ve heard that. Everything I heard about the night elves sounded like a myth to scare people,” said Callan. “I don’t see anyone as lesser. Not men or women or anyone.”

“I’m sure you don’t, or we wouldn’t be here.” Naexi kept stroking him. Her smile of delight outshined her every previous smile. “My mother and sisters and aunts... They. Would. Just. Die.”