

The Collector

YΘU HAVEN'T CΘLLECTED TΘDAY.

The voice startled her as it boomed inside her head. She heard it often, but it had been a few hours. Somehow, it never ceased to surprise her. She stopped in her tracks.

I've been a little busy, she thought in response.

YΘUR ΘNLY BUSINESS IS FULFILLING ΘUR BARGAIN. I CRAVE THΘSE DELICIΘUS MEMΘRIES ... AND I SHALL HAVE THEM.

Scorcha shook as a cold spike of pain radiated through her core. She stumbled.

The dwarf nearest her stopped. He turned his attention from his master. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," Scorcha growled. She was *not* fine. Azinoth, the fiend with which she'd made her pact hungered for new souls on which to feed. He'd asked for a thousand, and she hadn't fulfilled her side of the deal. If she didn't give him something soon, he would hurt her more, or even renege on the deal itself. This would cost her her powers.

"What is it, Shin?" The words of the mysterious Aderyn entered her mind as her eyes closed against the torturous aftermath of the attack.

"This one's in pain," Shin replied to his master.

Through the haze of the demon's fading touch, Scorcha heard the soothing voice of the ranger. "Perhaps lifting that stone beam weakened you. Here, you must rest." Faylin stepped forward and placed a calming hand on Scorcha's shoulder. She withdrew it almost immediately with a flick of her wrist. "I should have known you'd be warm to the touch." She fanned her hand a little, then drew her satchel off her back. She rummaged through it and produced a small parcel made of leaves. Inside were some cuttings of plants and some dry herbs. "Here, have one of these." She brought out a little mushroom and held it up for Scorcha to take.

Despite doubting it would help, Scorcha took it and popped it into her mouth. The fungus was surprisingly sweet. The heat from her mouth softened it into mush and she swallowed. Relief flooded her racked brain and she instantly felt the pain ebb.

"There, how's that?" Faylin asked with a smile.

"Better," Scorcha replied.

"If you're feeling weak, you should stay out here," Disa, the dwarf barbarian said from the front of the procession.

Leo, the tiefling, blinked in surprise at Disa's bold assertion. He shook his head in silent warning at Disa, but she didn't notice it.

"I'm not *weak*," Scorcha growled. "Only ..." she paused for a moment, not wanting to reveal the nature of her tormentor. "I'm only a little tired."

"*Tired* then," Disa corrected with a smirk. "Either way, you're no good to us in the next room if you cannot handle lifting a beam."

"I think it's imperative that we don't argue," Faylin said firmly. "We cannot finish our mission if we are insulting each other."

"I agree," Aderyn said. "Let's move into the next room. Scorcha, you can stay here while we clear the next one."

"Don't you think we need her," Leo interjected. He fiddled with the fringe hanging from his belt. "What if we come across one of those... things again."

Aderyn shook his head. "We dispatched one, we can certainly deal with any other threats ourselves without much trouble."

"Whatever the case! Let's just go! I want to be out of here so I can have an ale. I'm dead bored in here." Disa slammed the handle of her greataxe on the wrecked stone floor.

"We'll go in here next," Aderyn said, motioning to the room across from the one they'd cleared.

"You stay here," Faylin said softly, smiling sweetly again. "We'll go in here and be right back." As she leaned in close and offered Scorcha another mushroom, the genasi could smell the scent of fresh grass, tilled Earth and sweet flowers wafting off the half-elf.

THAT HALF-ELF. HER MEMORIES ARE CERTAIN TO BE BEAUTIFUL. JUST LIKE THE LAST ONE...

"I'll not harm her," Scorcha said out loud.

"Wh—what?" Leo stammered as he passed by in following the others.

"Nothing," Scorcha barked. "Continue on. I'll join when I can."

JUST LIKE THE LAST ONE ...

ONE MONTHS BEFORE

Scorcha drew her hood over her eyes as she walked through the gates of Waveborne and out into the night. The rain was beginning to fall, and as a fire genasi, she hated moisture of any kind. It literally and figuratively dampened her spirits.

In her pocket, a hefty chunk of change jingled in her purse. She'd gambled well that night, and she'd consumed a great deal of Illyrian Fire Wine, so there was a little wobble to her gait.

A few miles down the road, the cacophony of Waveborne's nightlife was replaced by the soft patter of rain, the chirp of crickets, and the distant sound of rushing water from the Brigantian Channel. The moons were overhead, Eros full and Morticia waning, both longing for the other but seldom touching.

That kind of loneliness was not foreign to the genasi. Connections in her life were few, and those that she hadn't severed had faded into a life she'd left behind long ago.

In her search for freedom and independence, she'd found the open road was her only ally. Anonymity was essential.

Her secret made it impossible to remain in one place for very long.

She was a Warlock, and to gain her power, she'd forged a pack with the demon Azinoth. Like most demons, he had never known love, and his one desire was to feel it, even if it meant claiming the souls of those on the material plane.

Scorcha remembered the fateful moment she'd been handed the Black Candle Flask, its demon-touched glass *always* cold, the candle inside only blazing to life when a soul was at the point of crossing over into the afterlife—when it could be collected for Azinoth's terrible purposes.

Some commotion diverted her attention and she immediately threw herself under the cover of the trees.

Ahead of her, someone was screaming, others were yelling in triumph. There was a terrible clanging of steel, the whinnying of horses and a crackle of fire.

"Please! No!" shouted a meager voice. "Leave us be! We have *nothing!*"

Scorcha sighed and stuck her head out for a better look.

A dozen yards away, a pack of bandits had ambushed a wagon carrying some people. The passengers had been forced to the ground, held at knife-point while the rest of the brigands tore apart the travelers' luggage.

"There's nothing here!" one of the four thieves shouted.

"They're sure to have somethin' on 'em!" the second insisted.

"Yeah! Strip 'em clean and kill 'em! We'll shake the wagon down for parts!" the fourth insisted.

The wielder of the knife crept closer to the driver and drove his blade into the driver's gut. With a cry, he fell limp on the path, blood gushing from his ribs and onto the road.

"No! Please, no!"

Scorcha could see the only other passenger was a small woman, though nothing else about her was apparent through the deluge.

"That's enough!" Scorcha shouted, her voice rumbling in her throat. She jumped out onto the path and stood tall, her hair ablaze, her eyes glowing molten red and the raindrops sizzling on her skin.

The bandits ravaging the vehicle started away from the wagon, which they'd nearly picked to pieces.

"Get out!" Scorcha boomed.

The three bandits dropped the bits and bobs they'd scavenged and dove into the woods.

The one tormenting the woman grabbed her by the arm and brought her up in front of him, putting his blade against her throat. "I'm taking *her* for my trouble, demon. You can have the rest."

"I don't want your leavings, foolish mortal!" Scorcha said, sticking out a damning finger. "Let her go, or I'll burn you to cinders."

"Try it and she's dead!" the villain said, grinning through his yellow teeth. The rain ran over his greasy head and down his ragged face, around his bulging eyes.

"I'll strike you down before your blade finds home. Now *let her go*." Scorcha warned, taking a few steps forward.

But she stopped short when the thief cut the woman's throat. She cried out and put her hands to her throat, but collapsed.

In an instant, the thief disappeared into the woods behind his friends, leaving his victim bleeding on the ground.

Scorcha ran toward her, summoning a flame in her hand. "Hold tight!"

The woman's face was growing paler by the moment. Scorcha could see the tiny pointed ears tucked under her hood among a nest of shimmering silver hair. A half-elf, Scorcha thought.

A little blood appeared at the injured woman's mouth, turning her pink tongue and white teeth red.

"It's alright," the sylvan woman sputtered. She gave Scorcha a look of genuine gratitude. "It's alright."

"No. I'll get you to a healer. Just hold on." Scorcha put a red-hot finger to the woman's cut and the pain elicited a high-pitched yelp. A shudder took hold of the patient as Scorcha drew her searing finger across the length of the wound. The flesh turned black at her fingertip. More blood slid out of the half-elf's mouth and down her neck.

TAKE IT ...

At her side, Scorcha felt the cold flame of the black candle flicker to life in her flask.

TAKE IT, DAMN YOU ...

Despite her intense desire to resist the orders of her bonded demon, she sighed and lifted her hand, placing it over the half-elf's face, closing the dying woman's eyes.

Scorcha took a moment to focus, whispered the shadow-words that initiated the ritual, and held the stance as tendrils of black smoke curled out of her hand, slid into the woman's body and reappeared with a glowing ball of light.

The dying woman shuddered again, then convulsed violently. She choked one last time, then went limp, dead in Scorcha's arms.

As the tendrils delivered the delicate soul to the black candle's flame, it passed Scorcha's shoulder and she could hear the tinkle of bells, the ring of laughter, and the soothing tones of loving words drifting from the glowing essence.

The tendrils pulled the light through its glass and the laughter fell silent as it slipped into the candle's flame and with a crackle, the flame went out.

Scorcha's chest tightened as she stared down at the half-elf's beautiful face, cold, white and clad in moonlight.

GØØD ... ANØTHER ...