A Cat in Yggrassid Plain

This story is a novelization of a DnD campaign I participated in with some online friends over Discord and Roll20. The story is paraphrased, as I don’t quite have perfect recollection of everything that happened.

# Chapter 1

A tabaxi walked into the village. Her green hooded cloak covered her black fur save for her ears and tail. Her bow and quivered bounced slightly as she walked past a horse-drawn cart.

In the village, a group of adventurers were gathered around a message board. She stood on the edge as they talked about the quests.

“Ooh! Look! Someone needs there treasure found!”

“And someone’s crops are going missing!”

The tabaxi’s ears perked. She examined the post about the crops.

FARM IN DISTRESS - OUR CROPS KEEP ON DISAPPEARING, AND WE DON'T KNOW WHY. TAKE A RIGHT ALONG THE ROAD AND YOU'LL SEE AN EMPTY FIELD, CAN'T MISS IT, CAUSE IT'S BARREN WITHOUT CROP.

The tabaxi’s tail swished. She looked down the road.

One of the adventurers tapped her on the shoulder. “You’re a big cat!”

The tabaxi looked at her. She was a young woman. “And you’re a big ape!”

The woman laughed, and so did the tabaxi.

A giant burst of laughter caught everyone’s attention. “You really think an *oni* is going to meet you at the graveyard tonight?” It was a little boy, pointing and laughing at a girl on a bench.

“Yeah, say hi to the oni for me!” The other little boy blurted.

The woman went over to the little girl. “What’s this about an oni?”

“It’s coming to meet me tonight. I’m scared.” The little girl said to the woman.

“Don’t listen to her, she’s lying.” The little boy said.

“Run along now, boys.” The woman shooed them away.

They stuck their tongues out at her at first, but then the rest of the party approached. “Come on, let’s go. We had our fun anyways.” And then the boys ran off.

The woman knelt down in front of the little girl. “I’m Aurora. Do you want help?”

“Um… yes, but… I’m not sure how.”

“What’s wrong?”

“If I don’t come alone, the oni will know.”

“I can cover that.” One of the adventurers raised his hand.

“Hmmm… ok. Meet me at my house at 9pm.”

“Looks like we got a quest, guys! Everyone in?” They all raised their hands and put it in the middle.

The tabaxi, a stranger to them all, waited on the edge of the circle.

“You in?”

The tabaxi nodded and placed her hand in the middle.

They all raised their hands at the same time. “Alright! Welcome to the group!”

One of the adventurers, a giant 8ft bald guy with multiple weapons on his back, approached the tabaxi and another adventurer, who was a purple dragon. “Come with me.” He pulled them aside and took them to the horse-drawn cart. “I’m Zane Allkiller. Welcome to the group. What’re your names?”

“Kriv,” said the purple dragon.

“I am Drathalion Treescorn.” The tabaxi nodded. “This is my first time in this village.”

“And now since you’re part of the group, it will soon be your first time in this cart. This cart, by the way, is mine, and we will probably be using it to get around. You owe me 1 gold for the use of it.”

“Mmmm…” Kriv pulled out her instrument. “I’m a little short on gold at the moment.”

Zane grunted. “Ok, just get it to me when you can.”

“Thank you.” Kriv went to rejoin the rest of the group.

Zane looked at Drathalion.

“Why do I owe you 1 gold?” She asked him.

“Because I need money to fund the upkeep of my cart.”

Drathalion looked off to the side for a moment. “Ok, here it is.” She pulled out her purse and dropped a gold coin in Zane’s hand.

“Thank you.”

They rejoined the group.

After some discussion, someone said it’s time to get out of the heat and into the tavern. Everyone agreed.

“Wait, I have to get my horse and cart to shelter. Does anyone know where that is?”

“Yeah, there’s a farm up north that will take care of your horses.”

“Thanks.”

Drathalion’s ears perked. She raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to a farm?”

“Yes,” replied Zane.

“Can I come with you?”

Zane shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

Drathalion hopped in the back of the cart and Zane pulled out of town and down the road.

On either side, there were vast fields with very little crops. Lone stalks stood alone in the empty fields, while trampled and shredded crops lay about everywhere.

Drathalion’s eyebrows tensed. She pulled her hood over her head and looked down at her paws, then up at the 8ft behemoth driving the cart. “So how long have you been running this cart?”

Zane shrugged. “About a month or so. Only a few days ago did I start a cart.”

“Well I’m honored to be one of your first passengers.” She shifted her feet. “I have to say, it’s nice to be able to give my weary feet a rest.”

“Yes.” Zane shifted in his seat. “Oh, Marisa is very foreign. Take what she says with a grain of salt.”

“Marisa? Is she your… what do you call it? Mate?”

“Hell no!” Zane chuckled. “I was literally just trying to strangle her a few hours ago.”

“How miserable.”

Zane shrugged. “Eh, not really.”

“Well, if you say so, I will eat salt when she says something.”

Zane face palms. “No, I mean, just don’t take what she says seriously.”

“I see. She is a liar.”

“No, she is weird and foreign.”

“ ‘Weird’. Is that how you view all foreigners?”

“No. Just her. I travel a lot.”

“So do I. Have you ever met a tabaxi before?”

“Yes, actually. So are you some sort of archer?”

Drathalion takes her bow off her back and admires it. “It’s how I hunt for food.”

“Do you ever fight?”

“I lost my claws in battle, so this is what I do now.” She mimes shooting an arrow with the bow.

“Correction, do you fight battles?”

Drathalion nods. “I do what I must to protect the land from destruction. It’s hard… to travel when there’s nowhere interesting to travel to.”

“Hmmm.” Zane nods.

Drathalion runs a finger along the great axe attached to Zane’s hip. There’s also a warhammer and a hand axe visible. “I see you’re more than a cart driver as well.”

Zane chuckles. “I live and breathe battle.” He pounds his chest. “This is a side thing.”

“You fight for glory?”

“No, for the thrill!”

“Based on your scars, I surmise you’ve survived quite a few.”

“Yes and no.” Zane tilts his head. “I have heard that people with my lifestyle only live until their late 20’s to early 30’s. And I’m 50.”

“To live *that* long, you must have always landed on your feet.”

“Heh. Well hey, if you want someone who lands on their feet, I can offer my services to you. I’ll gladly fight any battle for coin.”

“1 gold piece per battle, I presume?”

“Eh, for party members, I can offer a discount. Maybe more.”

“My heart purrs at the thought of you fighting by my side.”

“And I would gladly fight with you, too.”

Drathalion nods. “And I would also like to extend an offer to help you on missions.”

“I’d love to have you. Are you proficient in any tools?”

Drathalion pulled a knife out of her cloak. “I’m good at etching and carving. I would demonstrate, but last time I did I got imprisoned for something called ‘vand of lism’.”

Zane laughed and slapped his knee. “So you are proficient in carving tools?”

“If this counts, yes. But for me, it’s mostly a last-resort fighting tool.”

Zane chuckled and nodded. “Of course it is. For me as well.” He tapped his hand axe on his belt.

“That’s a pretty big knife.”

“Hah! Yes, and I’ve fought many battles with it.”

“So, tell me of the story of the fight where you got that scar.” Drathalion ran her paw finger along the scar on his hand. It looked like a butcher’s knife had chopped his hand between the index and middle finger.

Zane pulled his hand away and hunched over.

“I see. That memory is painful for you.”

“No, it’s… it’s a long story.”

“Ok.” Drathalion withdrew her hand. “So were you born here?”

“No, I was born in battle.” Zane tried to hide the fact that he was blushing. He pounded his chest.

“I have not been to that plane.”

Zane chuckled. “What plane are you from?”

“Just a little-known plane you wouldn’t have heard of.”

“Try me.”

*Mwwr*.

“I might know it.”

Drathalion turned away for a moment. “It is hot out here.” She pulled her ears into her hood and her tail into her cloak.

“I can only imagine how it is for you, with all that fur and no ability to sweat.” He glanced at her. “Don’t worry, we’ll be at the farm soon and we’ll get you in some shade.”

It was only a 30 minute trip from the town to the farm. The farmhouse was a small fortress. It was a rectangular wooden building with a large gate at the front instead of a door. No roof was visible. Zane drove the cart through the front entrance, which was a bit uncomfortably narrow for a cart. He pulled into the central courtyard of the structure. The courtyard was open-air. Surrounding it were several roofed rooms with doors along the exterior wall. In the center was a garden and a pond.

An old man in a straw hat and carrying a walking stick approached them. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Hey.” Zane dismounted the cart. “We’re here to board my horses and cart. We’re staying in the tavern in town.”

“Well, sure I can board your horses and cart. And I’ll take good care of them too! But you have to go around through the back! This front entrance ain’t for horses!”

Zane looked at the front entrance and at the horse stable the farmer was pointing at. “Mmm. My apologies. I’ll pull around back.” Zane did just that and dismounted.

Once the cart was at the stable, the farmer came out with his hands in his pockets. “That’ll do just fine. Right there. So how long are you staying? Are you adventurers?”

“As long as it takes.” He held out a hand to Drathalion.

She took it and he helped her off the cart. “We’re here about the crops. It is saddening to see your fields so empty.”

“That’s mighty kind of you, miss.” The farmer tipped his hat.

“How much do you want per night?”

“Well, seeing as hwo you’re here to help, I’m willing to waive the fee. Dang crops keep on going missing and we’re losing out big time.”

Zane looked down at Drathalion, panting quietly. “Yes, we’ll investigate that shortly, but for today, we have to get comfortable. Do you have shelter from this heat?”

“Come on in.” The farmer welcomed them into the courtyard. “He have 1 free bedroom over here, and outdoor shade over here on the porch.”

“That’ll work just nicely.” Drathalion smiled. “Do you have any water?”

The farmer whistled. “Rebecca! Go fetch them some water from the pond.”

A young girl appeared. “Yes, father.”

“You’re welcome to the room, the porch, and the pond as you wish.”

Drathalion nodded. “Thank you.” She walked past Rebecca and straight to the edge of the pond. Kneeling down, she brought her head close to the water and lapped it up with her tongue. She paused to pull her tail into her cloak.

Zane came up behind her and blocked out the sun with his massive body. “Are you doing alright?”

Drathalion let out a purr. Her tail slipped out from beneath her cloak. “Yes, I’m ok, thank you.” Then she continued drinking from the pond.

Then they hung out on the porch and had a lovely conversation with the farmer. Then when it was closer to dusk, they headed out on foot to the town. They met the group at the tavern.

“So how are we going to follow this girl without the oni knowing?”

A mage raised his hand. “Leave that to me.” He drew a circle on the ground and lit it up. Three ravens appeared, glowing bright blue.

Drathalion frowned. “Those crows are cats without claws at stealth.”

“First of all, they’re ravens. And second, I’m not done.” The mage cast a spell and the birds slowly faded until they disappeared entirely.

“Whoa.” Drathalion batted at the spot the ravens were at. She hit something that she couldn’t see.

The mage pushed her paws away. “Don’t hurt my birds! This is how we’ll follow.” His eyes flashed blue.

“Ah! They do have claws!”

“Yes they do.”

The group met up with the girl.

“Are… you sure you want to help me?” The little girl asked.

“Yes, we sure do. Now just go to the meeting, we’ll be right behind you.” Aurora assured.

“Ok. And you won’t alert the oni?”

“Nope, we got that covered.” The mage flashed the ravens visible for a split second.

The little girl’s eyes sparkled for a moment. “Ok”. She led the way.

The group followed a good distance away while the ravens followed closely. The little girl led them to a graveyard. When she got to its crossroads, three wisps appeared.

“Sing for us!”

“I don’t want to.”

“Sing for us!”

“Ok.” The little girl chanted in a language the mage didn’t know. After a while of chanting, an oni appeared out of nowhere.

“Thank you for bringing me here, friend.” The oni towered over here. “Come, I shall take you to your new home.” He extended a hand to her.

“I’m… not sure I want to.”

“Come on, life will be so much better there. No one will pick on you, and you can be who you are freely. Come with me.” As he spoke, he walked around her, carelessly trampling a flower bed in the process.

The little girl slowly extended her hand to his.

*WHIZZZ*

Right before the little girl could take his hand, the oni suddenly moved it, and an arrow appeared in it. The oni scanned the perimeter. “We’ve got company…”

“No, I came alone! Just like I promised!”

*WHIZZZ*

Suddenly, the arrow in his hand was split in two by a second arrow and his hand got sliced. “Ow!”

Another arrow came his way, this time it was on fire. This one was badly aimed though, and sailed right past him. “Two.”

He looked down at the girl.

In the commotion, a winged person had come in and grappled her. “You’re safe now, hun.” The winged person flew away.

“Three.” The oni gave chase, but was stopped.

“AAAAAARRRRGH!” Zane came out of nowhere and charged him with his battle axe. He sliced him straight in the chest, knocking him back.

“Four.” The oni regained his composure. He steadied himself and clapped his hands together, blowing a huge blast of magical air at Zane and everyone behind him. It created a localized blizzard.

Zane braced himself and only suffered minor cuts. Kriv was at the edge of the radius and nearly froze to death. The winged human was knocked out of the air and fell to the ground, dropping the little girl.

The little girl, however, landed on her feet and covered herself in fire, taking no ice damage.

The oni peered curiously at her.

WHIZZZ. WHIZZZ. He took a few more arrows to the chest.

His curiosity turned to anger. “You lied to me!”

“STOP!” The little girl shouted. A burst of light exuded from her, enchanting everything it touched around her.

The whole party was stopped. Drathalion hung in midair, charging up her next shot. Zane was mid-run and his axe hung awkwardly at his side. The rest of the party members were also unable to move, but could still see and hear everything. Even the oni was stuck.

The little girl was the only one unaffected. She ran up the oni and hugged him. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for all this to happen. And I can’t go with you.” She booped him on the nose, and he just disappeared.

She walked around to all the party members individually. “I’m so sorry for dragging you into this. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I just wanted… some friends. But I had to see how strong you were first. I’m in need of help. I’m in chains—” Before she could finish her sentence, she vanished. Time continued as normal for the party.

"What was that?" The centaur paladin said as he healed Kriv’s wounds.

"Someone who still needs our help.” Aurora declared. “We have to find out where she’s being held.”

The party agreed. They went back to town.

“We’re both travelers.” The paladin centaur approached Drathalion. “So do you got time for me to talk about my lord and savior?”

Drathalion’s ears folded back at his question. “Is this a paladin thing?”

“Stereotypical one, yes. But I’m not one of those. I worship Skerritt, God of Centaurs and Woodland Creatures.”

Her ears perked. “Tell me more about your god.”

“Well us centaurs and other woodland animals worship him as he protects us in the woods. And in return, we donate food and other stuff he likes to one of his statues. Also, you’re dumb.”

Drathalion pinned her ears and hissed.

“Cool it, I’m just playing.” The centaur backed up. “Besides, I saw your shots out there. It’d be really hard for you to hit me.”

Drathalion smirked. “And I saw your flaming arrow. You lack depth perception.” She covered one eye and laughed.

“Oh really?” He lit up his hand and cast a spell on Drathalion. “Divine Smite!”

But Drathalion vanished and reappeared behind him. “I see your fangs are sharp but your skin is thin.”

“This?” He held his chainmail. “You gotta penetrate *chainmail*, pussycat!”

Drathalion frowned. “That is my people’s way of saying ‘you like to insult others but are quick to anger when others insult you.’”

“I only get insulted when the main forest is on fire or when someone insults my savior.”

“That *would* be awful. I’d feel more than just insult if the forest was on fire.”

“Oh, of course! I’d be angry! I’d hunt down the person who burned it.”

“As would I.”

“Oh, and that trick you did to dodge my spell? I can do that too.”

“So what brings *you* to this plane?”

The centaur sighed. “Mainly I’m just trying to kill this dragon that killed my parents.” He looked down for a moment. “What about you?”

Drathalion nodded. “Mmm… we are in the same pride.”

“What does that mean?”

“More or less, it’s the same for me.”

“Oh? Gosh, that’s a bummer. Well, it looks like we got a lot in common.”

“You aim to protect the land. *That* I can respect.” She nodded.

“Well of course! I have to, I am a centaur after all.”

# Chapter 2

The moon guided the party’s return to the tavern. They all rented a separate room for themselves, except for Drathalion.

“Goodnight everyone.” Zane said. He looked down at Drathalion. “And Drathalion.”

“Goodnight!” Aurora said back.

Others all said goodnight too.

Drathalion smiled and winked. “*Goodnight*.”

Zane turned around and walked up the stairs to his room. Behind him was a second pair of footsteps. He glanced over his shoulder, and saw who he thought he would see.

He entered his room and before he could close the door, Drathalion slipped in behind him.

“Hi.”

Drathalion smiled at him.

“So why did you come to my room?” Zane sat down on the bed.

Drathalion sat down next to him. “You are a very strong handsome warrior.” She placed a hand on his hand and rubbed the other hand along his arm.

Zane’s heart beat faster and he turned away for a second. Gathering up some courage, he faced her again. “Thank you for that compliment. Did you need to talk?”

“Oh.” Drathalion’s smile faded and she looked down. After a moment she looked back up at him with a serious expression. “What do you think is happening on the farm?”

Zane shrugged. “I have no idea. We’ll see tomorrow.”

“Yes, well…” Drathalion stared into his eyes. They were a terrifying black with a red dot in the middle. Most would find his stare intimidating, but Drathalion didn’t flinch.

Instead, it was Zane that broke the stare. His heart was beating very fast. He clasped his hands in his lap and turned away from Drathalion. His face was turning red. “Yes?”

Drathalion let out a smirk. “Goodnight Zane.” She pulled back her hood and headbutted his arm.

“Goodnight,” he replied, heart pounding. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her.

Drathalion stood up, pulled her robe off, revealing her brilliant black fur pattern. She stretched a bit and then curled up on the bed. With a big yawn, she went to sleep.

Zane looked over at her, resting so softly. He pulled a blanket over her and she let out a little *mwr*. Then he removed his equipment and lay in bed next to her, facing the wall. His heart still beat really fast as he fell asleep.

Outside, Marisa was peeking in through the window on her flying broom. “Cringe.”

The next morning, Zane gets up bright and early. Drathalion was still sleeping soundly. He checked his bag for his gold bag. All 71 pieces, still there. All of his equipment was still there, right where he left it. He put it all back on, and went down stairs to talk to the innkeeper.

“What can I get you?”

“Thanks, but I got rations.” Zane pulled out his tack bread. He looked at his fellow party members who were also already up. “Good morning.”

“So you guys look like adventurers?” The innkeeper washed a plate.

“Yes, we are.”

“Up for some goblin hunting?”

“That’s something we do, yes, but not today. Today we’re investigating the disappearing crops at the farm.”

“Disappearing? Ha! If you ask me, they’ve been stealing their own crops this whole time.”

“Why would they steal their own crops? They sell it anyway.”

“Well the town can only afford to pay so much for their grain. I bet they’re smuggling it off to some other buyer that pays more.”

“Do you have any evidence for this?”

The innkeeper shrugged. “No, just a hunch.”

The conversation got really loud and woke up some sleepers upstairs, including Drathalion.

Drathalion yawned, stretched, and unfurled on the bed. She put her robe and gear back on and slipped out the window. She prowled around the forest and found a rabbit, which she quickly disposed of with an arrow. She knelt down, picked it up and started eating it like an apple.

Unfortunately, she drew a lot of attention with her strange behaviour and arrow shooting near town. A guard approached her and caught her red-handed, literally. “Mam, what are you doing?”

Drathalion stared up at him for a moment, and then in a moment of instinct, she gulped it and swallowed it whole. “Nothing, just going for a stroll.”

“Then what was that you just put in your mouth?”

“A ration. I’d offer you some but it’s all gone.”

“You know it’s illegal to hunt without a permit, right?”

“And where do you get a permit?”

“At the town center. It’s the building with deer mount on the front. You can’t miss it.”

“Ok, thanks mister.”

“Take care now.” He left.

Drathalion licked her fingers clean of blood and rejoined the party at the tavern.

“Where’s Drathalion? I think we’re all here except her.” Zane asked.

Just then Drathalion walks in. Everyone looks at her and immediately notices that there’s blood on her mouth.

Februs, Aurora’s partner angel, asks directly, “What’s that on your face?”

Drathalion wipes her face with her hand and realizes there’s still blood on it. “Oh, it’s ketchup.”

No one believed her, except Zane and Aurora.

“Right…” Februs side-eyed her. “You should go wash up.”

The Innkeeper piped up. “There’s a washroom out and around back. And by ‘washroom’ I mean outhouse.”

Drathalion went around back, and used the bucket in the outhouse as a mirror. She wiped her face with her paws and licked her paws clean until she was satisfied her face was clean. Then she returned to the party ready for the day.

And today, they all traveled to the farmhouse on foot together.

On the way, Drathalion observed for clues. She found a rock and dirt mound along the road. It had a small hole at the top, and several red ants traveled to and from it. She kept this info to herself.

The whole way there, they don’t see the farmer or any of their children out in the field, even though the cool day would be a good day to do fieldwork. When they got to the farmhouse, there was no note on the front gate. It was also open. Inside the courtyard, it was empty.

“Hello! Farmer!” Zane yelled. He walked up to the porch and knocked on the main hall door. No one answered. “Hello?” He opened the door. It was pitch black inside. “Farmer?” No one answered. Zane ventured in, and Drathalion followed behind. The others searched other buildings. After searching a few rooms, Zane saw a shadow shift. “What was that?”

“It went to the left.” Drathalion could see in the dark much better.

Zane followed the shadow into a room.

“It’s in here, on that chair.”

Zane found a lamp and turned it on.

HIIIIIISSSSSSSSS! An opossum holding a chunk of cheese hissed at them and scampered off.

“You’re free for now. You’re lucky I’ve had my breakfast already today.”

“Oh…” It just clicked in Zane’s head. “That *was* blood on your mouth this morning.”

“Shh…” Drathalion smiled and put a finger to her mouth. “Let’s search the next building.”

“Yeah let’s check on my horses. Zane stumbled around in the dark and tripped over a bench near the dining room table on the way out.

They ran across the courtyard. On the way, Marisa was trying to get into a certain room. “Hey this door won’t budge. Can you help me out?”

“Not now Marisa.” Zane ran straight to the barn door. It was covered in rope and triple knotted. Zane tried untying the rope, but it was too tight. He took out his great axe and sliced the rope in one clean cut, only slightly damaging the door in the process. The door swung open to reveal the contents of the barn: hay, hay, and more hay. “My horses!”

“The cows are also missing.” Drathalion noted.

Zane searched through the barn, and found the farmer and his wife tied up with rope, gagged with tape, beaten bloody, and unconscious. He turned to Drathalion and told her, “Go get Aurora.”

Drathalion nodded and dashed off.

Zane cut off all their ropes, then tried shaking the farmer awake. He didn’t respond. He shook the wife awake and she woke up screaming and pushing him away.

“Hey, hey, hey…” Zane put his palms out. “Easy now, we’re here to help.”

“Bandits! Bandits! Bandits!” she babbled.

“Bandits? Is that who took your cattle? And my horse?”

“And my… children! Where are my children?”

“We’re still looking for them, mam. Come with me.” Zane picked the farmer up and carried them out of the barn. The wife walked herself out of the barn.

Meanwhile, Drathalion ran out of the barn. She ran past Marisa.

“Hey can you help me read this?” Marisa held out a book that she apparently got from the room she couldn’t open earlier.

Drathalion blinked, and then kept running. She climbed up a tree in the middle of the courtyard and yelled “Aurora!”

“Yes?” Aurora appeared hovering in the air next to her.

“The farmer and his wife need help!” Drathalion pointed to the barn.

“On it!” Aurora got to the barn door just as Zane was carrying them out.

“I’m taking them to that room.” Zane nodded to a door.

“Oh we were just there.”

Once there, Aurora healed the farmer’s wounds and helped the wife get better. The farmer woke up and Februs interrogated him to find out more about the bandits.

Zane and Drathalion found Asahi. “What are you doing?”

“I’m tracking something.” Asahi didn’t look up.

“What?”

“A horse and cart.”

“MY horse and cart!” Zane yelled. “How fast can you run?”

“Ha! I can keep up.” Asahi smirked.

“Good.” Zane nodded. Then to Drathalion, “Go tell the others that we’re tracking down the bandits.”

Drathalion nodded.

“Let’s go.” Zane and Asahi took off on the trail.

Drathalion searched the rest of the farmhouse, but didn’t find the children. She found Marisa and Aurora in the library investigating the bandits. She looked around, and opened her mouth to speak, but then she decided against it. Instead, she climbed a tree and watched and listened. Marisa, Aurora, and Ferbrus were interrogating the farmer about his tax records, and how he seemed to have been going into debt very often and a mysterious benefactor was always bailing them out. Seemed like an important clue. Finally, Marisa and Aurora emerged from the library.

Drathalion dropped down in front of them. “Zane and that other guy went to track down the bandits.” She pointed in the direction they went.

“Well let’s go then!” Marisa hopped on her broom and sped off in that direction.

“Februs and I are transporting the farmer and his wife to town.” Aurora stated.

Drathalion nodded. “I’m going to catch up to Zane.” Drathalion ran off along the trail that Zane had followed earlier.

Zane followed the trail down to the bandit camp. Eighteen seconds later, Asahi caught up. Zane smirked. “ ‘I can keep up’, huh?”

“A guy as big as you has no right being that fast.” Asahi took a moment to catch his breath.

Behind them, Drathalion was still a half mile away, as was Marisa.

And behind them, back at town, in the tavern, upstairs, slept a sleepy centaur. He didn’t even wake when the party struck up a loud conversation downstairs early in the morning. If he wasn’t careful, he’d sleep in past checkout time and have to pay for another night.

# Chapter 3

Asahi and Zane got to the bandit camp and hid behind some trees. They observed the camp from the outskirts, and noticed that the encampment is fortified with wooden walls and a gate, which was presumably locked from the inside. The cliffs around the camp where steep and full of loose rocks. There was a river on the other side of the camp. Zane decided to wait for the others before proceeding.

The rest of the party arrived, and Zane informed them of the plan. “We’re going to wait until nightfall to sneak in. There’s too many bandits here to go in without stealth.”

Februs and Aurora arrived later in the afternoon. “The farmer and his wife are in town getting help. We assured them we would find their children. Have you located them yet?”

“The horse tracks…” Zane pointed to the ground. “Lead into that camp. I don’t see anyway way out. I believe the children are in this camp, but I don’t know where exactly.”

Nightfall came and everyone split. Marisa, Aurora, and Februs took the high ground on the cliffs. Zane, Asahi, and Drathalion grouped at the front gate.

“We have to take out those guards.” Zane pointed to the tow guards in the towers on either side of the gate.

“Wait here.” Drathalion climbed a tree, and found a guard on a tower near the gate. He was holding a torch, and a gold chain was glittering around his neck. Drathalion blinked aggressively at the guard, and a blue paw mark appeared on his chest. She pulled back an arrow in her bow, and shot the guard right in the chest.

The guard staggered back, drunkenly gaping at the arrow in his chest.

“Hmm… not close enough.” Drathalion let another arrow loose, this time going straight through the guard’s neck. The blue paw print vanished from the guard’s chest and he plummeted to the floor. “Hmm.” Drathalion smiled. Her eyes flashed blue, and she blinked aggressively at the other guard next to the gate. The blue paw print appeared on his chest, followed shortly by a deadly arrow.

The guard dropped without a reaction.

Drathalion dropped from the tree. “The guards are downed.”

“Great, now we need to sneak in.”

“Hold on a second.” Drathalion closed her eyes, and passed her hand down from her head to her chest, closing her fist. Her fist lit up and her body faded into the shadows. The shadows spread from her position to a small area around her, engulfing Asahi and Zane. “This will keep us from being seen.”

“Ok, let’s go.”

Zane and Asahi led the charge to the gate. Zane shouldered the gate, but it didn’t budge. “This gate won’t open. I could bust it open, but it’d make a lot of noise.” Zane turned to Drathalion. “Do you have any sound absorption spells?”

Drathalion gave him a confused look. She unequipped her bow and jumped high to cling onto the gate. She shimmied up and over the gate. Unbarring the locking board, she opened the gate just a smidge to let in Asahi and Zane, then she closed it behind them.

“Nice going, Drathalion.”

Drathalion looked down and blushed.

“Alright, you two go that way, this guy over there is mine!” Asahi climbed the ladder up to the tower, lightning dashed across the wall, and pummeled the guard, who had little time to react. Asahi looked down at his kill. “Yeah, that’s what’s up.”

Zane and Drathalion scooted along the inside wall. Drathalion climbed up to the tower, shoved the dead body aside, and pulled the arrows out of his chest. She lined up a shot to another guard. Letting the magical shadows slip away, her eyes glowed blue. She blinked aggressively at the guard in question, and a blue paw appeared on his chest. She shot both bloody arrows straight into his chest. He fell, dropping his torch.

Zane climbed up the ladder, and put out the torch with his canteen. “We can’t let this start a fire.” He walked across the wall, and watered out the other torch. After examining the camp, he jumped down next to an unusual tent. He peeked his head in.

Inside, an older, tougher bandit was talking to the farmer’s son. “Listen here, boy. We don’t want to harm you. We’re under orders to take you with us as payment for our boss. But don’t worry, no harm will come to you, as long as you do what I say.”

The boy looked up at him, shyly frowning.

“Hey, you look like a good strong lad. If you cooperate, you might even get to be one of us.” He slapped him on the shoulder. “See you around, son.” The bandit leader exited the tent.

Drathalion watched from the poorly lit wall as Zane ambushed the bandit leader. He jumped on him with his axe, and tore up his arm.

The bandit leader braced himself and pushed Zane back. “Oh hey man how’s it going?”

Zane was taken aback by the bandit leader’s unnatural friendliness. “I’m… trying to kill you.”

“Oh, I see that.” The bandit leader casually looked at the gaping wound on his arm. “And why are you trying to kill me?”

Zane put down his axe hand. “Because you kidnapped that kid. I’m here to rescue him.”

“No, you don’t want to do that.” The bandit leader put an arm around Zane and pulled him into a huddle. “Between you and me, his parents owe *a lot* of money to my boss. Rescuing him now will bring more trouble to his family than you know.”

“And who is your boss?”

“Just the man with the briefcase.”

Zane looked bewildered. “Who?”

“He might not seem powerful, but he is. He’s paying all us here to kidnap these kids. Why?” The bandit leader shrugged. “Don’t care. But after we meet him tomorrow, we get new members to our group, and money for supplies, so we take the job.”

“You’re meeting tomorrow?”

“Yes, at this very spot. Would you like to meet him?”

“I would.”

“Let’s make a deal. I’ll introduce you to my boss tomorrow, and you don’t try to kill me tonight. Deal?” He put out his hand.

“Deal.” Zane shook his hand vigorously, but the bandit leader didn’t flinch, even with his wounded arm.

“Great. Now let’s go to the campfire and get to know each other.” The bandit leader nudged Zane to the campfire. There, he addressed his underlings. “This here is a new friend. He will be eating with us tonight. Though I don’t know how he got in.” He scowled at his men.

The bandits around the campfire all looked down or averted their gaze.

“Anyway, we have important matters to attend to. What did you say your name was?”

“Zane Allkiller. I kill things.”

“As do we, when hired to.”

Drathalion pulled the two double bloody arrows from her last mark and got into a better position on the wall so she could watch and listen in. She had a clear shot to any of the bandits around the campfire, but waited patiently.

“As a mercenary myself, I can respect that.” Zane accepted a mug of beer. “But to a point. Kidnapping children? That crosses a line.”

“We bandits do what we must to survive. It’s not easy living in this world.”

Up on the top of the cliff, Marisa, Aurora, and Februs were watching.

“*Now* can I let my spells loose?” Marisa jumped up and down on her broom, itching for action.

“Wait,” Aurora held onto the edge of the broom. “Zane is in a dangerous position, we don’t want to give away his position.”

They watched from their vantage point as Zane met with the bandit.

“Huh, looks like an armistice has been reached.” Februs noted.

“But then why is Drathalion standing there with her bow ready? And why is Zane’s axe still in his hand? And why is Asahi over there beating up that guy on the ground?” Marisa tried to shove Aurora’s hand away. “It’s about to go down, and I want to get all up in it.”

“Wait.”

“Hmm…” Februs pondered. “It seems we need more information. Only one way to do that.”

“But…”

“I’ll be safe.” Februs launched himself into the air, and then floated down to the campfire from above. He landed next to Zane. “Good day.”

Zane nearly dropped his mug, but had enough composure to introduce his party member. “Oh, this guy here. This guy’s with me.”

“How did you get in here?” The bandit leader slammed his mug on the log.

“I just came in.” Februs shrugged. “Now, what’s this I hear about the man with the briefcase? Something about a meeting?”

Februs and the bandit leader talked about the man with the briefcase and the farmer’s debt.

“So that’s why you need the children? I take it they’re alive and well?”

“Yes, there are safe.”

“May I speak with them? I’d like to make sure they’re ok.”

“Sure, why not.” The bandit leader shrugged. “As long as we’re in agreement they don’t leave here tonight.”

“As I understand it, taking them tonight would be very bad indeed.”

“Ok then we have an understanding.”

The bandit leader had two of his men escort Februs to each of the children, and Februs indeed verified that they were both healthy and unharmed.

“Thank you. I will make sure that your hospitality is noted.” And with that, Februs took off into the air. He traveled back to town and told the farmer and his wife the “good” news. The bad news didn’t sit well with them, however.

Meanwhile, Kriv was in town and ran into the mysterious girl from the midnight graveyard. “Have you seen my party members? We got separated and I don’t know where they went.”

“Oh, yes! I know where they are. Would you like me to take you to them?”

“Sure.”

“Ok, have a nice trip!” The little girl reached out and pushed Kriv.

Kriv fell over instantly and landed in a large body of water. He clawed his way to the surface, only to find that he was being whisked away down a river. The torches of the nearby bandit camp flickered on the water. He tried swimming to the shore, but the river was too strong. After lots of attempts of escape, he finally got splatted against a rock. He took a moment to regain his breath and then walked along the bridge to the bandit camp.

Along the way, he tuned his guitar. He didn’t really know where he was, so he just wondered into the camp. Luckily he found Zane at a campfire before he found any bandits. “Hello, my fellow party member!”

“Oh, this guy!” Zane gestured. “This guy is also with me.”

“Another one?!” The bandit leader yelled. “How did *you* get in here?”

“That is a long and frightful story.” Kriv finished tuning his guitar and started strumming. “Lost and alone in town I found a lass, who wields magic powers and opened for me a pass. Plunged into a river, I’m afraid I almost drowned. Until I saw the torch light of your wonderful little town.”

“Ok, that’s enough. Do you got anymore friends you’d like to tell me about?”

“I’m not ‘lost and alone’, as you’ve probably figured.” Zane motioned to Drathalion to join them.

Drathalion placed her bow on her back and crept up to the campfire. Zane motioned again, and she approached, sitting on the ground next to Zane.

“She’s also with me.”

“Wow, they’re just crawling out of the woodworks. I don’t even want to know how you got in.”

“That’s probably for the better, because we just killed like all your night guards.” Asahi dashed from the tower, suddenly appearing at the pork spit with a fork. “Is this done, by the way?”

“Asahi!” Zane snapped.

The bandit leader grunted. “So that’s how you all got in. Well, so be it. That means less mouths to feed. They’re all dead weight anyway if they can’t hear an 8ft behemoth stomping around.” The bandit leader offered the party some pork.

Zane and Kriv heartily accepted, but Drathalion stared intently, ears pinned back.

“Everything okay?” Zane patted Drathalion on the head.

She looked up at him, nodded, and continued staring. Zane rubbed her head through her hood as he ate his pork.

After some time passed, the bandit leader stood up. “I’m off to hit the sack. You’re all welcome to sleep here tonight if you wish.” He motioned to two of his men, he stood at attention. “Make sure they get accommodated.”

The two men nodded.

“Accommodations? That’s great. I need a blanket and a pillow.” Zane tossed his stick into the fire.

The two men returned with a large blanket. Zane unraveled it but found no pillow. He shrugged. “I guess that’s what the backpack is for.” He climbed up into his cart and laid on his back. Backpack under his head, blanket over his body, and axe in hand, he closed his eyes. He opened them to something shaking the cart.

Drathalion climbed up into the cart and knelt next to him. She planted four arrows at his feet. Her glowing blue hands left a misty imprint on each arrow. When the magic glow faded, she looked at Zane.

“What are you doing?”

“Cordone of Arrows, for protection.”

Zane pulled back the blanket to reveal his axe. “For protection.”

Drathalion’s ears pricked forward for a moment, and she let out a smile. She pulled the blanket back even more, and slipped in next to Zane. Zane reactively held out his arm under her, and she laid her head on it like a pillow. She curled up next to him and laid a hand on his chest. “For protection.”

Zane pulled the covers back over her. “Nice shots tonight by the way.”

“Nice ass tonight.”

Zane blushed.

“Don’t worry about it, I got your back.”

“And I’ve got yours.”

“Those children will be in good hands.”

“Oh yes, the children. Did you see where they were being kept?”

“Yes, in that tent where you ambushed the bandit leader.”

“So why didn’t you take the opportunity to rescue them?”

“I’m short and clawless. Do you think I can carry children?”

Zane tried not to laugh as a thought clouded his mind. “Did you not get my hint?”

“Oh, I got it. But I disagreed.” Drathalion’s ears flicked in the cold night air. “Watching you was more important.”

“Why?”

“For…” Drathalion yawned. “…protection.” She fell asleep, silently purring.

Zane smiled. “Goodnight, Drathalion.”

# Chapter 4

The next morning, at the crack of dawn, Zane opened his eyes. He didn’t sleep a wink at all last night, but that was intentional. He was battle ready the moment he “woke up”. He looked to his side, and Drathalion was sleeping soundly, cuddled up next to his side. Her front paws rested on his chest, touching his handaxe. He slowly and softly moved her hand so he get up. His careful movements didn’t disturb her from her slumber. He gently slid the blanket back over her.

*Mwwr.*

He climbed off the carriage. He reached back in to grab the arrows sticking straight up. “Well, it’s morning now, and we’re safe. We don’t need these anymore.” He pulled them out and inserted them into Drathalion’s quiver. He clapped his hands together. “Time for breakfast.”

He sat at the campfire and lit it. A bandit captain came out and greeted him. He brought food. Zane happily cooked it over the fire.

An hour later, the smell of the food awoke Drathalion from her slumber. She reached out in front of her, but the space was empty. She opened her eyes to find that Zane was gone. She pushed the blanket off her. Yawning, she stretched her arms out. It was then that she noticed. The spot where her cordoned arrows had been was empty! She hopped out of the cart and snuck up behind Zane.

“Zane. Zane.” She tapped him on the shoulder.

“Mm?” He didn’t turn around.

“Something’s wrong. My cordoned arrows are gone! I think one of the bandits must have set them off, but there’s no bodies!”

“Oh, no, nothing’s wrong.” Zane rotated a piece of meat in the fire. “I disarmed them and put them in your quiver.”

“Wait, what? *You* disarmed my trap?”

“Yeah. You hungry?” He patted the seat on the log next to him. “Breakfast is almost done. Come sit.”

Drathalion emitted a low growl and walked away. She climbed up the ladder to the wall tower. She jumped onto the railing and, without even looking to see how far down it was, jumped to the ground below. It was slightly further than she thought. Although she landed on her feet, all four of them, she took a minor injury. She went off into the woods to hunt.

“All rise!” The bandit captain called.

The tents rumbled and rustled with men getting ready. One guy was ready almost instantly, as if he had woken up in perfect uniform. Most of them were acceptably dressed but groggy, but one guy came out in his boxers and sat down around the campfire.

“The suited man will be here soon. I want everyone to get ready.”

Two guys in a tent up on the cliff were having an especially hard time. They were really drunk from the night before. Outside their tent, they could hear their visitors.

“Good morning, sleepy head!” Marisa the witch shook Asahi violently.

“Mmmmm…” Asahi rolled over and put a hand over his face.

“I gotta say, you don’t look too bad.” Marisa rolled him back over and uncovered his eyes. “If you couldn’t tell, that was a compliment.”

“Don’t get any ideas.”

Marisa put a finger to her chin. “I don’t think we’re good for each other anyways.” She threw his clothes at him. “Get ready. Who knows what’s going to happen today.”

“But we *do* know what’s go—”

“I said *Who* knows what’s going to happen today.”

Asahi rolled his eyes.

The two bandits in the tent finally got ready and popped out. “What a good nap!” He stretched. He turned to Marisa and Asahi. “I hope you two weren’t too intrusive last night?”

Asahi shrugged.

“Hmm. Ok. Well we best be getting down to camp.”

“Before we go down…” Marisa flew on her broom in front of him. “Do you know anyone good at making something?”

The bandit shrugged. “Nope. But I do know something good at unmaking something. And that something is time. Hurry up!”

The hungover bandit crawled out of the tent and struggled to his feet. He wasn’t fully dressed and could barely take two steps without falling over.

“Oh my goodness! Let me help you!” Marisa flew over and let him rest on her broom. She guided him all the way down the path to the bandit camp.

But before they could get to the front gate, they saw a figure walking in from the woods.

“Hold still! Hide!” The bandit called.

They all hid in the bushes.

A tall, slim man in a black suit and tie walked slowly down the path. His oddly shiny top hat was matched only his extravagant briefcase, which he hung at his side. Despite walking with his head held high, eyes hidden behind a pair of shades, and his chest puffed out, his pace was slow enough to come second place in a turtle race. He had all the time in the world. And he took it, too.

As he made his way into the bandit camp, all the bandits stood at attention and awaited his official arrival. Zane stood up from the campfire and stared him down. The suited man paid no attention. Before he got to the captain, he opened his briefcase, pulling out a bag of coins. He tossed it at the bandit captain’s top officials, who wrestled for control of it. The winner got to distribute it. The bandits all formed a line to get their share of the loot.

The suited man approached the bandit captain. “I trust that you have the children?”

The bandit captain nodded, but before he could speak, Zane cut in.

“Yes, I was going to ask about that. The parents want their children back.”

“The parents of that quaint little farm?” The suited man tilted his head. “And?”

“I’m here to make a deal for their release.”

“I’m a reasonable man. I guess I could relinquish ownership of their children, and forget their debt, but I do require a reasonable amount of convincing.”

“The father got beaten near to death and the mother had to watch.”

The suited man was unimpressed.

“I’m a mercenary. I do good work.”

The suited man raised his eyebrows. “I see. I could use a grunt like you to do my chores.”

“And if we do this chore for you, the children go home, and the debt is forgiven?”

The suited man nods.

“Ok, and what is this chore?”

I have a particular… magical intuition of sorts. And right now it’s telling me that one of my closest objects of requirement is somewhere to be found on the beach end of this continent. It was stolen from me.”

Marisa and Asahi sneak into the bandit camp behind the suited man. They hide behind a haybale and peek over it. “Asahi, I think he’s really suspicious.”

“And I will reward you for the return of this magical item. Mostly gold.” The suited man patted his suitcase. “So we have a deal?” He extended his hand.

“I don’t do handshakes.”

“The handshake is a sign of trust.” The suited man glared at him over his shades. “Do you trust me?”

Zane stared into his eyes. “I want forward payment upfront.”

The suited man nodded.

Zane shook his hand.

“Then it is a deal.” The suited man smiles. A small spark of magic transferred from the suited man’s hand to Zane’s, but Zane didn’t notice. “And about this forward payment…” The suited man reached into his suitcase. “How’s this?”

Zane took it and put it in his bag. “That’s part of it. I expect the rest.”

“You’ll get it, in time. Trust me.” He smiled as he walked to the bandit leader. He whispered in his ear.

The bandit leader nodded. “You two there! Secure the children! They’re not to be harmed! Everyone else! You’re with me!”

The suited man tipped his hat to Zane, then turned and walked away. He walked out just as slowly as he walked in. Asahi and Marisa tried to hide from him as he got close, but he looked directly at them. They shuddered back. “Excuse me,” he said as he tipped his hat to them. Then he walked away.

The bandit leader and his men follow soon after. Soon all that’s left is the party and two guard bandits guarding the tents with the children in them.

Marisa and Asahi come out and join Zane around the campfire. “What did you get, Zane? What did you get?” Marisa pokes his bag.

“Blue crystal.” Zane picks up the roasting stick.

“Can I have it?” She lifts the flap.

“No, but you can look at it.” He pulls out the blue crystal.

Marisa holds the crystal up to the sun. It glows a brilliant fluorescent blue. “I wonder what this is.” She pulls it into her chest. She pulls a book out of her bag as she sits on the log near Zane. She flips through the pages.

“What’d you find?”

“It’s a…” Marisa rotates it several times. “An Azerite crystal!”

“What does that do?”

“It can be used as a spell focus, and it costs a lot of money!”

“How much?”

“Based on the quality of the cut… 50 GP! Perfectly cut!”

“Huh. That’s it?” Zane flips the meat in the fire.

“I don’t know. Let me find my spell.” Marisa flips through another book, landing on a page marked “Identify”. She casts the spell on the blue crystal. “It’s… it’s a weapon!”

“No way.”

“Yeah, it can be used as a weapon!” Marisa grabbed it like she would a sword and stabbed the air in front of her with it.

Zane grabbed it and stuck it back in his bag. “It’s not a toy, Marisa.”

“Oh, that reminds me! Do you know somebody that can make things?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Me.”

“You?! Zaney boy, *you* can make things?” She elbowed him.

“I can. I don’t have the tools though. Because *someon*e—” He looked directly into Marisa’s eyes. “Refuses to go to the dwarven city, where I need to get my supplies.”

“So, do you know how to make a gun?”

“What’s a gun?”

“So since you’re stupid and don’t know what a firearm is—” Marisa flew above him and looked down.

“I *do* know what a firearm is.”

“So you can craft me a shotgun? A rifle? Or how about an M1-Guran?”

“M1 what?” Zane spat. “First of all, don’t call me stupid. Get off your high horse.” He reached up and dragged her broom down until they were at eye level. “Second of all, I don’t know what you just said. You’re speaking gibberish.”

Marisa explained to Zane how guns work.

“Hmm. I can do it.” Zane nodded. “But I need precise specifications. Do you know how to make a blueprint?”

“I sure do!” Marisa conjured up an illusion of a gun. “Here you go.”

“I need something more permanent, like on a piece of paper.”

“Welp, this is the best I got for now.”

“Ok, I can work with that.”

Meanwhile, Drathalion got back from her hunting trip. Despite how long she took, she didn’t bring back any food. However, her mouth and hands were covered in blood, signs of a successful hunt. She climbed the bandit camp walls and stood on the tower, looking over the party from afar.

Zane turned around. “You’re back finally! I was about to send out a search party!”

Drathalion glared.

“What are you doing up there? Don’t you want some breakfast?”

Drathalion’s gaze pierced through Zane’s skin.

“Wow she’s sure being weird today.” Marisa pointed her gun illusion at Drathalion.

Drathalion ducked and peeked only her out above the platform.

Marisa shook the gun and made a lot *POP* noise.

Drathalion flinched.

“Got her!” Marisa laughed.

Drathalion low growled.

The party moved out to the beach. Drathalion followed close behind them, but kept her distance. Marisa flew above them, forcing conversation to require a little bit of shouting. They walk along the river on the top of a cliff.

Marisa flies down at looks at how clear the river is. “This water is so clear and clean!”

“Yes.” Zane confirms, focusing on the blue crystal.

“It’s much nicer than the water from where I’m from. There, the water is so polluted because the people throw their trash in the water. A lot of sea creatures suffered because of it. Though some of them did grow large and trample cities.”

“You’re speaking nonsense.” Zane played with the blue crystal, trying to figure out how to use it as a weapon.

“You’re just naïve and stupid.” Marisa flies upside down in front of Zane.

“If you want me to make your gun, you’ll stop calling me stupid.”

“Ok.” Marisa straightened out and flew up. “Stupid.” She laughed.

Zane clenched his fist, cracking the crystal. As he did, light streamed out of it. “Wait…” He crushed the crystal completely. The crystal grew bright, and transformed into a blue crystal sword. It glowed brightly. Zane pointed it at a dense patch of shrubbery. A light beam poured into the crevasses, revealing critters inside it. “This is super useful!”

“Let me see!” Marisa flew down and grabbed the sword by the blade.

Zane let go, and as soon as he did, the blue crystal sword became just a crystal again. “Interesting.” Zane caught it.

“That light is so bright! It’s like a godly amount of light.” Marisa flew in circles around Zane. “Do you have gods here?”

“I’ve met a few of them, and killed a few of their clergyman.”

Marisa then rants about religion. Then she talks about wars.

“You’re talking nonsense.” Zane complained.

“No, stupid, you’re just naïve.” Marisa giggled.

The party soon arrived at the beach. They walked down a hill between two cliffs. There was a cave behind two bandit tents. The river on the beach swayed violently, especially for a river. It was as if it was reacting to their presence.

Drathalion took her position at the top of the cliff. She watched as Marisa flewaround the beach, getting close to the water. Soon a giant gust of wind came out of nowhere and swatted Marisa off her broom. She reacted quickly, grabbing it and pulling it back under her. She drifted over to Drathalion.

“Hi kitty!”

Drathalion looked away.

The wind got even stronger and nearly knocked Zane and Asahi off their positions on the beach. Everyone turned their attention to the water, which seemed to be the source of the wind. A face appeared in the water, rising up off the surface, and growing limbs. It spoke in an ancient language.

“Marisa?” Zane called out.

“I think it says we should go away!” Marisa struggled against the wind.

“Not an option. Stand your ground!” Zane drew his weapon.

The water elemental rose up out of the water. It rolled out onto the sandy beach, and charged something within itself. No longer in the water, the wind it produced subsided.

“I got this!” Asahi dashed in and drew his Bushido.

The water elemental formed a club within itself, pulled it out, and swatted Asahi away. Asahi braced and dashed in with his wind stance. He slashed the elemental with his katana. The elemental sealed the cuts very quickly.

Zane closes in to the fight with his new sword, attacking it twice. The elemental sealed its cuts quickly.

Drathalion took her time entering the battle. With a sigh, she opened her eyes, and stared at the elemental. Her eyes flashed blue, and a blue paw print appeared on the elemental. She drew her bow, and let loose an arrow. It flew through the elemental. It was a bullseye, but the elemental seemed unphased, except for the flickering of her hunter’s mark. That told her it was taking damage. She shot it with another arrow. Same thing.

Marisa flew overhead, regaining her positioning from all the wind. “Make haste my friends!” She cast a spell on Asahi and Zane. When the spell was done, they were slashing and slicing faster than before. The spell was successfully cast, but her hands didn’t stop glowing. “Oh no!” She flew off. The energy in her hands crackled and pulsed. “Not another magic surge!” A giant flash of light exploded from Marisa. *Who knows what could happen?*

The water elemental did not like the sudden onslaught of attacks, and charged on the ones who led the brunt of it. It expanded and encompassed both Zane and Asahi, swallowing them both. Asahi sidestepped and escaped, but Zane was not so lucky. The water elemental floated him up off the ground, removing his traction with the ground. Zane swam through the elemental, but it moved enough to keep him trapped. Despite his high lung capacity, Zane was drowning faster than normal. The water elemental forced his lips open and was leeking water directly into his lungs. He steeled his resolve, but he was fading fast.

Drathalion looked on from above. Zane deserved this. He broke her trust, now he doesn’t deserve to trust her to help him. He shouldn’t have let her sleep in. He shouldn’t have disarmed her trap. He shouldn’t have walked off and abandoned her. He deserved this. She put her bow down and requivered her arrow. She put her chin up and smiled. Then with her next breath, she looked down and to the side. But he did make her feel safe. He made her feel welcome. He made her feel home. Also, horny. But he hadn’t really abandoned her; in truth, he was just a few feet away making breakfast. Now, she had really made up her mind.

She growled with the force of a magic spell. She knelt on the ground and poured her magic into the earth. It traveled in a single vine down the cliff, across the beach, and under the water elemental. It exploded into a garden of vines, reaching up, grabbing anything it could. It grabbed at the water elemental and her party members in the area.

Asahi, quick witted, slashed the vines coming up to grab him, avoiding getting caught. The water elemental shrugged it off like it was nothing. Zane wasn’t caught either.

The vines didn’t grab Zane, but Zane grabbed the vines. Reaching out, he took his chance at escape. Grabbing vine after vine, he made his way out of the water elemental’s stomache. He landed on dry land, purging the water from his lungs. The vines willingly accepted it. Zane was barely breathing, but he survived, and he was angry.

Meanwhile, Marisa survived the magic surge and the flash of light. When it faded, tiny globules of water floated in the air around her. She reached out and touched one. It sparked and the tiny bubbles all flew into it. They all coalesced into a single blob of water, which fell into her arms. Despite being all water, it held together in her hands. She swished it back and forth. It had the consistency of jello.

Soon a face emerged from the blob. Then a mouth. “Wah.” It spoke.

“Ah! You’re so cute!” Marisa hugged it. “I’m going to name you…”

“Marisa!” Asahi called.

“No, not Marisa! That’s my name!”

“Help!” Asahi slashed the monster with his many swords.

“Oh! Right!” She rubbed her cheek on the blob. “Up you go.” She placed it on her shoulder. Her hands glowed as she cast a spell. “Fire into transmute to lightning!” A lightning bolt struck the water elemental.

It seemed to take no damage, but the electricity passed through the water elemental into the vines. The vines started growing again, even faster than they had before. This time, instead of grabbing, they pushed Asahi and Zane into the air.

“Not helping!” Asahi yelled, slashing at the vines as much as he could.

“YES.” Zane grunted with focus in his eyes. The vines lifted him up high into the air. He drew his crystal sword and jumped off the vines, point his sword straight into the water elemental. “You want me?? You want ME??” He screamed.

The water elemental looked up.

Drathalion’s heart pounded. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Then you can have me!” Zane dove sword-first into the water elemental.

The water elemental broke his fall, but got split in two. No problem, just seal up the cuts. This time was different. The magic of the crystal sword disrupted the water elemental’s ability to heal. Zane cut straight down from the top, cutting all the way through to the bottom. With a squelch and a burp, the water elemental exploded, splashing the party with water.

It splashed Drathalion’s mouth and hands, cleaning them of the blood that had caked on earlier. She sighed with a satisfied smile.

Zane stood in the vine area, grunting and taking deep breaths. He snorted here and there too. With a pound of his chest, he screamed, “Victory!”

“What’s with all these vines?” Asahi complained, slowly slashing his way out of the vines. “I thought they’d disappear with the water elemental?”

“Those are mine.” Drathalion slid down the cliffside. “So Zane, now you know how it feels.”

Zane snapped his attention to her. “HUH?”

Drathalion was a bit taken aback, but she pressed on. “Now you know how it feels to have your sense of security taken away from you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were trapped in the water elemental, and trapped in my vines.”

“No! I’m not!” Zane grabbed a vine and pulled it until it snapped. He then proceeded to run around the vine area as if it wasn’t even there. “I can move freely through what you call ‘traps’!”

“Yes, traps! You disarmed my trap!” Drathalion snapped. “You betrayed my trust by removing my protection!”

“Protection? You have no idea. I was up all night! Protecting *you*. You have no say in this matter.”

“But I do have a say. And what I mean to say is,” Drathalion grabbed him around the neck with her bow. “Don’t touch my stuff.” She brought his head down to hers. She looked deep into his eyes.

Zane calmed down, letting the adrenaline drain out of him. “It wasn’t smart of you to trap me in your vines.” He plucked the bow from her grip, took it off him, and handed it back to her. “Unless you wanted to entangle me.”

She shot him a dirty look.

“Ok, duly noted. Don’t touch your stuff.”

“Are you sorry?” She put the bow on her back.

Zane rolled his eyes. “Ok. I’m sorry… for not waiting to move them until you woke up.”

Drathalion narrowed her eyelids, but nodded anyway. “Ok, that’ll do… this time… Just, don’t touch my stuff, ok?”

“Hmm.” Zane nodded. “You seem plenty happy to touch *my* stuff.” Zane picked his weapon off the ground and walked to rejoin the party.

Drathalion walked alongside him. “Do you like it when I touch your *stuff*?” She slyly smirked.

“I don’t mind—”

Drathalion slapped his butt.

He looked down at her, taking in her coy smile. He looked away, unamused.

“Oh…” Drathalion dropped her smile.

They rejoined the party. Marisa was trying to get into the cave, but she couldn’t.

“Now who’s the stupid one?” Zane called. “You can’t even walk through a cave entrance.”

“It’s not me!” Marisa protested, combing through her book. “Dispel magic!” Nothing happened.

“What’s going on?” Drathalion readied her bow.

“There’s an invisible wall blocking the entrance to the cave.” Asahi demonstrated. He leaned up against it. It looked like he was a statue with how still he could lean on nothing.

“Nothing I tried is working!” Marisa huffed. Her shoulder water elemental rubbed up against her head. “Thanks, Sparky.”

A loud boom came from within the cave. They all stood at attention.

*SO, YOU CAME TO KILL MY FAVORITE PET.*  A booming voice echoed in their heads, seemingly originating in each of their own ears individually. *AND NOW YOU COME TO STEAL MY KNOWLEDGE. IT WAS THAT OLD GEEZER SALESMAN, WASN’T IT? HE SENT YOU HERE, DIDN’T HE? WELL UNFORTUNATELY FOR YOU, HE SENT YOU TO DIE! GO AWAY AND DO NOT ENTER.*

“It’s no use!” Marisa screamed. “We can’t enter anyway!” She flipped through her book, then slammed it on the ground.

Zane tried striking the wall, but it was no use. He shrugged. “Looks like we’ll have to find another way around.”

“So it’s just a retrieval quest?” Drathalion approached the cave entrance, stepping lightly on her feline paws.

“Yes.” Zane replied.

“And getting this ‘knowledge’ will help us rescue the children?”

“Yes.”

“Ok.” Drathalion took a deep breath. She put her hands together. They glowed a bright blue. She pulled them apart, and instantly, she was gone. A little blue wisp remained in her place, but it took blew away in the wind.

“Drathalion?!” Zane exclaimed.

“I’m here.” Drathalion appeared on the other side of the invisible wall. “I’ll be right back.”