

CHAPTER FOUR. THE SINGULAR PAIR

1.

"I can never tell if I'm talking to myself," declared Daramont Draiq, glancing up and about with a frown at the mighty oak trees that rose around him. "My dear Na-Tahly, if you must take to the branches like a squirrel will you at least give me some inkling as to where within those branches you might be? Or indeed perhaps you've left me finally, gone to seek love or treasures anew in parts far and away."

In response, an acorn came sailing forth from a particularly dense grown of foliage, arcing through the air to land almost perfectly center of Draiq's head.

"Nice to see I warrant the same level of respect you normally deign me," he responded, glancing up again, while trying to look as offended as he might, but knew himself the sides of his mouth were betraying him with the slight smile that formed there.

The forest of Gravelle Green was a dark and sometimes fearful place to be sure. Acre upon acre of mighty oaks, some so large and densely packed side-by-side, that for much of the Summer when the trees' deep green leaves were in abundance the sun was all but completely shut out from many areas. Indeed, Draiq had wondered earlier, with trees so large, what sort of a snake-pit of intertwined roots must exist underground, allowing himself that one idle notion before setting himself to the task at hand. That being his investigation into the murders that had occurred here in the last few months.

With nary a rustle of leaf nor a snap of twig, his partner Na-Tahly made her appearance, though even with this, the fashion she chose was distinctly her own. In a clear area where the branches around had grown outwards away from each other to create a sort of natural opening, bereft of leaf and greenery of any kind, she hung by her legs hooked over a tree branch to look upside down at the man she sometimes addressed as "Montora".

"And how many times have you told me that facts for finding lay about a scene of death?" the slender girl asked, eyes bright and a smile on her pretty face. "How many times have I heard *"Na-Tahly, don't kick that dung aside, I need to taste its age,"* or *"Na-Tahly, don't even think of turning that body over until I've looked upon it"?* And how many, many, many times have I heard *"Na-Tahly, don't step in the grass, there are facts afoot"?* Personally, I think with that last one you just enjoy saying it for the grand wit that you perceive it makes you appear. Montora."

"And I think you enjoy calling me Montora, with such so healthy a peppering of scorn and rebuke, for how arch you perceive it makes you sound, my lady. And for the eleven millionth time I am not your Montora anyway, so there's that. Now do as you're told and come down. Careful now. Land right by me and the facts afoot with stay right for the seeing."

"As my Montora bids."

Na-Tahly unhooked her legs, seeming to an on-looker unknowing of her abilities, perhaps in that moment having chosen to take her own life, falling head-first from the high branch down towards the ground below. During her drop, however, the girl pivoted her body at the waist, bringing her feet in contact with the bark of the tree, whereby she then pushed off, sailing through the air to land with deft grace by the side of Draiq, who seemed not in the least

impressed with Na-Tahly's feat. In fact, he was already back to studying the ground a little further from them, giving his companion but half a mind as he gestured at the grass ahead.

"Do you see? Yonder?"

"I see horse prints and foot prints a great many," Na-Tahly answered. "And I see the girl's body of course, the poor, unlucky thing. What of you? What do your eyes tell you?"

"I also see all that you make note of, yes, to be sure. But I see a few other things too."

"You do?"

"I do."

"And as is your wont, you'll give me half answers and riddles and a twinkling eye and knowing smiles, until you're good and ready to tell me exactly what, yes?"

"Am I that obvious?"

"No, not oh so much. No more than a dragon's belch into nighttime skies, or the rouged lips of a doxy, or perhaps the screams of some unfortunate, waylaid upon the rack in a torture garden."

"Ah, then I get points for subtlety," Draiq responded, grinning at his friend who smiled back at this despite the serious face she sometimes liked to wear, although Draiq noted often this was not one of her better perfected skills. "All I will say for now, my dear, until I'm more certain of things...is that the killer is more and less than he appears."

2.

The village of Byenuu was fast becoming a town, expanding in size and population in proportion to the commerce brought about by its main source of income. Mushrooms. If the forest of Gravelle Green was known for anything it was the abundance and variety of fungi that proliferated its interior. The height and density of the mighty oaks, producing areas of light and darkness, warmth, and chill in turn, caused fungus to form on the ground, on trees, and all around. Some, the button heads, glad-lads, sweet-tooths and such were good eating as most outlying regions further afield of the village would attest whenever a shipment from Byenuu arrived. And thanks to Byenuu's one grand structure, of the village's own invention, based somewhat on an oast house, but with the kiln heat and venting altered to suit the mushrooms less vigorous consistency, a healthy trade in dried mushrooms exported as far as the frozen steppes of Zanderine and the balmy beach cities of the great, serene, and terrible Ocean-Xu-Vel in the sunny South, further added to the village's coffers.

Other fungi were less agreeable to the palette of course, being of the poisonous variety, yet these too found great demand (within the regulation of sheriffs' tenets of course) to the apothecaries, mage-lairs, and temples that possessed the guild seal or royal crest allowing them to handle such deadly fare. And of course, with poison mushrooms there were also deals and sales to be made in many a tavern's quiet corner, selling them to assassins, dark witches, and folk of a mind to do others harm. Of course, abutting Gravelle Green Forest as it did, such illicit trade was frowned upon by all in Byenuu whose continued prosperity depended not just on steady trade, but their own good name lest the sheriffs of nearby Quimble or even, God forbid, the great and royal city of Askunnhar came calling.

It was the "steady trade" part of this delicate recipe for success where Byenuu had currently hit a snag, however. It was the murders, you see, the terrible murders, done by a maniac or devil-bewitched sort of some kind, who once or twice each seven days for the span

of the last two quarter moons had taken the lives of men and maids alike, so much so that the collectors and pickers of the village were wary of entry, initially refusing to venture too far into the forest, whose deeper, darker parts of course were where the best mushrooms were to be found. And that was back when the problems first beset Byenuu. With more bodies being found, with other pickers simply entering the Oaks and then never to be seen alive again, bodies or not, those lucky enough to still be alive now simply refused to brave the woods at all.

The Sheriff of Quimble was summoned and proved himself what everyone in their hearts knew him to be. A politic, a bureaucrat, and needs be when in close quarters with rabble or wrongdoers, a head-knocker. But the mystery of the murders and the finding of the killer proved beyond his capabilities. He addressed the folk of Byenuu as the birds called forth the morning, his chest out, his face and tone assured, and told those assembled that he needed time to process his findings and on top of that there were pressing matters back in Quimble that needed attending too. Repeated inquiries and requests that he return and complete his work then went unanswered.

It only got worse with the deaths of Janys and her brother Leith; siblings who's ailing mother necessitated them entering the forest in search of mushrooms to keep them all from the debtors' cells. Their bodies, or at least parts of them, were found by a search party who finally worked up the courage to go looking for them several days later. It was the children's mother, still gripped by sickness, staggering down the street consumed with grief and fever both, sad and defeated, her spirit broken; the sight of which touched even the coldest heart in Byenuu. Enough was enough, it was decided. If the elected body of the law wouldn't solve this dilemma, then someone would have to be hired who could.

Investigations into such individuals were quickly made and upon repeated enquiries to neighboring towns and cities (even as far-a-field as those at the foot of the Singing Cliffs) one man's name was repeatedly mentioned as the best, if not the most orthodox, Truthsman of any who had license and shingle to practice as such. A message was sent, summoning said Truthsman for adequate recompense.

And so it came to pass that several weeks later two riders rode through Byenuu's main thoroughfare, their appearance attracting the sort of mute stares from the villagers they passed only rivaled perhaps by the arrival of that company of players several Autumns prior who had boasted a verbose and somewhat flamboyant fire-elf among their troupe.

In fact, as the riding duo made their way past, the silence that fell upon the assembly of onlookers was a thing in itself, marred only by the caws of a few distant crows.

Of the two riders, the man, Daramont Draiq, had a humor to him. That was notable above, or indeed despite of, his many other remarkable attributes. He was tall, this obvious even while he rode his horse; an elegant roan with markings that resembled clouds in the sky. His grace was evident from how his upper body countered the sway of his animal as it made its way along. One of Draiq's eyes, his left, was dead, evidently from a knife or a sword wound of old, the scar running from brow to upper cheek, leaving it a glazed milky white. This detail would have made the man unsettling to behold if not for the bright spark of humor and light evident in his good right eye. Draiq had cropped brown hair, in the fashion of a soldier, yet his manner in all other ways suggested someone who hadn't spent overly long on a battlefield of any kind. Indeed, though assured in his stance, he at no time exuded the essence of a fighting man, with his only weapon a short, curved sword of the sort more commonly seen stowed in

the belts of Western corsairs. His clothing comprised brown leather boots and leggings, brown leather gloves, one on his hand, the other tucked into his belt, with a velvet tunic as rich a green as ever was, though the ride to Byenuu has befouled it in part. The cloak around his shoulders was green too, but patched here, there, there, here and there, these all of green also, but of shades both dark and light, olive, mint, jade, moss and all hues in between.

With a sly smile on his face and twinkle in his good eye, Draiq looked upon the folk of Byenuu.

“Na-Tahly, my dear,” he said with a backward glance at his companion, “it appears we have arrived.”

Na-Tahly remained silent and by way of a reply instead sprang from her ride; a large, humped camel of the kind ridden by desert nomads, although the awe-stuck villagers of Byenuu had no prior knowledge of such a people nor indeed such an animal. Na-Tahly stood surveying the crowd, meeting their gazes each in turn, although these gazes were not long returned as those same villagers all quickly dropped their stares and looked away.

It was clear from her coloring that Na-Tahly origins were far from those of Byenuu’s pale folk. In pressed, Na-Tahly would have revealed her people were the Gaeniti of Gaenitia, a race and land both known for their beauty and their skill in combat. In that regard she differed from Draiq greatly, having witness the bloody excess of a battlefield on many the occasion.

But if she was a lethal thing, she was a beautiful example of it, with the warm caramel hue of her skin complimenting the delicate shape of her face and almond eyes, alone with the fine, long dark hair that draped down her back in a long, full braid. She was small and slim, with a toned, muscular figure that might have been called boyish if the curve of her hips had been one shade less. If anything marred her beauty it was the intensity of her stare which made even her most ardent admirers ill-at-ease.

Na-Tahly moved towards Draiq, with graceful, confident strides. A leather breast-plate tunic together with an exotic, colorfully-printed loincloth bound around her hips was her only garb, offering scant protection against the brisk morning wind that day, yet Na-Tahly seemed oblivious, with nary a shiver nor goose bump to show for it. And where Draiq had scant weaponry, the girl more than made up for, with twin short sword crossed upon her back, a set of six sharpened stars ribboned to her tunic, a stiletto in a wrist sheath and a strong-bow strung across her saddle. Oh, and the thin copper wire that wrapped around her ankle, though seeming decoration to any who noticed it, doubled quite nicely as a garrote when needed. All in all, and especially to the sheltered folk of Byenuu, she presented quite a sight.

“Hmm, you know,” she finally replied to Draiq, still training her gaze on the crowd, “I believe you’re right. What superb deduction, Montora.”

“Was that sarcasm, my girl?” said Draiq, trying as he always did with Na-Tahly, while usually failing abysmally, to show displeasure in lieu of a smile.

“And again? Another amazing feat of reasoning? I am truly in awe.”

The crowd looked on at this exchange, many of them wondering if their money would be well spent with this odd pair or if another attempt to summon of the sheriff of Quimble was a better course of action, after all.

And so it went for a good few minutes where the silence of the crowd could have turned things awkward if not for Draiq partaking of a nip of liquor from a flask he had tied around the horn of his saddle, and then promptly thereafter offering it around to those of the young men

nearest to him. This surely helped alleviate the moment, together with the braver of the young children in attendance, drawing nearer to Na-Tahly's animal fascinated by its ability to spit great distances and delighted by the reactions of those adults in the crowd who were the unhappy recipients of these projectiles.

Finally, Zut Tobbins, chief elder of Byenuu, summoned from a nap and bleary-eyed because of it, pushed forward to meet the village's new arrivals.

"Draiq?" Tobbins enquired.

"Draiq." Daramont responded, a smile still playing on his face. "This is Na-Tahly my partner in untoward matters in need of a solution.

"You're not what I expected," Tobbins said, fully awake, finally, and clear-headed enough to do so with a good slice of the pompous veneer that usually accompanied his waking hours.

"And what, pray tell was that?" enquired Draiq leaning down in his saddle towards Tobbins. "I had no idea we humble Truthsmen came in any one type."

Tobbins thought of his response for a moment, before squeaking forth an "um."

"In fact I'm curious, Draiq went on, "what other Truthsmen may you have encountered? For I find we're a rare breed."

"No...err...none, sir. I admit. None but yourself."

"Then there you are. Here we are," Draiq responded with a gesture towards himself and Na-Tahly both, "now you'll know what to expect the next time."

Realizing there was nothing to do but make the best of what certainly appeared to be a bad lot, Tobbins bid the pair enter the tavern where, with what little was left of the village's ale as refreshment, he and his fellow elders explained the situation.

Draiq heard how the murders had begun and how the number of those dead, or missing presumed, had risen daily. He heard how mushroom exports were down to one tenth their norm and with the quality of whatever stock they could find and process to be so inferior they feared the village's reputation had been damaged beyond repair as it was. This elicited a chorus of agitation from the many people young and old who'd followed them in and were now standing, as might spectators to a play, listening intently to every word spoken.

Draiq and Na-Tahly were then told that from what little evidence they could find at the scenes of these murders, the madman was on horse, with those tracks as visible as his own once he'd dismounted. Draiq also heard how the meager attempts made to catch the killer; this comprising two groups of gallant, brave, or perhaps in light of the outcome, foolhardy young men setting out. It had resulted in one group never seen again and the other group chased back to safety by what they all claimed was a terrible and mighty rider wielding both ax and sword. However, upon Draiq and Na-Tahly interviewing these men themselves they admitted the darkness of the trees, the fact the maniac was in back of them, and their panic in that moment, had all conspired for none of them to get a decent look at their pursuer.

Finally, Draiq and Na-Tahly were told of the killer's latest victim, the last since the murders of Janys and Leith. A girl, Beyth by name, no older than eleven. A brave and independent girl who had summoned her courage to go in search of mushrooms for her family. She hadn't returned after she had left the morning prior when she's snuck away by dawn light. Then her father too, in looking for her, had also failed to return.

"Let me think on this a while," Draiq told the group. "Leave me."

“More ale?” one elder asked before another nudged him hard, fearing this unproven stranger would drink them out of what little was left.

“No,” replied Draiq much to everyone’s relief, “tea though. I have some in my saddle pack, Na-Tahly can get it for you.”

“Lucky me,” Na-Tahly said as she went outside.

Draiq looked at her exit, words of rebuke on his lips until he thought better of them. He turned back to the assembly.

“And tomorrow she and I will go forth.”

3.

The Truthsmen were boarded at the Fulltyke Inn, which was adjacent to the Tavern and was indeed owned by the same couple. Draiq and Na-Tahly were given the big middle room, with the landlord’s wife bidding them into it, smoothing out the cover upon one of the bed’s pillows, checking the chamber pots were empty, and wishing them a pleasant and restful night before taking her leave.

The bed, a big four-poster, was covered with thick blankets and wolf fur for good measure along with several eider-filled pillows that were softness distilled if perhaps in need of an airing. All in all it seemed just the bed that a village might offer visitors who the next morning were setting off to solve a violent mystery that threatened its very survival. Truthfully however, the room had been selected for Draiq and Na-Tahly for a different reason entirely, namely the wall to the side of it abutting the owners’ own being thin enough that all and any noise, be it creak of bedspring, ardent moan or loving whisper could be clearly heard. The owners, you see, had their wedding so long ago that any passion between them still existing, greatly needed a helping hand. Indeed, many was the bride and groom who abiding in the Fulltyke on their wedding night were given this room chamber for that very reason, as well as any traveling couple too, if they were young enough and showed the spark of a passion shared. Draiq and Na-Tahly, with their strange relationship and stranger interactions, promised even more arousing entertainment with the thought of the cruel and twisted demands the pair might make upon each other. So much so that the old man and his wife had their ears to the wall barely a moment after they’d closed the door on their guests.

The morning however found the old couple churlish and sour-faced with disappointment, having been rewarded solely with Na-Tahly telling Draiq not to hog the blankets, while he scolded her later for both snoring and farting too loudly, both things she denied doing but which Draiq, and indeed the listening couple, could attest to.

But by the morning, the Truthsmen were gone anyway. Draiq and Na-Tahly, both, arising a goodly time before the nighttime ceded to daylight, with a note left telling the village they were off to find the killer and to expect their return no later than two day from now.

So swift and mysterious this departure, in fact, that the more doubtful and less trusting among the crowd thought the two had merely taken their leave like tenants skipping their landlord and likely would never show their faces again.

The rest of Byenuu however, believing Draiq a man of true worth simply waited. And hoped.

4.

"I'm tired," Na-Tahly remarked, yawning.

She squinted over at Draiq who was framed by the rising sun, as they rode their mounts along the well-worn path that countless pickers and cart oxen had trod into the rolling field separating Gravelle Green from the village.

"I am too, my rose with many thorns. Quite tired in fact. But the forest is deep, by all accounts, and I mean us to be in the heart of it by high sun."

"We should have had tea."

"Aye, and fried pork and bread chunks perhaps with duck eggs," Draiq agreed. "Then perhaps a melted cheese pot with more good dark bread for dipping. Oh, and some sweet jam cake to end it, how could I forget that."

Na-Tahly licked her lips upon hearing Draiq's menu. "Gods, my stomach wants to leap from my body," she groaned.

"Oh, and do you recall that time in Dhrez-El-Mah when the Caliph invited us to dine? The roasted goat. The spice-rub on the fat. Mmmm, I can still recall the smell. Glorious. Do you remember how good it was?"

"I hate you and my belly hates you more."

"And do you also remember that pie stall in Havenshire? So simple, nothing much to see and the woman who made them too, naught to speak of...but oh, the talent in her fingers making such wonderful pastries. The meat pies or the fruit, which were better? To this day, you know Na-Tahly, I can't decide."

"You. Are. A monster." Na-Tahly glared at Draiq, gathering the ammunition in her mind for her next volley of insults. "In fact that's what I will call you from now on, Monster. Not Montora. Monster. Or Montora Monster. Monstrous Montora Monster. Or some such."

"Are you done?" Draiq enquired. "By the by, are you ever going to stop calling me Montora? We talked about this on our way to the town. And every town before it, if I'm not mistaken. You know how it irks me."

"But you know that's how I see you."

"And yet you speak with not one jot of diffidence but rather as an equal and a partner, which indeed you are, as far as I'm concerned."

"Well not as far as I am."

A hawk aloft sailed by, and the pair stopped their sparring or squabbling or whatever you might call it, to admire the bird for a moment, before Draiq turned again to Na-Tahly, looking up at her on the saddle perched high upon her animal's hump.

"Na-Tahly, if I were your Montora, as you put it in the language of your people... if I truly were someone you owed everything and all to, so that my every whim was your duty to satisfy... have you any idea... any notion how a man like that would treat you?"

"I suspect that you're about to tell me."

"Well for one thing, my sharp-tongued thing, upon being awoken in the night from a sound sleep to be told he was taking too much blanket, he certainly wouldn't return a good share to you. No, I'm sure he'd spank you for good measure. Yes, if I were such a man, I'd have traded you by now. If fact, why not? If that is how you view me, why not, indeed?"

Na-Tahly listened quietly, not sure how serious or jesting Draiq was at this moment.

"I think I'm going to find you someone else to plague and badger," he continued, "a fat, hairy dolt of a fellow, perhaps. Yes, that's the ticket, some rotund and ill-fragrant dealer in dog

hides, who when came the night would wave his short fat member at you, intent to harbor it in whatever port of yours he cared to.”

“You really are a delight to accompany on these jaunts, you know that. Montora,” Na-Tahly said with smile.

“Why are you smiling? I’m serious. As grave as old king’s tombs.”

“Then who would snare you rabbits for your dinner?”

“Ah, well you have a point,” Draiq said smiling back, “I do love rabbit.”

They rode then for a moment or two in silence.

“Look, Gravelle Green looms,” he added nodding ahead towards the gigantic trees that rose before them. “We must cease our fun now, there’s work ahead.”

5.

They moved through the trees with a silence long mastered from their time spent together. They were both on foot now, their animals tethered to an oak on the edge of the woods, with the Singular Pair moving in such silent coordination with each other’s movements that not the barest hint of noise came from either of them. Surely, they would have seemed the epitome of a partnership, truly, to any on-lookers, had there been any there to witness it. They advanced gracefully as if of one mind, taking the lead ever-so-slightly in turn, sometimes Na-Tahly and sometimes Draiq. Never a word said, they made their way with a nod to whatever signs each of them noted; this mark on a tree’s bark or that trodden grass trail or broken shrubbery. Indeed, if one or the other of them was the better tracker, it was hard to say, and with the quiet intensity of the pair, that was information neither of them at this moment were keen to volunteer.

Onward in this careful, deliberate fashion they advanced. Slowly, steadily.

Onward so until they found the girl.

It was then the pair’s dynamic changed, with Na-Tahly standing some distance from the scene, looking at poor, dead Beyth, her body hewn down the chest by sword or some sharp weapon or tool, one arm severed and lying some distance further afar. The dead girl’s face was unmarked in any way, serene in death, in stark contrast to the rest of her body. Na-Tahly’s expression showed sadness and pity too, perhaps, as best as she might try to hide what her people considered “weak” emotions. Her gaze held so for a moment longer before, turning away, she took to a long-lying oak branch and scrambled up the tree to the concealment of its lush, full greenery.

Draiq’s actions, on the other hand, were a flurry, indeed almost a blur, kneeling, standing, stooping, looking at the girl, her wounds, the ground around her where the tracks of both a man and his horse were evident. In fact, these tracks held quite some fascination to him, so much so he was soon prone, lying there muddying his tunic even more, his face close to ground so to more thoroughly study everything.

And soon, a look of certainty began to form across his face. He nodded, a movement so slight as to be barely notable, as if making some vague confirmation to himself of his findings. His next movement was far from subtle, pushing up with his hands and bounding to his feet in one fluid motion. Standing, he surveyed his surroundings one final time.

“The killer is clever, I’ll say that. What do you think, my dear?”

Silence. The chirp of a wardwill, nothing more.

Draiq looked up and about. "I can never tell if I'm talking to myself. My dear Na-Tahly, if you must take to the branches like a squirrel will you at least give me some inkling as to where within those branches you might be? Or indeed perhaps you've left me finally, gone to seek love or treasures anew in parts far and away."

At which point her answer came in the form of an acorn.

6.

It was a little later, with Na-Tahly now beside him, when Draiq cleared his throat and began his explanation.

"Look at your feet, Na-Tahly. What do you see? What can you tell me about your feet?"

"Oh, for the sake of all the Gods, must we turn this into one of your games? Must we always do this?"

"I thought you enjoyed such moments."

Na-Tahly ponder this before making her reply. "I suppose I do. At times. I think it's the girl affecting my mood, Daramont. She's so young and undeserving of her fate. To dally with too much our back and forth, seems unseemly and not to my taste."

"Yes, well far be it for me to perpetrate your peoples' ideal of the callous, white-skinned barbarian and you have a point nonetheless."

"And I'll indulge you," Na-Tahly said, "although not for long with the poor girl lying there. You ask about my feet? They are as a walk through the woods might find them, dirty. What else should they be?"

"Your ankles, then. How are you standing now, this moment?"

"Well, one is bent slightly of course, the ground is hard and irregularly sloped under the softer moss and topsoil and it's rare to make a solid flat step because of it."

"Yes, I see your tiny feet, the prints of them anyway, here and there about and many of them show the same thing, flat ground but your heel lower in the ground or the toes, depending on the angle of the harder under-soil, a clay of some kind it seems to me, dictating the angle that your foot lays with each step. Look, sometime your instep is lower or the outside of it, again due to the slope of where you've stood. I'm the same. The bases of my footprints are as irregular as yours. Note also the dead girl's foot prints, her sandals show the same irregularities."

"I'm assuming this preamble pertains to the killer."

"And you'd be right. Indeed. Look, the hooves of the horse also angle and slope at their base true to the lay of the clay, yet the killer's feet do not. They are flat each time, as if they've been pushed in, sometimes touching the under-soil at the toe, and barely crushing the moss atop it, as if the foot makes no action of its ankle. Or flat again like that first one, where instead his instep should be lower or the heel or such and so and so."

"So the killer has no ankles? Two wooden legs, like those poor old warriors tottering around in the alleys of Mazineet, no longer with sword and now of the begging bowl."

"Yes, but such unfortunates are no horsemen, when have you ever seen one riding?"

"Never," Na-Tahly agreed, "now that you make me consider the question."

"I think the feet are manufactured," Draiq continued. "Placed on the ground around this girl's killing and I'm sure we'd agree the same at all of the other places the murderer struck if

those scenes of slaughter were still fresh. No, I don't think a man's real feet stood here at all, at any time before mine have."

"But who would stage such a pretense? The poor dead girl?" Na-Tahly asked with a bitter laugh. "Or perhaps the killer's horse? Or perhaps--" The next word died on her tongue at the same instant a light shone in her eyes. Realization. "Oh, I see," she muttered softly as if to herself, "of course. How stupid of me not to--"

It was then that it happened.

The change in Na-Tahly was instantaneous. Swords out, body tense, alert. Eyes here, there, all around for the moment it took before the sound of the horse's hooves gathered any sense of the direction that they came from. All this, mind you, before Draiq had heard anything at all, his mind still intent on the scene before him and with ears not as sharp nor so attuned to sudden perils. To this end, it was with much a startled continence that he was dragged to one side, pulled down so by Na-Tahly displaying a strength that belied her small stature. They hit a grouping of moss and bushes together, missing by barely an inch the sword that swept across, over their heads and burying one sharp edge in an oak by the side of them.

Leaving Draiq where he lay, Na-Tahly rolled out from their concealment, rising to a crouch in one fluid movement to face the killer they'd been seeking; a centaur standing some twenty-seven hands tall from hooves to its human shoulders.

It was male, with the human part of the beast far from being the handsome and sterling creatures of myth, charming maidens into congress through wit and continence. No, the brute had a face that while a man's in shape was far from melodious, rather with course lips, a splayed nose, and overly broad cheeks as well as slanted eyes of a color not unlike liver bile. Dirty braided hair hung down his back. His skin, too, was course and dry from time long spent in hard, cruel land unlike the woods of Gravelle Green. Thick muscles lay under that skin; massive arms, shoulders, chest and neck. As to clothing, he apparently felt he required none, save a sleeveless suede jerkin, a leather sword sheath and belt pouch, as well as some gold and bronze bracelets if those could count as garb. His weaponry was the sword in his hand; thick, double bladed and of an exotic design not unlike those that the executioner for the Nabob of Amphat employed in his labors. Oh, and strapped to one side of him, were two thick poles made from teak or a similar dense wood, with handles at one end and at the other expertly carved ivory representations of human feet.

The centaur turned, with a good deal of grace despite how densely packed the trees were around him and the creature's own massive size, coming back for Na-Tahly, who in answer to this pulled the twin swords from the sheaths on her back. She then held one in each hand at the ready as the creature charged while screaming some form of oath or challenge in its own guttural tongue. Draiq, watching what occurred next, as he too arose, marveled at Na-Tahly's nerve, as he had on many other occasions, seeing her now unmoving; still, staring intently into her attacker's eyes, as the beast closed the distance between them in a few short strides. It would seem, perhaps to someone other than Draiq, unfamiliar with Na-Tahly's ways, that she was frozen in place through fear or from being unsure what her move should be. But as the centaur came at her, so Na-Tahly leaped sideways and upwards, past the creature's flank to slice across him, running one sword the length of his ribs and with her other blade slightly lower to score a strike at the beast's underside slicing off a good two inches of his penis.

The centaur screamed a terrible cry, though whether this was from rage or pain was hard to say, as he spun again to come at Na-Tahly. It was equally unclear if the stream of words from the beast that followed its scream were curses; oaths of death to Na-Tahly for her actions, or if the centaur was merely in shock from his own injuries and the noises issuing from him bore no translation at all. What was clear was his intent as he charged again, the sight of this made all the more dramatic by the blood from the wounds to his side and groin, flowing freely behind him as he made his way.

A short distance from Na-Tahly, who again stood seemingly transfixed, through her eyes spoke of her concentration, the Centaur bent at the waist with his massive shoulder raised as he slashed his sword sideways across with the clear intention of parting Na-Tahly's upper torso from its lower half.

Instead, Na-Tahly watched the sword as it came at her, bringing her legs up as she jumped into the air to land with both feet on the sword's wide blade flat as it flashed past. This acting in that moment like a springboard, allowing her to leap again even higher, twisting backwards over the head of the Centaur to land astride the creature's back. The Centaur, stunned by how the events of his day were unraveling at the hands of this warring sprite, reached behind with no little desperation hoping to drag the girl from him and smash her against a tree for good measure. But it was here, much to his dismay, and the admiration of Draiq, that Na-Tahly again proved adverse to the creature's intention by drawing both of her swords, one in each hand to either side of the Centaur's neck, and with a following action that seemed comprised more grace than strength or force, took the creature's head from its shoulders.

"Expertly done, my girl," Draiq said with no small amount of pride.

Na-Tahly glanced at him with a slight smile as she nimbly dismounted the centaur, who now without its head, ran straight into an oak where it fell, flailing then twitching then still.

"Why thank you, Montora. I'm gratified I entertain."

"Indeed," he added stepping forward, "well if I was your Montora, you've hit upon the reason I would never trade you."

"Oh pray tell," she said with no small amount of sarcasm, "so I might make such my goal in life."

"You, my dear, are never boring."

Draiq walked over to the Centaur, crouching to examine the contents the creature's belt pouch.

"Anything?" the girl asked as she cleaned her swords before re-sheathing them.

"Err, yes, actually," Draiq proffered, standing to look her way. In doing so, a light shaft, cutting through the foliage in a tight stream struck Draiq's face just so, that from where Na-Tahly stood, the man's dead eye seemed to glow with some equal parts mirth and magic. "The answer to the why of all this, and obvious too now the winds of fear have died away. Come, we've a walk to our mounts and a ride to our payment and I've a mind to be done by nightfall."

7.

They made good time and had the rooftops of Byenuu in sight by late of sun. The town folk had gathered in front of the foremost house as the Singular Pair entered the village and so

seemed at first sight like a greeting party. It was their stony faces, some of them even glaring as if Draiq had committed some grave effrontery, that spoke of this not being so. Draiq glanced at Na-Tahly with a wink, and she nodded back, both recognizing this pattern of behavior from prior sundry cases.

"We have returned," Draiq said, feigning ignorance to what was taking place, "and the killer of Gravelle Green is no more. "

A few of the town people exchanged momentary looks of relief, but most seemed unimpressed by this news.

"And how do we know that?" Zut Tobbins said, pushing forward with an air of confidence not as evident when he first encountered Draiq. In fact, resplendent in a new velvet robe edged in white fox fur, as he was, Tobbins cut quite the figure. "What proof have we," he continued, "that you didn't just skirt the forest and then come back with a tale of success so you can claim your fee and be gone with nothing done at all?"

"Why you don't sir," Draiq answered, "except I'm no liar. We're called Truthsmen for a reason after all, so I ask that you trust me."

"Well I don't," Tobbins sneered, "I never did in fact, despite those around me who said we should chance you."

"I'll tell you what is happening now, shall I?" Draiq smiled. "Just so we can save time, with you all the sooner paying us for our labors and us being down that road and far away. Shall I? Yes, I'll tell you." He shifted in his saddle. "You know we're what we claim we are, and that we can do what you could not. That being the finding and killing of the murderer you feared so. And then, but a short while ago, you no doubt saw us from afar returning from this task. In fact Na-Tahly espied someone..." Draiq said nodding at a group of males, all grim-faced young men, their arms folded in front of them to better show their might, "...one of you hardy lads perhaps, up on a rooftop on lookout. So knowing we approached, you called yourselves together so you could meet us and send us from you unpaid, thinking you might somehow intimidate us to turn tail. And your reasoning that our purses remain wanting, despite knowing in your hearts that we've done our job, is that you nevertheless demand proof."

Draiq nodded to Na-Tahly who had already begun reaching for something on her saddle hidden under a covering.

"Don't you think that by now Na-Tahly and I haven't had this tired cheats' charade acted out by other clients who thought to deny us? Don't you see, people of Byenuu, that we're already well aware how this drama plays out?"

On cue, Na-Tahly tossed the centaur's head through the air.

"In fact," Draiq continued, "we wrote the ending."

The head landed, splashing mud and blood, from the head itself, up towards the assembly, most notably Zut and most adversely the pristine whiteness of his fox-fur trim.

"Oh, you'll pay for that, sir!" Tobbins roared back. "By the God's you will!"

"Really? I doubt it," Draiq continued. "I've a feeling you think your success this day lies in the fists of the stout young lads I noted prior. However, I have no doubt it's those same fine specimens who the killer sent running home. Na-Tahly, on the other hand, killed that beast. Na-Tahly, my dear do they scare you, these boys?"

"Not at all," she said, with strong-bow now in hand and aimed at Tobbins' face.

"Yes, I see you aren't even bothering to aim your weapon their way."

“Oh, I’ve no time for boys, Daramont, you know that. No. If one of them moves, this arrow goes through the illustrious Zut Tobbins’ forehead.”

Tobbins’ mouth opened, as he tried to shape a response, but none came. He coughed. Taking a breath to calm his heart. “Yes,” he gasped finally, “perhaps we were a tad rash.”

“A tad,” Draiq replied, “oh, I’d say. And if it’s all the same to you, my girl and I will remain a tad cautious, for fear one of these lads will find his spine and try something rasher still.” He glanced at Na-Tahly, whose aim and gaze remained fixed on Tobbins. “That’s it, Na-Tahly, I don’t need to tell you. If anyone moves, kill our new friend Zut. If he tries to run or in any way make a break for it, do likewise. In fact, why not spend these idle moments pondering reasons not to kill him.”

Tobbins' gulp could be loudly heard.

“Now, get one of your lackeys or leg-men to it,” Draiq continued, “and bring me the coin as promised.”

After a moment deliberation among the crowd as to who the “leg-man” was to be in this new development, a steward of the town was sent to where Byenuu’s coffers were held. He reappeared, moving far slower than he’d left under the weight of the coins, although Draiq noted that the bag holding them was no bigger than the centaur’s head, and so the steward’s gait spoke more to the man’s overall health than any great weight to their payment. The bag was then attached to the rear of Na-Tahly’s saddle, her animal snorting with displeasure from the newly added load and the steward’s close proximity, but after the man had left, the camel readjusted, and all was right.

Draiq then took the reins of Na-Tahly’s mount and turning his own horse to leave, lead the other beast too. As the humped camel turned, however, so Na-Tahly brought her legs up in time with that motion, spinning on her backside to reseal herself facing the opposite direction and so retain her aim on Zut. And so she remained, aimed, ready, facing back at the people as Draiq led her from them.

“Oh and not that you deserve this intelligence,” Draiq called back, “but did you think the killer might not be devil-touched and rather acting on the orders and coin from another? The centaur surmised that if you knew what it was, your fear of it would ebb. In time you’d see it as merely a pest, albeit a fierce, murderous one. At that point, you’d send in a hired militia, perhaps. You know, those roving bands, you find on the road from time to time.” He glanced at Na-Tahly. “Well we certainly do. Anyway,” Draiq continued, looking back at the villagers, “the creature knew that the notion of a maniac in the woods, would stoke more fear among you, which indeed it did. Afterall, the unknown is always deadlier than the truth, as it attacks the mind with errant fears.”

“Wait,” Zut called, “what was that? The creature was paid you say?”

“Based on papers the centaur carried, revealing much of its orders and intentions, it seems that Quimble would like your mushroom trade for itself, thus also explaining the sheriff’s seeming malaise.”

“But sir! Wait! My dear, good Draiq! Then what should we do now?”

Draiq and Na-Tahly continued on, neither of them bothering to answer, and were soon lost from sight due both distance traveled and looming dusk.

It was a beautiful mid-morning that followed their leaving the vicinity of Byenuu. Indeed a fine day to be sure. And with their purses full, a job done and nothing grave or untoward on the road ahead, an easy, cheerful calm fell upon Draiq and Na-Tahly both. They'd camped in a clearing, close to a brook with shade from a small thatch of elms affording them all the grace they desired. Na-Tahly had gone, off, as was her way and long since something Draiq had failed to note. Draiq, himself, had spent an hour with parchment, quill and a vial of ink, readying coded messages that he hoped would get them their next commissions. These were in preparation for when they reached the town of Two Rooks in the next vale, known for a highly reputable Pidgeon-Word office, where Draiq's ciphers could be sent forth and they could see where fate might send them following that.

Ambling away from their camp, Draiq found himself by the brook where he reasoned he was due a wash, but upon gazing at the waters found them so calm as to hold him in their sway. He stood thus for several minutes, not thinking, his mind stilled in a way that he was rarely afforded.

The silence was broken after a moment more when Na-Tahly appeared from under the water, rising up from its depths, clutching a trout she'd caught with her hands that they might have for lunch. She walked to the side of the brook, her ankles still in the water but all else of her there in sun, the light glistening gold and bright upon her copper skin. She was naked.

Draiq looked at her, transfixed for what he realized was moments longer than he considered seemly. "I'm sorry," he said turning awkwardly.

"Montora?" Na-Tahly said in a half whisper. Then louder. "Montora! Let me remind you, I am yours. I am. How was it you said yesterday? "Harbor in whatever port you cared to"."

Draiq continued on, away, already noting to himself that this was the first time in over a year Na-Tahly's presence in his life had caused him sadness. And knowing too, sensing it, that had he been brave enough to look back he would have seen from the expression on Na-Tahly's face that she was thinking the same thing of him.

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