**“Chapter 9: The Final Battle”**

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*A VOICE Competition: Dungeons and Krayt Dragons*

“Praise be to Paladine,” the group’s largest warrior, a Paladin, shouted in a whisper to his merciful God. His eyes scanned the inner sanctum of the dungeon they had progressed to thus far. Before him he could only see small campfires with several large, lumbering bodies silhouetted by the flames - Minotaurs. The beasts were powerful one-on-one, but a whole herd occupied this cavern before the lair of the metallic dragon the party sought.

    “Hush,” the Red Mage scathed. Adorned in a myriad of red clothing, Rulvak was the group’s mage aligned to the moon of Lunitari - the neutral goddess. As a practitioner of magic, he was a jack of all trades; capable of providing both supportive and offensive magic that neither of the groups other mages could summon.

    As if to illuminate their respective differences, the group’s White Mage, Atyiru, reached out to put a hand on the shoulder of their Paladin, Uji Tameike. “Do not mind them,” she reassured him, “you are the group’s leader and we follow your decision.” Where Rulvak’s clothes appeared road worn and frayed, her white tunic and cloak were pristine - the small gems along the collar refracting any light that touched them.

    An impatient sigh came from the rear of the group. A Black Mage, wearing simple robes with a cowl that often obscured his face, stood tapping his foot. Oddly enough, no noise came from the action, but it illustrated his desire to advance their campaign. The group’s final mage, one of the trio, stood the most powerful amongst them all. At Atyiru’s request, Braecen had been added to their party after a particularly nasty campaign against a Necromancer. He alone had the blessing of Nuitari - The Ungod of the Black Moon of Krynn - to dispel the undead Lich from the mortal realm.

    A Ranger, Turel, chuckled at the entire sight before him. He was the jovial one of the group; he dispelled the dour moods, acted as a scout, and safeguarded their morale. As he shook his head, he moved to a better vantage spot to ascertain their surroundings and the threats that stood between them and their goal. While he was not the shot-caller of the group, Uji listened very closely to the feedback from his friend and compatriot.

    The final member of the wayward party was Zakath. Once a slave, he had been liberated during a raid between warring kingdoms by the White Mage - the devout of Solinari - and decided to stay permanently to pay off his debt. He was not one for words, but his blade was sharp and he often acted as a vanguard and secondary front lines warrior when the group needed it. His often quiet demeanor was vastly different from his frenetic attacks and slashing combat style.

    Turel’s eyes adjusted to the dark as he moved away from the group. He could see the outline of six distinct forms. Six enemies. He retreated and relayed the information to the Paladin so a decision could be made. “If we go,” warned Turel, “we will have to kill them all.”

    “Or they will follow us all the way to the exit,” Uji finished the man’s thoughtful analysis. “We had to make a choice - advance or give up our quest.” Before he even finished the comment, Braecen had become noticeably irritated. He, more so than the others, was invested in finding this particular metallic dragon. It was said that this dragon had studied at the side of a famous Black Mage named Fistandantilus. Renown for being the wisest, and most powerful, of all of Nuitari’s children, access to his research could vault the Black Mage from a journeyman wizard to a vaunted Elder of the Order. For the group, though, it meant a huge payoff if they could recover any artifacts or possessions of import.

    “I say we advance,” Rulvak chimed in. “We have come so far for this.” Several individuals nodded in agreement. The risk was high, but they had known tough decisions - and the potential for death - would exist on this quest.

    “Mages on that ridge,” the son of Paladine pointed, “I want you up there, too, Turel. Try to keep from charging Zakath and I all at once.”

    Turel grinned, “You got it boss! I hope you don’t mind if I put one in their eye when the chance presents itself!”

    “With me, Zakath!” The Paladin roared as he broke from cover. The silent marauder charged into the fray at his side. Campfires cast shadows over the warriors, but the silhouettes made for easy targets for the ranged members of the party. A ray of brilliant white light pierced the darkness and surrounded the first minotaur charging towards Uji and Zakath. The Paladin recognized it as one of Atyiru’s spells meant to lower the resistances of their enemies. In the darkness, it had a second benefit of illuminating the minotaur with its iridescent light.

    Uji’s blade crashed into the blade of his opponent in a jarring crescendo. They fought quickly for large man and beast. Far faster than what one would have thought possible. An arrow whipped past the Paladin’s ear and stuck the large beast in the neck. A second later a second then a third arrow found the same mark - letting the blood flow from the massive creature’s throat towards the ground. Weakened and dazed, Uji made quick work of his opponent with his massive two-handed blade.

    As his eyes moved towards the next encounter, he found Zakath stuck between a pair of the beasts. The tactic allowed them to harry the warrior from both sides. Several cuts shown on the man’s body as blood flowed freely across his pale white skin. As he worked to retreat, Zakath began to glow a faint purple from a warding spell from the group’s Red Mage. Daring to turn for just a moment, Uji caught a glimpse of Rulvak rapidly casting a series of protective spells that would shield his fellow warrior from the brunt of damage coming from both sides.

    A wicked jet of black smoke encapsulated another minotaur a moment before it burned a brilliant emerald light. In the center mass of the light, the beast cried out in anguish and torment as the obsidian air and green flashes tore it apart. The Son of Paladine recognized the Dark Arts of Braecen the easiest on the battlefield, but it did nothing to settle his mind against such perversion. Similar of mind, Turel put several arrows in vital spots of the beast to end its anguish and retire the Black Mage’s cruelty from the battle.

    A large form crashed into Uji’s side. He had been too distracted by watching the events unfold to see a minotaur flanking from his left. Knocked into the air before unceremoniously being dumped onto the ground by gravity, he rolled several feet before his back crashed into a cavern wall. All of the air expelled from his lungs and he sat momentarily stunned as the large creature marched forward on him.

    He felt Atyiru’s whisper enfold him like the sun of a warm summer day. Her magic expanding to cover him from head to foot; seeking out his pain and relieving it in one motion. As she continued her chant, he could hear her carefully spoken words; they held her sincerity and care for the party. A missile, a mixture of white and red, smashed into the ground before him. Another of Rulvak’s arsenal of spells, the pair of wizards were working in unison to get their largest fighter back onto his feet. Unwilling to waste their good intentions, Uji forced himself to his feet and braced for the onslaught that would meet him.

    Several arrows streaked towards the minotaur, but he adjusted his course as he charged to narrowly avoid their bite. The Paladin knew his friend was cursing the large beast for making his shot untrue, but Uji was ready for the direct attack. Dodging to the right, he let the beast crash headlong into the cavern wall. The ground pitched and bucked as the shockwave rippled through the surrounding area. He spun on the ball of his foot and brought his large blade down in a heavy arc. The beast danced to the side in a desperate attempt to evade the attack. Uji released the blade, knowing his opponent was agile, and reached for a pair of knives strapped at his back.

    He drew them both in unison and leapt onto the beast. Their twin bite cleaving into the massive muscles in the creature’s neck and chest as he ripped them downward. The minotaur moaned in pain and attempted to buck Uji off, but his effort was minimal and died away as the light faded from his eyes.

    The battle had been fierce, but it had cost them several critical spells and further taxed their large, front line warriors. The path to the metallic dragon was clear, but if another battle erupted the party would be hard pressed to withdraw from a dragon’s retribution. Silently, Uji wondered if the secrets of Fistandantilus were worth all the trouble as they shuffled towards the entrance to the next, and final, chamber.