

“Think she’s a tief?”

“Nah, tiefling’s got horns, ya sot.”

“Well lookit ‘er. She’s so... *red*.”

Qyreia’s deadpan expression of ignorance could only last so long. “And my hair’s as *blue* as you fucks are *obnoxious*.” She flashed the hilt of her sword against the table. “Now piss off and let me drink in peace.”

The two townsfolk might have tried to start a row if not for a curt nod from the bartender. He didn’t want any trouble, and she was a paying customer at that. A room, food, *and* drink. A pair of drunken locals with few other places to get their swill would eventually come back regardless, and probably better behaved. Besides, they could still drink outside if they wanted, and the evening was warm, with the late evening sun still not yet touching the horizon. Even a red-skinned adventurer was welcome so long as their coin was good at the Braying Bitche. So far, the coin had been very good indeed.

For her part, the red woman was likewise kind enough to set her sword back under the table’s edge and return to her dinner. While her coin *was* good, it was also some of the last that she had, and she wanted a good night’s rest before she started on the thing that brought her to this defunct mining town.

*Goblins.*

A bunch of the ugly buggers went and took over the local mine; even took a bunch of prisoners, though for what purpose was up for debate. Only one miner had made it back to tell the town. Their ad hoc militia’s response had been lackluster at best: attacking the goblins’ hasty fortifications in force, but wilting at the first signs of actual resistance. Though calling a rabble of men carrying pitchforks and sickles a *militia* was a bit of a stretch. This wasn’t one of the cities with a proper guard force. And for all the ores they dug up, their smith was apparently only good for casting pickaxes and making horseshoes. There wasn’t a spear among them, and hardly more than a cudgel or wood axe in the way of actual weaponry.

The call for adventurers went out, and Qyreia was close at hand. Yeah, her coin was good now. But if she got rid of the goblin menace, she’d have even more coin to spend at the inn. Or so the innkeeper hoped.

For her part, the red woman had little intention of staying at the inn *or* the podunk village for any great length of time. She needed the money. Keira and Leadra, her two other party members, were off doing other solo adventures and jobs. They planned to meet up in a week with money that was a little harder to come by as a group. She missed the lack of a warm bed partner more than anything with the temporary split, but it was a necessary evil.

“Don’t suppose you’re here about the mine,” the innkeep said as he passed by, making the rounds of the bar to collect tankards and the odd plate.

“Was it the battle kit or the obvious *outsider* thing I have going?” she replied wryly, motioning to her face to emphasize the latter point.

The large human huffed, amused but not amused. “Both.”

“Were you with the group that tried to oust the gobs?”

He nodded soberly as he grabbed a mug and started wiping it down. “Nasty business.”

Qyreia wound her own cup in circles, swirling the thick brown beer as she looked at the human critically. “What can you tell me about their setup at the mine?”

“They fortified it. Wasn’t fortified before.”

“Most mines aren’t.”

He nodded again, keeping to his casually professional tone and expression. “Was hasty and flimsy, but was enough of them with their bows to throw us back.”

And the mine? Open pit or tunnel?”

“Starts open. They use that clearing for shacks and storage nowadays.”

“How deep?” she asked, ignoring how his language broke the more he talked. *Backwoods hicks getting thrashed by gobbos. Not sure which part is worse.*

He chewed on the thought momentarily. “Can’t be more’n a furlong, but you’d be better off asking one of the miners.”

“Who are all dead, save the one poor sot that’s ranted off everything he knows.”

The innkeep narrowed his eyes at the surroundings, noting how some of the outlying patrons weren’t too amiable with the conversation. “Begging your pardon, miss, but you’re taking this all rather casual when there’s still blood in the air and possible lives t’be saving.”

“And you have a whole *town* that couldn’t oust the goblins from a mine only a furlong deep.” She sipped at the swill that passed for beer, holding her expression. “So I intend to find out what I can so *I* don’t get added to the list of casualties, or *worse*.”

“Worse?”

Qyreia’s lips pursed in knowing thought as she stared at the brown liquid in her cup. “Goblins like tormenting other creatures. And if there’s a *hole* they can get into, well...” She finished her cup and let the wood clap loudly on the bar top to indicate for another.

“Then they’re as likely to try and get in all at once as much as one after another. If you get my meaning.”

Other faces besides the innkeeper’s sobered around the common room, and an electricity of anxiousness filled the air. It was an odd counter to the adventurer’s placid demeanor as she finished her food and pounded down the second beer.

“Care to show me to my room?”

The big man blinked as if broken from a stupor. “You’re not going out there?” he asked with a certain sense of urgency, no less fueled by her previous observation of goblin habits.

“They can see in the dark,” she said, pointing at her own gray-blues shimmering by the light of the candles and fireplace. “I can’t. And at any rate, I don’t need my *camping* gear to fight a bunch of gobs.”

There was a certain level of ‘fair enough’ in the human’s expression as he trudged around the bar and motioned for her to follow. The room — one of many that lined the back wall of the single-story building — was simple fare of a straw-stuffed bed, washing stand, chair, and writing table. And Qyreia was fairly certain she wouldn’t be using any of them anytime soon. No sooner did the inkeep hand her the key that he was given a subtle hint to leave the red woman be. As soon as the door was closed behind her and her pack dropped at the foot of her bed, Qyreia spent only a cursory moment to wash up in the water basin.

Then it was out the window into the warm evening air.

The darkness prevented anyone from seeing her exit, and there was nothing odd about the townsfolk seeing her on the main thoroughfare. She spotted the annoying drunks from earlier, who had the good sense to keep their eyes averted. It wasn’t necessarily their bordering-on-racist comments before that had irked her so much. More so that Qyreia didn’t know the answer herself. And they were right: she lacked the horns of a tiefling. Perhaps a genassi, though they were rare enough that she questioned the likelihood. She might’ve asked her parents if she had ever known either of them. Even their fates were a mystery to her. It left her with red skin, blue hair trimmed to better suit life in the wilds, and a surly disposition to all the suspicious looks she got wherever she went.

She didn’t complain about being able to see in the dark though, even if it *was* tinted red. The lie to the innkeeper was something of a strategic one. The less “special” she was, it meant less weird treatment, and likely better pay. It wasn’t unheard of for the more gifted races to get reduced rewards because things were “easier” for them. Besides, for a whole town to be driven off in trying to retake their mine, there was a real possibility of a spy for the goblins.

Coming out at night meant not only catching most of the little buggers out in the open, but also spotting this potential village traitor.

As Qyreia slipped away from the village proper and into the woodland that separated the more urban center from the mine, her vision shifted from its usual full color spectrum to shades of red as she adjusted to the darkness. She could see deer grazing in apparent safety, an owl silently gliding overhead, and all the branches to avoid stepping on to keep quiet.

By the time she started to see the faint light of torches, her bow was drawn, with an arrow loosely knocked and ready. Goblins might not be the brightest candles in the chandlery, but they were nocturnal and apt ambushers, and she was walking through the woods toward a concentration of them. The ranger at least had the good sense to stay downwind and prevent them from sniffing her out. On the downside though, that meant *she* could smell *them* well before she saw anything in the form of movement.

Through the gaps between the tree trunks, she could just start to make out the pale stone face of the outer surface mine. A grunt and a dark shape plopping from a tree halted her movement instantly. Slowly angling her head upward, she was greeted with the sight of one of the goblins leaning out from his perch in the mess of branches, loincloth pulled aside while he pushed out another clump from his pimpled rear.

*Of course.*

Qyreia eased back several paces and, timing her draw with the cretin's strained grunting, loosed an arrow into his throat. The whisper of a gurgling noise that erupted from the hole was all that accompanied the sound of his lumpy body collapsing among the tangle of wood and leaves. In quick order, she slipped up the safe side of the tree not stained with feces, and rather roughly jerked the arrow from the goblin in a single swift motion.

*Little fucker was probably setting up a prank for someone.* She picked up the goblin sentry's crude quiver of equally rough-looking arrows. *Insult-to-injury right before he shot them in the back.*

Where there was one though, there were going to be others. It was luck that the goblin she killed didn't see her before. She practically walked right into this one, and while their sight might've been in grayscale, they likewise had the gift of darkvision.

Her newfound perch did have one advantage though. It allowed her to see a good portion of the surface mine area. Most of the miners' shacks and storage areas had been torn down and repurposed into an ad hoc palisade. The few remaining structures' purpose was unclear, though goblins seemed to wander in and out casually. It may have simply been a place to relieve themselves away from the small bit of festivities in the open space, where a series of small fires were burning, highlighting their dancing and guttural chanting. It also lit up the handful of cages that contained the humanoid shapes

of what she could only assume were the captured miners. Likely they were going to be the entertainment for the celebration over beating back the villagers' attack earlier that morning.

*Well then, she mused as she drew one of the goblin arrows and knocked it to her bowstring, let's put a little chaos in this party, shall we?*

There wasn't time for any trick shots, nor was there anything she could really do to start a fire among the celebrants. There was, however, a larger goblin that seemed to be observing the festivities, participating only occasionally to throw his weight around and bully his kindred, or jab at the prisoners with the butt of his spear. Given the pair of goblins that followed him around almost religiously, he was likely someone important.

Her bowstring whispered past her cheek, and the crudely crafted arrow sped through the open air, its shadowy shape disappearing among the flickering and undulating shapes of the celebrants. Its appearance in the big goblin's chest, however, caught quite a lot of notice. He staggered for several seconds, garbling something in their grating tongue to his attendants and the other goblins, before simply falling backward into the stony, hard-packed dirt.

Confusion and awe held the entire group in silence for several moments while they processed what happened. One of the bodyguard approached the corpse and rudely jerked the arrow from its ribcage, examining the bloody arrowhead and shaft, before raising it above his head and screeching something in the goblin tongue that Qyreia could only guess as either some accusation of treachery, or as claiming the spot as the new chieftain.

*Well that was a lucky guess then. Good job, me. Extra ale when we get back. She mused about her ladyfriends who were likewise adventuring solo. And maybe a little alone time.*

The reverie was interrupted by the breakout of a large frackas among the goblins in the central area. The bodyguard's initial claim to the title was swiftly being challenged by a dozen others, and a general brawl ensued. Even the trees and bushes around her rustled, while in other parts of the perimeter, she could see goblins filtering out from the trees to join in the frackas.

Qyreia wasn't about to let an opportunity like this pass her by. Letting the goblins' noise conceal her movements, she slipped from the tree with her bow and quiver of goblin arrows still in-hand, and slinked over to the nearest goblin sentry, who was watching the fighting angrily, but apparently content with not getting shivved for his absence. When the ranger put an arrow between his shoulder blades, he briefly reconsidered his priorities before the fall finished off what life was left in him.

"This is so much better than what I'd planned," she chuckled quietly as she pulled the arrow out for reuse.

She'd expected a night full of harassing shots to whittle away at their numbers and tire them out before they retreated into the mine during the daylight hours; followed by the less savory mine-tunnel slog with her blade. *Maybe* the miners weren't killed for the intrusion, or maybe they were. The quest was to kill goblins first and foremost, and save the miners *if possible*. One against a whole goblin lair was practically suicide without sacrificing one resource or another. And hostages were quite the resource.

Letting them bruise, bloody, and kill each other was exponentially easier, especially when it let her sneak to each successive sentry and pick them off one by one without any of the dozens of goblins being any the wiser.

As Qyreia finished off her fifth sentry, she cast another of many glances toward the fighting, expecting to see a lot of broken gobbos. While many were battered and weakened, most had banded together into three or four apparent groups around the camp, launching raids at each other from within their own palisade. What caught her attention and worry was a group approaching the prisoners' cages, weapons drawn and seemingly about to start riddling the humans with fresh holes.

"Shhhiiiiit!"

With the realization burning into her eyeballs, she swung her bow around and grabbed a handful of the goblin arrows, knocking, aiming, and firing each one in turn. The lead goblin was about to skewer one of the prisoners with a spear when the arrow *thunked* into the side of his cranium. The two lady goblins behind him took their own medicine in their respective rib cages. The fourth and fifth saw this and turned to run away, only to receive payment for their efforts in their backs. The miners, seeing this, collectively breathed a sigh of relief, albeit confused about seeing goblin arrows protruding from the bodies.

They didn't seem to question the series of arrows that shattered the bindings on their makeshift prisons. They were quick to grab the weapons off the dead goblins, but found themselves trapped between the warring parties still vying for power. Qyreia gave them a suggestion, of sorts, by launching an arrow into a goblin trying to escape one of the few remaining shacks, which had hitherto been avoided by the feuding parties: it was easier to launch attacks from behind barricades than through one or two doorways.

The miners fortunately took the hint and ran headlong for the building. There were likely more goblins inside, but far less in number than the humans. One of the miners took a javelin to his side and fell as they ran. Their attempts to save him were answered by more missiles that prevented his rescue, and he expired from additional peppering as the miners sprinted into the shack.

"Okay," Qyreia breathed, thankful for the outcome. "That's one less thing to worry about. Just... a couple dozen more to go, and hopefully there's none still hiding in the mine."

She knew there would be. It just felt nice to say.

At this point though, she was running out of goblin arrows. Their quivers were rather small, and sending her ammunition into the little fortress prevented her from recovering and reusing them. Given how the goblins all seemed to notice that their prisoners were free, armed, and fortifying themselves in the hut, it was likely the feuding would be put on hold until the humans could be dealt with properly.

Their own malice would unite them, and Qyreia couldn't afford that. The miners would be killed, and she would either have to wait until the goblins were fighting again to reduce their numbers, or wade into the fray herself.

"Fuck me sideways. *Ugh*, fine!" She patted down her weapons in a quick, almost ritualistic check, working herself up to fighting a couple dozen goblins on her own. "Okay. Okay, we can do this, Q ol' girl."

The little knoll in the woodline that she currently occupied gave her a decent view into the palisade enclosure, and she could still make out at least two of the warring parties, as well as the handful of goblins that seemed to be lingering at the subterranean mine's entrance. *Let's get the rats out of their hole first.*

Unlike the earlier moving targets, these were standing still, waiting and watching in a chokepoint. It was like fish in a barrel. Two were dead before they had the sense to react, and they pointedly snarled and screeched in the direction the arrows came from: the woods. For a moment, as Qyreia loosed arrow after arrow into the charging mess, she worried that this might not have been the best idea.

A thought occurred, though, as they rallied their other lairmates to kill off this sniper in the woodline. The red woman slipped back into the darkness, hoping the goblins' darkvision was muted by the firelight that surrounded them. A sharp turn on the backside of the knoll and she was dashing back the way she came, circling the perimeter that had already been cleared of sentries. *But they don't know that*, she thought as she weaved through the underbrush, trying to find the path of least resistance to cause as little audio or visual chaos for the goblins to pick up on. Given their furor, they probably wouldn't have noticed anyway.

Rather than take to the walls, the enraged creatures threw open the makeshift gate and poured out into the treeline, calling to their sentries that still lived. Off to one side, they received a handful of responses, but the other remained silent.

*That way.*

They spread out and stormed into the underbrush, charging roughly in the direction that Qyreia had gone. They hadn't seen her slip out of the woods and cross the stretch of open ground, and she only just managed to clamber over the wall before the sallying party came into view. Panting excitedly from the sudden rush of adrenaline, she leapt

from the firing step — little more than dirt piled against the inner side of the palisade — to the level ground and made quickly for the gate.

From beyond the walls, she heard the screech of a sentry calling out her presence. A trio of goblins, lingering as guards by the gate, turned and spotted the red woman as she came barreling at them, a bow in one hand while the other drew her side sword.

A goblin arrow arced through the air, but the shortbow that shot it left little power or speed to the missile by the time it even got close to the ranger, and Qyreia had only to sidestep it. The three goblins at the gate frantically tried to formulate some sort of plan, arguing for who should blow a warning horn while the others fought the red woman. It gave Qyreia a nice little opening in the nearest goblin's defense, swatting his warpick — a repurposed miner's pickaxe — aside and cutting deep into the side of its face. The next one in line accepted its fate as the last in the row fumbled with a signal horn, stepping toward the charging woman with its spear ready to thrust. Qyreia jukeed left and cut into the back of the goblin's neck with a rough spin.

The last goblin was sputtering and wheezing into the horn when, looking up at the red woman in a panic, he was run through by the sharpened steel.

The last goblin had hardly hit the ground with the sword still sticking up from its chest when Qyreia dashed for the gate, cursing as another arrow came dangerously close to her face. But with no other goblins to oppose her, she was able to shut and bar the thing against the goblins outside.

Another arrow came and landed, burning itself in the gate's wood by her hand.

“Okay, *fuck you!*”

She'd already seen where the arrows were launched from. She could even make out the movements of the guard reaching for its own warhorn. It got off two blasts by the time Qyreia drew one of her own arrows and sent the goblin tumbling from the branches. But those outside had been warned, and she could hear all sorts of screaming commotion.

“Dammit.”

Turning briefly to unsheathe her sword from its goblin holster, she lurched up to the firing step to see the goblins surging toward the gateway. The initial impact rocked the flimsy construction, but it held; just as likely that it had done the same under the town militia's failed assault. Still, get enough goblins together, and they'd topple anything, and she wanted that gate kept shut. Sheathing her sword, she knocked an arrow, loosed, and repeated, felling a trio of goblins by the time they realized what was happening and withdrew to cover.

“Oi! You fucks in the shed!” she yelled back over her shoulder as she checked her dwindling ammunition. “This'd be a *lot easier* if I had some *help!*”



She could hear the hesitant opening of the door, followed by a series of footplods indicative of humans. *They're always so gods-damned loud.* But she was thankful when they showed up, and she sent them to collect arrows from among the dead, keeping only one of the healthier looking ones with her to watch her back and keep a lookout for any goblins trying to sneak around the side.

“Shouldn’t we throw some fire out there?” the strapping young miner asked while the others dashed off. “Make it easier to see?”

“I can see just fine.” As if to punctuate the point, she knocked another arrow, waited a moment, and fired just as the goblins surged forward to attack, felling the lead member.

They wavered briefly before coming on again, faster, one group trying to plow through the gate while the other made to scale the wall. Her sword and the miner’s did work there, while those carrying arrows ran frantically to the gate, dropping the bundle of missiles to brace the door, rescuing the situation by a narrow margin. But they were all still relatively safe, and the goblins were driven off with another handful of dead and even more wounded.

It gave the ad hoc defenders a moment of respite to reinforce the gate, collect up the arrows, and generally breathe.

“Was this your plan?” her erstwhile partner asked. “I don’t suppose you have more... um, of...”

“If you were gonna say ‘my kind out there’, then no.” She flexed her bowstring reflexively, testing its condition. “Just me.”

The young man looked at her curiously; the sort of whimsical intrigue that is most often found in those living in isolated towns such as this. “Do you know any languages?”

“I know common,” she shrugged with a wry grin.

“I know that, but... primordial or celestial?”

“Nooo and nooo.”

“Infernal?”

“*Hell* no.”

The lad was getting desperate. “Elvish? Dwarven?”

“I only know elvish between the sheets.”

That seemed to satisfy his curiosity. “Oh? Like what? Say something.”

The others still working rolled their eyes at the nonsensical conversation, but the ranger felt that it wasn't too horrible to humor him. "*Foeir ennas. Ceri- ú- dár.*"

He blinked a few times. "I... What does that mean?"

Grinning, she leaned in to whisper, "*Right there. Don't stop.*"

The young miner nearly choked and fell back off the wall into the dirt, much to the laughter of the other miners. *Good. We're gonna need some high spirits.* Beyond the palisade, there were loud sounds of chopping and of orders being barked in the goblin's grating tongue, and Qyreia knew they weren't building another fort just to spite them. If they could hold out until morning, though, the goblins would have little choice but to flee. They were not fond of daylight.

It took effort to stay on high alert for long periods. It was taxing on the body and the mind, especially when the miners were already bedraggled from torture, and Qyreia from the long day, the fighting, and now the long night. But she'd been in enough scraps to know that the one that gets the element of surprise has a very distinct advantage. So, with a couple miners armed with goblin shortbows, a collection of arrows shared between them, and the others armed with clubs, axes, and the goblins' short spears, they stood vigil at the wall.

A fortunate thing too, as there was but one loud string of goblinoid speech that echoed out from the woods before they surged forward. Using the majority of their number, they brought forth a chopped-down tree trunk, carried between them and sprinting their makeshift battering ram forward. Those in the back hurled branches sharpened into javelins to try and keep the archers busy.

"You two shoot at the ram!" Qyreia directed. "The rest of you, brace! They've got a tree!"

Before those on the ground could question her description, she was already off down the wall, spreading out to avoid an easy javelin hit, and started returning missiles from her bow. The pair of miners were poor shots, but the ram was coming on straight, and there were plenty of goblins to hit. For every two or three misses, one arrow struck home. But they were quick, and the distance from the woods to the gate short, so it struck the reinforced door roughly, splintering the boards and the original wooden bar that locked it.

The humans shouldered the blow and pushed the door back into place with a modicum of confidence, only to look back and panic.

"The mine! More comin' from the mine!"

Qyreia spun and saw a half dozen surging forward across the short expanse of open ground between them and the tunnel entrance. Without thinking, she leapt off the firing step and started for the goblins.

“You lot hold the gate!” She knocked and loosed an arrow to send the lead goblin tumbling. “I’ve got these ones.”

There was enough time to loose another arrow before she simply dropped the bow, drew her sword, and charged into the handful of creatures. A wide swipe of her sword did little more than knock aside weapons and throw the goblins’ attack off balance, but that was enough; it was still four-to-one, and they weren’t coming one at a time.

A spear lurched at the red woman, and she caught it in her side, feeling the crude metal grating the side of her leather armor, but only just barely touching at her skin underneath. *Thank the gods, whichever one hates gobbos.* Using the secure grip, she leveraged the goblin and the polearm around to sweep the group again, sending most floundering to the ground and knocking one in the side of the head. She stabbed that one, then slashed out the throat of the one that had tried to skewer her.

The last two were still getting off the ground when she attacked again. The combat was brutal and over quickly, allowing her to wrench the spear out of her armor and turn to collect her bow and resume the defense of the gate.

One of the miners was lying against the back of the wall, a javelin in his shoulder, while the others were stabbing through the growing gap in the gate’s planks. As if to remind them that she was still alive, Qyreia paused her advance, drew one of her last arrows, and fired through the roughly-hewn aperture. Seeing it take a goblin in the mouth to come out the back of his throat emboldened the miners and they heaved with their last bits of strength to seal the door again.

Qyreia vaulted up to the firing step in time to see the goblins readying for one last attempt with the ram. Just as they started forward, she knocked her last arrow and fired at the lead goblin, dropping him and tripping up all of those behind him, sending the whole group and their ram toppling and rolling against the palisade.

There was only light slaughter after that. A few truly foolish goblins tried to climb the wall, only to be skewered on a sword blade. The rest, seeing the futility in their continued attacks, fled into the woods to nurse their wounds and return to whatever hovel they crawled out of; hopefully before the sun came back up. While those within the wall were wary, there was marked celebration among them and their apparent savior. Come the first glow of dawn, they knew they were safe, and began making their way back to town.

Qyreia’s young partner seemed particularly interested in continuing their conversation. “So, what now?”

“A reward,” she said back confidently, with a certain air of seriousness. “Then a room and a bed that are waiting for me.”

“I... don’t suppose you would tell me anymore of that elvish?”

She quirked a brow at him. “You don’t speak elvish.” The ranger punched his shoulder amiably, but with enough gusto to hammer home her point. “And there isn’t anyone around here that does. Not in public,” she squared her gaze at him, “*or* in bed.” She cast a brief glance at the woods behind them that held the mine. “I were you? I’d be looking for a new line of work.”