

HellCraft

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HellCraft was originally published as a serial to the alt.games.diablo newsgroup during 1998 and 1999. It is an original story based on characters and situations created by Blizzard Entertainment.

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Prologue: Mr. Mojo Fallin'

A wizard had come to save them all. No one in Tristram knew much about him, only that he answered to the name "Mojo" or "Mr. Mojo." Ogden had a vague recollection of hearing the wizard mention that he belonged to the House of Risin.

Whoever he was, he seemed both confident and competent. He made several trips into the defiled cathedral, returning each time with a backpack full of treasure and reporting that yet another level had been cleared of the demonic infestation. The people of Tristram began to hope that, perhaps, this was a hero who wouldn't wind up gutted and hanging from Ogden's sign.

Then he ventured into the festering nest across the river. He returned four times, reporting strange alien monsters that even Cain could not identify. The fourth time he returned, he was seriously wounded and depleted of Mana. He described battling and being forced to flee from a monstrous creature that called itself the Defiler. The wizard had Pepin heal his wounds and Adria recharge his sorcerous might. This time, he promised, the Defiler would not surprise him and he would bring it down with the deadliest of spells. He did not return from the hive a fifth time.

Two weeks later, a swarm - or army - of insect-like monsters exploded from the nest and razed Tristram. The creatures called themselves the Zerg.

Chapter 1: Morning; Two day's journey north of Tristram, at the northern edge of the Creep

"What is this stuff?" asked Dolt Lungren wrinkling his nose. The forest floor before them was covered with a thick carpet of sticky purple goo. It covered the ground and crept up the trunks of trees and other foliage to about waist-high. The air swarmed with black flies that seemed to be thriving on the stuff.

"That's what we're here to find out," replied Solo kneeling at the edge of the substance.

"The ground was covered with it the morning after we fled Tristram," said Griswold, "and it seems like it's been creeping after us ever since."

"In fact, we started calling it 'creep,'" added Gillian, standing several paces away from it.

Solo removed her gloves, gingerly dipped a finger into the creep and turned her keen analytical powers on it. It was sticky like honey, and made her fingertip tingle. Slightly acidic, she surmised. She studied the dollop on the end of her finger for another moment and then tasted it. Griswold and Gillian both made retching sounds. Dolt, who had eaten much more unsavory things in his time, merely shrugged.

Solo spat. "Sweet," she said putting her gloves back on and wiping her mouth. "It's also alive and feeding on the forest. I don't think it can do any harm to large animals or plants in the short term, but I'd be worried if I was an insect or a bit of moss. It's eating anything it can and excreting sugars. Maybe to feed some other kind of organism."

"You could tell all that from a taste?" asked Gillian, visibly impressed.

Solo shrugged. In the short time she'd known the young healer, she had quickly seen that it really didn't take much to impress Gillian. "This stuff tastes like fifty teaspoons of sugar in a pint of water," she explained. "With all these flies buzzing around, it should be writhing with maggots, but it's not because they're being digested or dissolved. If I had any doubt that whatever this 'creep' is composed of wasn't strong enough to hurt me, I wouldn't have tasted it in the first place. I wouldn't eat too much of it though. A couple swallows will be enough to keep you running for the bushes for the rest of the week."

"That explains Cecilia's condition," nodded Gillian. "The poor child. Luckily, Pepin taught me a couple of good remedies that I should be able to concoct here in the forest."

"You mentioned it feeding some other kind of animal," Dolt prompted.

"I'm jumping to an educated conclusion," admitted Solo. "Most animals don't excrete sugar." She paused and realized that she was the only person present who understood what "excrete" meant. "Most animals don't shit sugar," she continued. Gillian blushed upon hearing the vulgar word. "That's because they can use sugars themselves. When plants or animals do produce sugars like this it's either to attract other animals the way flowers produce nectar to attract bees, or it's to feed something else. Since it doesn't seem to be attracting anything other than flies - who are attracted to ordinary animal droppings - I'm guessing the latter."

A louder, lower droning sound from above drowned out the constant buzzing of the flies. Leaves rustled and then branches snapped as a wasp-like monstrosity flew out of the woods. It was fully the size of a prize hog and covered with needle-like spines. In its mandibles, it held a struggling woman. The creature and its prey buzzed low over their heads.

In a flash, Solo was slicing at it, with a sword in each hand, as Griswold stabbed up at it with the sword he'd forged on the Anvil of Fury. The latter blow separated the creature from its prey and Dolt ended its twisted existence with a blow from his mighty axe.

Dolt and Solo moved to examine the dead monster while Griswold and Gillian rushed to tend to the woman it had been carrying.

Solo barely had a moment to examine the beast when she heard Gillian scream.

"Sweet Mother o' Mercy!" swore Griswold.

Solo and Dolt looked up to see Griswold, his sword raised high, about to execute the woman. Solo yanked the Master Blacksmith away from the woman with a hurried Telekinesis spell.

"What in Zakarum's name are you doing?" she demanded rushing to the woman's aid, Dolt following close behind.

A moment later, they both saw. The woman was beautiful and nearly naked, with flaming red hair. She also had a pair of tiny horns protruding from her forehead. A single bat-like wing grew from her left shoulder blade. The wound where her right wing had been torn off gushed black ichor instead of blood.

"'Tis a demon!" shouted Griswold, stating the obvious and advancing again with his sword in hand. "Lemme kill it before it kills us."

Both Dolt and Griswold stepped forward to finish off the wounded demoness. Gillian, still pale and shaking a little, stepped in front of them.

"What?" asked Dolt not quite hearing what Gillian had said.

"I... I said, no," repeated Gillian. "I did not train under Pepin long – God rest his soul - but he made me swear to the Healer's Code. I must honor it." She became more confident as she quoted: "A Healer heals, always. A Healer does no harm, nor allows harm to be done. It is not the place of a Healer to judge the worthiness of those whom she would heal. God must judge and a Healer must heal."

Between them, Dolt and Griswold were roughly five times Gillian's size. She stood her ground, and it was Solo's turn to be impressed. "I think it would be worth our while to have the demon alive for questioning," said Solo. "We need to find out what the situation is in Tristram and what sort of creatures are being spawned there."

Dolt and Griswold growled like wolves separated from their prey. "Besides," added Solo, "I want to know what kind of creature it is that can mutilate a Hell Spawn Succubus and if we should expect any more. I'd hate any of us to lose any limbs because we turned down a chance to gather adequate intelligence."

"Very well," conceded Griswold, "but you let tha' devil-bitch know tha' she's feasted on 'er last soul an' that her hours are numbered!" He glared at Gillian. "Healer's Code or no!"

Gillian knelt beside the Hell Spawn and cast a Healing spell. "If it makes you feel any better, Griswold, I may not be able to save her. I can stop the bleeding and close the wound, but I cannot restore the wing any more than Pepin could have restored poor Toby Wirt's leg. She might still die of shock and pain."

Dolt nudged Griswold. "We can always hope," he whispered to the Master Blacksmith.
"Aye," agreed Griswold grimly.

Chapter 2: Late Afternoon; Refugee Camp, two-and-a-half day's journey north of Tristram

The air had the stench of humanity, which, paradoxically, made Red Vex hungry. She could smell four females and three males. One of the females was quite old. These scents were almost masked by the very strong smell of her own blood, which probably explained the incredible pain across her back and right side. She could hear the heartbeats of the seven humans. They were all strong and steady; they betrayed some tension but nothing like the pounding rhythms of lust or fear that she knew so well. That was definitely bad news, because it meant that they had the advantage. She was lying on her stomach. One wing-assisted leap could carry her over the humans' heads and to safety. She lurched forward and discovered that her hands and feet were bound. She tried opening her eyes and realized that she had also been blindfolded.

Perhaps guile would work. Red Vex had spent centuries perfecting a helpless waif routine that had lured many a victim within striking range. "Please," she whimpered, "I'm afraid." This was true. "I... I hurt." This was also true, but the breathless stammer at the front end was a hero slayer.

The youngest female moved toward her, her heartbeat relaxing as the sickening treacle of human compassion oozed from her. Red Vex took little comfort from this because, at the same time, the air suddenly smelled of metal and charging Mana. One human had bought her act. The others drew weapons and were preparing spells.

"Spare us your deceptions, vile one," came the voice of the old woman.

So much for guile, but she wasn't licked yet. That gave Red Vex an idea. She quintupled her supernatural pheromone production. This particular power only worked at very close proximity, but Red Vex sensed that they were inside a tent or similar structure. Such conditions would be more than adequate for sending her captors into mindless Lust Frenzy. Within seconds males and females alike would be climbing over one another to sample her pleasures.

Then everything went cold and numb. The old woman had Stone Cursed her! Of course she'd be less susceptible to Lust Frenzy than her younger companions, but still, her willpower must have been incredible.

"Are you quite finished?" the old woman asked her as the Stone Curse wore off. The sound of muffled breathing told Red Vex that everyone in the room had covered his or her mouth and nose. She could still send them into Lust Frenzy through the very pores of their skins, but probably not before they realized what she was up to and cut her to pieces. After that, they'd probably celebrate by having an orgy on top of her scattered innards.

Red Vex sighed. "Yeah, I'm done. You can't blame a girl for trying though."

"Ye're no girl, ye're a demon," came the voice of an older - but still well in his prime - man.

"Poe-tay-to, pah-tah-to," remarked Red Vex. "I'm still alive, so you must want something from me."

"In fact, we do," came another woman's voice. "We need information about what's happening in Tristram."

Red Vex shuddered, remembering her escape from that cursed little town. She regained her composure quickly and said, "If I provide this intelligence for you, what do I get in return? And don't say my life, because I know that's one thing that you're not prepared to grant me."

"True enough," said a second, younger man who smelled of testosterone and Strength Elixirs. Red Vex licked her lips. "But you do have a choice between dying quickly and cleanly here..."

"No!" protested the young female.

The man ignored her. "...Or being left tied up and helpless for those creatures that took your wing."

"My wing?" Red Vex flexed her wings. The left one moved, but there was no longer anything on the right. She let out a howl of genuine despair for the first time since she'd become immortal.

No one spoke as the echo of the cry died away. Although her anguish over the loss of her wing was real, Red Vex was not above using the vague pangs of sympathy she sensed around her to her own advantage. "You have the smell of heroes among you," said Red Vex. "Do you intend to return to Tristram to defeat the Zerg?"

"What is that to you?" asked the woman who had asked for information.

"I'll tell you everything I know," said Red Vex, "under one condition."

"Ye're in no position to bargain," remarked the older man.

"I'm in a superb position to bargain," Red Vex shot back. "I have information you need and, since you're already going to kill me, I have nothing to lose."

The man who had threatened her started to speak, but the woman cut him off. "And what would your condition be?"

"I want to go with you to Tristram," said Red Vex.

"Out of the question," said the woman. "We'll have enough trouble watching our backs without keeping an eye on you at the same time."

"Why would you want to go back anyway?" asked the younger man.

"My wing, you dolt!" she snapped. "Those monsters maimed me, and I'll do anything I can to pay them back!" A little righteous wrath went a long way with some humans. Unfortunately, she had no way of knowing she was addressing Dolt Lungren, who hated being called a dolt more than just about anything. His rage slammed into her empathic senses like a fist. Only the fact that the two other males present moved to restrain him saved her life, and Red Vex knew it. She decided to press ahead and try to salvage the situation. "Look," she continued, "Without me, the Zerg will cut you to pieces before you're within a mile of Tristram. I can provide you with the intelligence you need to get in, rescue the prisoners and escape."

"There are people still alive in Tristram?" asked the younger woman.

"I smelled a number of live humans as I fled," lied Red Vex. "It may not be too late to save them, but their time is short. Plus," she continued, this time truthfully, "I saw

something else that may be of interest. There's a large field near Tristram surrounded but untouched by the purple ooze. I even spotted a number of cows grazing peacefully. I can lead you there."

Chapter 3: That Same Afternoon; Refugee Camp

Valeria Desdemona Sapphire Stars-in-the-Heavens-over-Riparia of the House of Halla had been sitting outside, keeping watch and looking after the ailing Cecilia. Valeria's heart was heavy. When rumors of the troubles in Tristram reached the Sisters of the Sightless Eye, Valeria cut short her training in order to go to Tristram to offer aid. She had arrived at the camp earlier in the day only to find that there was no one left in Tristram to help.

She looked over at the bedroll where the young girl lay sleeping restlessly by the fire. Her face was pale and she was severely dehydrated. Valeria recognized the symptoms from her desert training. The problem was that Cecilia simply couldn't keep any food or water in. The girl shivered and Valeria moved to cover her with another blanket.

One by one, the others came out of the tent where they had been interrogating the wounded demon. The first one out was the Barbarian giant, Dumptruk. Like Valeria, he had been on his way to Tristram to check on the welfare of friends after hearing about King Leoric's madness and the other troubles.

Even though she was a full head taller than Valeria, Rhapsody, the Bard, looked minuscule next to Dumptruk. She was freelancing for the Westmarch Scribes Guild and had been on her way to Tristram to gather news of that city in the aftermath of King Leoric's unsuccessful war on Westmarch.

Although she was the same age as Valeria, Valeria had a hard time not thinking of Gillian as a mere girl. She had been working as a barmaid at the Tavern of the Rising Sun when Valeria passed through Tristram two seasons earlier on her way to receive her training from the Sisters. Even though Gillian's tragically abbreviated training under Pepin had matured her a bit, her world was a tiny one that was, until recently, without risk or change.

The Master Blacksmith, Griswold, followed Gillian. Even from across the camp and over the fire, the veteran warrior's eyes looked haunted to Valeria. Within the six months since she'd last seen him, he had lost his family, his livelihood, his home, and now the town of his birth.

Dolt Lungren, a Barbarian wanderer, came from a different tribe than Dumptruk. He was handsome while Dumptruk had a more brutish appearance. He spoke plainly compared to Dumptruk's broken way of speaking that seemed to lack personal pronouns. Paradoxically, Dumptruk was easily the smarter of the two. He had the soul of a philosopher, while Dolt was more like a crafty wild animal. Valeria thought of him as a lone wolf who had been shunned by the pack and then shunned the pack in turn. She sighed. Such insights would have passed her by like summer breezes a half-year ago. She had learned more from the Sisters than mere archery.

The last two out of the tent were Adria, the witch, and Solo, the Bard. Adria was both changed and unchanged since Valeria had first met her. When Valeria first arrived in Tristram, Adria made her living telling fortunes and arranging marriages. Valeria had passed on the witch's matchmaking services, but her prognostications had turned out to be unnervingly accurate so far.

Valeria had instantly sensed a kindred spirit in Solo, and would have loved to join her on her adventures, or invite her along on hers. However, if the situation in Tristram was as bad as feared, Valeria knew that their paths would lead different directions.

"Who's watching the she-demon?" asked Valeria as the others took seats around the fire. Gillian checked on Cecilia and then went to her tent to look for ingredients for a remedy for her.

"Adria cast enough Stone Curses on her to keep her petrified while we decide what to do next," said Solo. "Red Vex - that's what she calls herself - turned out to be a fountain of information about Tristram and the Zerg. Unfortunately, most of the news is pretty grim. What Tristram had before was a demonic infestation; a major one granted, but still manageable. What's there now is more like an invading army."

"What kind of numbers?" asked Valeria.

"A lot," said Dolt.

"And increasing steadily," added Solo. "Their troops hatch out of pods, and the pods grow like toadstools after a rainstorm. What's more, any creature they encounter, they either kill or capture and mold in their own image."

"Aye," said Griswold, "The creature we battled this afternoon was grown from a wee wasp!"

Valeria gasped. She had seen the creature's body when Dolt and Griswold dragged it back to camp. "That used to be a wasp?"

"Kind of," said Solo. "I think it's more complicated than that. They take the essence of the wasp and combine it with their own essence until it suits their needs."

"Zerg craftsmen, like friend Griswold," said Dumptruk. "Take raw materials and forge weapons."

"Aye, living weapons," said Griswold nodding at the analogy.

"You saw what they did with an insect," said Solo, "so you can imagine what they might do with a demon."

"But you wouldn't have to, because they've already done it," said Rhapsody. "According to our unreliable source, they killed or drove out most of the smaller demons and twisted the most powerful ones in their own image."

"What do they want? And where did they come from?" asked Valeria.

"No one seems to know where they came from," said Rhapsody. "Apparently, the first hive appeared a couple of months after King Leoric's death. Neither Solo nor I have heard or read of anything remotely like these creatures. I'll check the Royal Library and with the Scribes Guild when I return to Westmarch."

"As for what they want," said Solo, "It's pretty clear they want to increase their numbers and diversity with whatever creatures they encounter. They're going to keep spreading and will continue to be a threat to man, beast, demon and angel alike until something stops them."

"And at this point," continued Rhapsody, "that something is going to have to be an army."

"Many armies," corrected Griswold.

"That's why I'll be heading back to Westmarch with my report as soon as I've had something to eat," said Rhapsody. "The king must be alerted and his forces mobilized. The longer we wait, the stronger the Zerg will get."

"Dumpruk return home too," stated the giant Barbarian. "Warn other tribes of Badlands, then bring warriors to fight Zerg."

Valeria nodded her head. "I was hoping to be able to go to Tristram," she said, "But it's clear my duty lies in returning to Riparia and leading my own forces back here."

"Dolt, Griswold and I will be going to Tristram to scout out the Zerg and learn what we can," said Solo. "Adria will stay here and work on a way to defeat them."

"Everything the Zerg produce is alive," said Adria. "Their weapons, their nests, all their resources. Anything damaged will simply heal in time. It is one of their greatest strengths." She paused. "It may also be their greatest weakness. Everything feeds on the creep. It is my plan to try to concoct a poison powerful enough to taint the creep and leave the Zerg vulnerable."

"Gillian and Cecilia will stay here with Adria until I get back from Westmarch or can send someone for them," said Rhapsody chewing on a strip of dried pork and cramming a few pieces of fruit and a loaf of bread into her backpack. "I'm almost set to go. Do you have any extra Mana potions?" she asked Adria, "Full restoration, preferably."

"Potions of Mana are exceedingly valuable in times of need," said Adria sharply. "There is no such thing as 'extra' Mana potions."

"Spare me. If you have 'em, I'll buy 'em," replied Rhapsody. "I'm going to have to drain my ball a couple of times Teleporting all the way to Westmarch."

Adria started to name her price. "It would be appropriate," interrupted Solo, "if you'd spare her your usual adventurer's rate under these circumstances."

"Oh, very well," sighed Adria getting up to go back to the tent. She returned with a large trunk and sold Rhapsody three Full Mana potions and a standard Mana potion for 123 gold pieces.

Rhapsody tossed back the smallest of the four potions. "Ahh," she sighed, her face flushed. "That's the stuff. I thank you, and my expense account with the Westmarch Scribes Guild thanks you." She stood up and slung her backpack over her shoulders. "Good fortune to you all. May we meet again soon under pleasanter circumstances," she said. "I'm gossamer on a spring breeze." With that, she invoked the Teleportation spell and vanished.

Valeria squinted in the direction of Westmarch. Her keen eyes picked out a tiny figure more than a mile down the wooded road. Rhapsody Teleported again and disappeared from sight entirely.

Gillian came out of her tent carrying a cast iron pot full of a thick, milky liquid. She began warming it over the fire.

"What about the demon?" asked Valeria.

"She will remain Stone Cursed for several more minutes," reported Adria.

"I meant, what are we going to do with her?" said Valeria.

"Easy," replied Dolt, "we shatter her and use her for cobblestones."

Griswold guffawed at this, but Dumptruk shook his head. "Dumptruk and friends better than demons," he said. "Not kill helpless foes."

Dolt looked at him as if he'd become unhinged. "What good is Stone Curse, if it's not for killing helpless foes?"

Dumptruk could have pointed out that he had never needed such magic, but let it pass.

"I agree with Dumptruk," said Gillian sparing the giant Barbarian a fond glance. She was busy stirring the remedy she was brewing for Cecilia. "Killing her now would be needlessly cruel."

"Cruel?!" sputtered Griswold. "Did y'not recognize that she-demon? She's surely one of the ones who..."

Solo interrupted him, not wishing the argument to go on any longer. "Frankly," she said, "I'd like to take her to Tristram with us as she asked. She fed us a lot of information about where we're going, and I'd like her to be there to receive the first of the punishment if she's attempted to mislead us. The only problem is I'm not sure how to keep her under control so she won't be a threat to us." Solo hoped that focusing them on a practical problem would distract her companions from a philosophical debate with no real solutions.

Adria had been digging through her trunk to inventory what she'd been able to rescue from her shack. "Ah!" she said, "This might be just the thing you need." She held up a large black studded leather dog collar attached to a slim length of gleaming chain. "It's a Collar of Submission," she said, "Whoever wears it will obey the holder of the chain." She turned to Dumptruk. "Dumptruk, be a good fellow and go fetch Red Vex."

Dumptruk lumbered into the tent and returned carrying the petrified succubus over one shoulder. Gently, he set her down between Adria and Solo. Adria slipped the collar around the demon's neck and fastened it. She handed the chain to Solo. "When you grasp the gold links and tug on the chain, she will be submissive to your will for several minutes. The effect diminishes slightly with each use. However, if you are a good master, you may find that you no longer need the collar's power."

Solo was about to ask what Adria meant by being a good master when she saw what the witch had in her hands. "These can be securely fastened to each other, to the sides of the collar, or to your end of the chain," she said. Adria was holding up a pair of studded leather wristbands that matched the collar.

"Why would a dog collar have matching wristbands?" asked Gillian. "What possible use could they be?"

"Never mind," said Adria dismissively and fastening the wristbands around Red Vex's wrists.

Gillian looked puzzled. Griswold and Dolt both guffawed and even Valeria snickered. Solo looked at the leash in her hand as if it had suddenly turned into a dead snake. She tried very hard not to imagine the answer to Gillian's innocent question and failed miserably.

"Would either of you..." began Solo trying to offer the leash to Dolt or Griswold.

The Blacksmith and the Barbarian both shook their heads, grinning. "Ye're the one who wanted t'keep her alive," Griswold reminded her.

"Stone Curse start to wear off," noticed Dumptruk.

"You should use the collar's power immediately to establish your authority," Adria advised.

Solo sighed and gave the chain a gentle tug.

"Harder!" commanded Adria. "You must prove your dominance beyond all question to use the collar effectively."

Solo yanked the chain and nearly pulled Red Vex off her feet as the Stone Curse wore off.

"Command her to stand up," suggested Adria.

"Um... Stand up," said Solo.

"Yes, Good Master," said Red Vex standing up straight and looking at Solo expectantly.

"Why, she sounded just like Ogden!" gasped Gillian.

At that moment, Adria considered Stone Cursing Gillian and leaving her in the woods someplace. Fortunately, Dumptruk intervened. "Soup boiling," he observed.

"Oh, thank you Dumptruk," said Gillian removing the pot from the fire and taking it over to Cecilia.

"All right," Solo told Red Vex, "Have a seat."

Red Vex sat down. "Yes, Good Master."

"Please don't call me Good Master."

"I'm sorry, Good Master."

Solo rolled her eyes. "We've decided to grant your request and take you to Tristram with us."

"Oh, thank you, Good Master."

"How long does this effect last?"

Adria shrugged. "It varies."

"Great." She turned to Red Vex again. "I don't suppose there are any errors or omissions you'd like to correct about the information you gave us earlier?"

"Yes, Good Master," said Red Vex. "We'll want to keep to forested areas as much as possible and avoid open areas. All the Zerg creatures burrow and I've seen them burst out of the ground to capture their prey. Tree roots may slow them down, or at least, give us some warning."

"We would have regretted not knowing that," said Solo without looking at Dolt and Griswold. "Anything else?"

"Yes, Good Master. I lied about smelling live humans as I fled Tristram. I think the only survivors of Tristram are in this camp."

Solo spared a glance at Gillian. She knew that the young healer had been hoping that her grandmother had somehow survived the massacre. "Are you sure there are no humans left alive in Tristram?" asked Solo.

Red Vex looked troubled, obviously wanting to please her Good Master. "Anything is possible," she said. "I have reason to believe that Lazarus might still be alive. Although I don't suppose you'd be interested in rescuing him."

"Aye," grumbled Griswold, "I don't suppose we would."

Solo had one other question in the back of her mind. "Why do you really want to go back to Tristram?"

Red Vex was slow in answering, and this was not lost on Solo. "I wish to find my sister, Black Jade."

Chapter 4: Evening; Refugee Camp

Red Vex was handcuffed to a tree, with her hands behind her back. It was Griswold's turn to watch her. "Don't think I don't remember ye," he told her. He had been warned about her powers and kept his distance. Red Vex would have told him that he didn't need to bother. Blasting him with a Bloodstar or sending him into Lust Frenzy would only get her killed or molested or both, and she wasn't in the mood. Since the effect of the Collar of Submission had worn off, however, she didn't feel she was under any obligation to volunteer any information.

"You and that sister of yours arrived with Caravan a half year ago," Griswold continued. "Posin' as dancers, ye were. Lazarus was a good man, a holy man. How did ye tempt him into betraying us all?"

Red Vex couldn't resist such an obvious opportunity to bait the blacksmith. "How do you think?" she asked him, arching her back and bouncing her ample breasts at him.

Griswold quickly averted his eyes, but Red Vex knew she had him going. Something to work on a little later.

"That's enough of that," said Solo, coming up behind her and reattaching her chain to the collar. "Go get something to eat and get some rest, Gris," she said. "I'll take over."

"All right," said Griswold, and then he said to Red Vex: "Ye'll get yours."

"I can't wait," leered Red Vex.

"Leave him alone," Solo ordered. She didn't bother to utilize the collar's power. She figured it was enough for Red Vex to know that she could. She detached the wristbands from one another and released the demon.

"Should I thank you?" asked Red Vex sarcastically.

"Just put this on," Solo gave Red Vex a cloak. It had a slit up the back to accommodate her wing. "I need the boys watching you, not staring at you."

Red Vex put the cloak on. There were three buttons at the bottom of the wing slit to fasten the loose ends together. The cloak was thick and loose and hid Red Vex's charms adequately.

"That'll do," said Solo. "Back to your tree for the night."

Not ready for a confrontation, Red Vex obeyed and Solo refastened her wrists.

"Can I speak to you for a moment, Solo?" asked Gillian approaching them. She was carrying a long box.

Solo stepped away from her prisoner. "Sure, what can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to thank you for trying to find out the truth about my grandmother," said Gillian. "She was a Bard like yourself, you know. In her youth. Perhaps you've heard of her, her name was Giselle."

Solo shook her head. Most Bards worked as long-distance messengers or freelanced for Scribes Guilds. They tended to be solitary individuals whose paths seldom crossed. In fact, Solo was a very common name for Bards.

"She and my grandfather adventured together for many years before he was killed in battle. That was when I was just a baby. As he died, my grandfather passed his sword along to my grandmother. It's an ancient and magical weapon," said Gillian opening the box. Inside was a great curved blade, nearly six feet long. "My grandmother adventured for a few more years after my grandfather's death until she settled down and became the Master Scribe of Tristram. She claimed that the sword contains the essence of every warrior who ever wielded it competently in battle, and that it transfers some of that skill and power to anyone who is able to wield it competently herself. She always felt that part of my grandfather is in this sword. In fact, she called it The Grandfather."

Solo was touched by the gesture, but had to turn Gillian down. "I'm sorry Gillian. I truly am. But that sword looks about four inches taller than I am. I'd need both hands to use it, and I don't think I'd be all that effective."

Gillian smiled. "Just try it."

Solo shrugged and lifted the great sword out of its box. It was solid, but remarkably light, and it was balanced perfectly. If she closed her eyes, it was almost as if she was wielding a short sword. She turned away from Gillian and tried a few moves with it. The sword practically wielded itself; it was deadly accurate and could dish out devastating damage.

"When the Zerg were closing in on us," said Gillian, "my grandmother insisted that I save The Grandfather instead of her. She cast Flame Waves and Lightning Walls from her sickbed to cover our escape. The last thing I heard were Flash spells..." She shook her head, trying to dislodge the memory.

"She must have been a remarkable woman," said Solo.

Gillian smiled. "She was. She had Second Sight, you know. Wait, before you say anything, my grandmother had a dream with giant slithering creatures in it. She also saw Pepin running from a house in the town. That was the night before the Zerg invaded, she made me pack and warned me to be ready for the worst."

Solo practiced with the sword for several more minutes while Gillian watched her in silence. "This sword is wonderful!" Solo finally enthused. "This has got to be the second most fun you can have with one hand!"

Gillian looked puzzled. "Funny, that's what my grandmother always used to say. I never understood what she meant."

Solo laughed. "I think I would have liked your grandmother."

"Well, if the legend is true, then part of my grandmother is in that sword too. May it serve you and her memory well."

Solo strapped The Grandfather's scabbard to her back and sheathed the ancient sword. "Thank you," she told Gillian. "I'll do my best to honor this weapon and your grandmother."

Later that evening, Dolt approached Gillian. "I have a favor to beg of you," he said, skipping any social niceties or preamble.

"How may I, I mean, I'll be glad to help if I can." Gillian had been trying to break herself of the habit of saying 'how may I serve you.' She had always meant it as a way of being

courteous when she was working for Ogden, but it had earned her more wise-ass remarks than she cared to think about.

For his part, Dolt Lungren was not much for witty repartee. As a rule, he did not like people much, and liked conversation even less. It was an attitude he inherited from his father, for whom most social discourse had ended in swordplay. "Since I arrived here," Dolt gestured at the camp around them, "and found that Tristram had been razed by the Zerg, I've had the feeling that I am somehow cheating death."

"Well, it was lucky for you that you hadn't arrived a few days earlier," agreed Gillian.

"No, it's more serious than that," said Dolt. "I can't shake the feeling that, somehow, I was meant to die in Tristram. Lately, each hour that passes feels like one that I wasn't supposed to have." He fiddled with the healing potions tucked in his belt pouches. "Tomorrow, Griswold, Solo, the monster..." He gestured over at the tree where Red Vex was bound. It was Adria's turn to watch her. "...and I are going into Tristram."

Gillian was the first to admit that she was naïve about many things, but she had worked at the Tavern of the Rising Sun long enough to know that when a grim-faced warrior approached her talking of his impending doom, a proposition usually followed. Some were romantic or poetic or heart wrenching; others were charming in their clumsiness. Most were direct and fairly vulgar. They all boiled down to the same thing. A good many of the young women of Tristram were happy to oblige such requests from the right individual. Unless Caravan was in town, the prospects for entertainment in Tristram were usually pretty limited. Gillian was reminded of Farmer Lester's unfaithful young wife, Glorianna. She called it "the Fleshdance," and it seemed like she would do that dance with just about anyone. She had vanished - like so many others - shortly after the troubles began. Gillian wondered whatever became of her.

For her part, Gillian's usual response was to be warm and sympathetic, and to spike her would-be suitor's drink. Eventually, the warrior would be drunk and tired enough to be escorted home by one of the town guards to sleep it off in peace. For those individuals who were particularly persistent or vulgar, Gillian kept a powerful laxative behind the bar. After a couple of doses of that, they'd be far too preoccupied to bother her anymore.

Gillian wondered how she was going to deal with Dolt, but he surprised her. His request was not of the physical nature that she had expected. "I would be..." Dolt paused, searching for the right words. Although there was no history of diplomacy, or even asking, in his family, Dolt wanted to do this correctly. "I would be grateful and honored if you would keep my name for me."

Gillian blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"My immortal name," said Dolt. What was that word that people used when they were asking for something? "Please..." That was it. "Please keep it for me." He thrust a tiny scrap of greenish-brown parchment into her hands.

Gillian looked at it. On it was written, "Dolt Lungren." The 't' in "Dolt" looked funny, though. It looked as if it had meant to be some other letter, and only wound up being a 't' by accident.

She was puzzled for a few moments and then remembered something her grandmother had told her about Fundamentalist Scribes Guilds. In some lands where the literacy rate was low, the local Scribes Guilds held great power over the people. To those people, reading and writing were considered magic, and Scribes were considered sorcerers or priests. Some of these guilds were known to offer their blessings to their subjects by writing down the subjects' names. For a price. Gillian's grandmother had not thought much of such guilds. She had referred to them as a bunch of loonies in her more charitable moments.

Whatever they were, Gillian knew better than to question another man's faith. Especially when that man carried a giant axe and had biceps as big around as her thighs. She accepted the parchment in the spirit in which it had been offered. She opened the box that, until recently, had held The Grandfather. Nestled in the bottom of the box was a leather-bound book, one of Jarulf's Tomes. It was not one of the originals by Master Scribe Pedro, of course. Nonetheless, it had been in her family for generations. Between its pages, it held locks of hair, dried flower petals, notes, poems, and other mementos of lives gone by. Gillian opened the book and slipped Dolt's name in.

"There," she said closing the book and wrapping it up again. "That will keep it safe until you return." She smiled warmly at the Barbarian warrior. "And you will return."

Dolt returned the smile, but not the warmth. "Thank you," he said.

Chapter 5: Morning; the Woods

The woods oozed with creep. The only thing worse than the overpowering sweet smell of it was the buzzing and swarming of the flies feeding on it. After a half-hour, Solo would have cheerfully set someone on fire if there was a chance it would bring relief from the flies.

Furthermore, the creep made for difficult walking. In some places, it was ankle-deep. If there was rock or a tree root or some other solid surface under it, it was treacherously slippery. Otherwise, it was as sticky like molasses. There was no way to tell beforehand; you simply had to take a step and hope for the best. Red Vex was the only one who seemed not to be having any difficulty walking. It was a marked contrast from earlier in the morning when Solo had untied her from her tree.

Solo had seen the succubus stumble a few times before already, but this time she took two steps and pitched forward. Her wing beat furiously as she fell and, if she'd had both wings, it might have kept her upright. As it was, all she did was turn a couple of sloppy pirouettes before crashing chest-first into the ground. A normally proportioned human being would have landed face-first. As it was, all Solo could think of was a clown she had met when she was traveling with Caravan. His nose honked when he squeezed it, and Solo couldn't help imagining that sound when Red Vex hit the ground.

Red Vex let loose a stream of obscenities that had made even Dolt and Griswold cringe and pale. Solo was glad that Gillian and Cecilia had gone to gather berries for breakfast. They would certainly have required a full-healing potion apiece from hearing Red Vex's curses.

Red Vex struggled to her feet, dusted herself off and nearly stumbled again. This time Solo was quick to identify the problem. It wasn't just that her missing wing was throwing her balance off. "It's those boots of yours," Solo told her. "They've got to go."

The boots Red Vex wore came up to her mid-thigh and were made of gleaming black leather - demon hide, actually. The narrow soles also featured six-inch spiked heels. No wonder succubi needed wings to keep their balance!

Luckily, Solo had a couple of extra pairs of boots. The nomadic lifestyle of Bards led most of them to value a good pair of shoes even more than a good pair of swords. The boots she offered Red Vex were soft leather, ankle-high and had tough flat soles. "Put these on," Solo told her.

Red Vex sat down on a log and peeled her boots off. Like the rest of her, her legs were flawless and as smooth and white as ivory. Solo - who, in rare moments of vanity, considered her legs her best feature - refrained from considering any comparison between Red Vex's anatomy and her own. That way lay madness.

Red Vex slipped her dainty feet into the new boots and stood. She took a step and a strange expression came over her face. It was a long time before anyone present realized it was a smile. "These shoes are incredible," said Red Vex. She took a few steps. "Why, I no longer feel the need to kill men and devour their souls!"

"Ye're kidding," said Griswold, who had been watching the entire episode.

"Yes, I am," replied Red Vex, her smile gone. The fact that Griswold looked taken aback at the statement was not lost on Red Vex. It would definitely be worth her while to work on the veteran warrior when she could get away with it.

The rest of the morning had gone by uneventfully. Dumptruk and Valeria each left for their respective homelands, promising to return with reinforcements as quickly as possible. Gillian had spent much of the night brewing Healing potions for each of them. Solo finished equipping herself by purchasing a half-dozen Mana potions from Adria. Adria took that opportunity to remind her that she expected the Collar of Submission back when they completed their scouting mission.

"Ordinarily, I would be loath to part with it," said Adria of the collar. "But these are dire circumstances. Besides, I'll be too busy to use it until after the Zerg menace is dealt with anyway." Solo had no desire to ask Adria what she would have used the collar for if it hadn't been for the Zerg menace.

Adria gave Solo one other item: A Horadrim Portal scroll. "This scroll will open a different portal than the Tristram Town Portal. I used it to escape the night the Zerg invaded Tristram," she said. "Make sure you are within a mile of the cathedral when you read it. It will bring you here to the forest."

Solo, Dolt and Griswold headed into the woods toward Tristram. Red Vex, at the end of the leash Solo held, led the way. The creep had spread a half-mile closer to camp than it had been the day before. Overall, the mood of the party was somber. Partly because of the difficult going due to the creep, and partly because of the nature of their destination. Tristram was not just a dead town. It had been murdered, and its murderer had stayed around to gloat.

With nothing to do but shoo flies away and pick their way through the creep, their thoughts wandered. Griswold's mood was especially grim. His family had lived in Tristram for generations. He remembered when, as a young man, he had been called to the church to claim his father's body. Torvan Griswold had been a Tristram Ranger who had disappeared on Long Patrol one day. Another Long Patrol had found his body a fortnight later pinned under a rockslide. Griswold felt as if he was going to claim another body. Part of him was glad that none of his family had survived to see the Zerg invasion of Tristram. He whispered a silent prayer for his wife, Kella, and for his children, Torvan, Hogan and Hildy. They had all fallen as victims of the Black King's madness.

Griswold knew Tristram had gone to hell long before the Zerg arrived. It was all the fault of the she-demon, Red Vex. While no one knew all the details, Griswold had no doubt that she and her sister were somehow tied up in the betrayal by Lazarus, the disappearance of the Prince, King Leoric's madness and the raids by the cloaked riders. Red Vex and Black Jade had come into Tristram with Caravan, posing as dancers. They had sought out the Archbishop Lazarus, claiming to seek redemption and to follow the Path of Light. Of course, their goal was not their own enlightenment, but rather the corruption of Lazarus. Griswold wondered again how they'd done it. With the possible exception of Captain "Wet Blanket" Lachdanan, Lazarus was the most pious man he'd ever known. If he ever got half a chance, he swore he'd beat the answer out of Red Vex before he killed her.

Dolt Lungren cursed as he slipped on the creep and had to grab a sticky tree trunk to keep from falling. He had heard rumors of the troubles in Tristram and had been on his way to seek glory in battle. Normally, that was what gave his life purpose. But then, normally, he expected to be alive at the end of the day. He had even gone so far as to give his name to the girl, Gillian.

More and more, Dolt had been thinking of his late father. No one was exactly sure how or when Olaf Lungren had died. He had been a Barbarian warrior with a temperament that made Baal look like a sleepy nun. There was little doubt that he'd finally gotten into a fight - probably with an angry mob - and lost. Dolt sighed. He had inherited his father's strength and temper and would probably soon inherit his demise. Perhaps if he had been born to another family, he would not be on this path. Maybe he'd be in a nice quiet guildhall somewhere forging horseshoes or blowing glass. Then again, maybe he'd still be here up to his ankles in sticky alien goo.

Before they crossed into the creep, Solo had taken the precaution of casting a Mana Shield. She then replenished her magical energy by drinking one of the Mana potions she'd gotten from Adria. It was standard practice, since a Mana Shield was most effective when one had a full ball. In retrospect, it might have been a mistake, however. The blue potions were famous for a particular side effect, and Solo found her thoughts turning toward topics that were not at all appropriate to their current situation. The fact that Red Vex was a few feet ahead of her and leaking supernatural pheromones didn't help matters either.

The last time Solo had been with a man had been over a year ago when she was traveling with Caravan from the coast to Riparia. He had been an acrobat, and his agility and stamina had made him a memorable companion. Solo allowed herself a smile at the memory, and then sighed. Judging by her current company, she'd be "Solo" a bit longer. Even though he was handsome enough, she was not at all interested in Dolt. She could have said "misanthropic misogynist" to his face and had days to get away while he tried to figure out what she meant. It was enough that she'd earned enough of his respect that they were able to work together. Even though he hadn't said so, Dolt Lungren was one of those people in whose world Solo would have been at home raising a mess o' babies.

Griswold was another story. The older man had a good heart, but it had been broken again and again. To get close to him would be to immerse herself in his pain.

Meanwhile, Red Vex had been amusing herself by calculating what it would take to seduce and control each of her captors. There was a certain amount of role-playing involved, and that's what made it fun. For example, Dolt Lungren would respond to strength. One or both of his parents had probably been very controlling and, whether he realized it or not, that was what he would seek out in a mate. The Collar of Submission would have been ideal for him. Even without it, though, Red Vex was confident that, given an hour alone with the Barbarian, she could have him eating out of her hand. Or any other part of her body.

Griswold was almost the opposite. He thought of himself as a father and protector. He'd respond to anyone that he thought he could help. The fact that he'd lost so much would make him especially vulnerable to the charms of a damsel in distress. Of course, he blamed her for the loss of his family and the destruction of Tristram, and hated her for it.

That was not really the problem one might have thought it would be. Being a creature of Mephisto, Red Vex knew how easy it was to turn love into hatred, or hatred into passion.

Red Vex was aware that her power was having an effect on Solo, and would not have acted to control it even if she could. She could feel the slight increase in the Bard's body temperature and hear the increase in her heart rate. That was good, she might be able to turn even a slight distraction to her advantage. As with the two men, Red Vex had faith that she could have worked her will on Solo without undue difficulty. Solo, she sensed, would respond to a confidant. If she became her best friend, it would be easy to overcome her heterosexuality. Red Vex frowned. It was something like that that had resulted in her becoming Red Vex in the first place. Just for an instant, she almost remembered her name.

They had been within sight of the road, but followed Red Vex's advice and stuck to the forest. They were caught short when the woods ended in a rolling creep-covered meadow.

"Do we keep going?" asked Dolt.

Solo nodded. "We need to go another mile before we're close enough to use the Horadrim Portal into Tristram."

Centuries ago, Horadrim wizards had known how to conjure portals that could transport them instantly between any two points in the world. Thanks to Horadrim secrecy, however, all knowledge of that spell had been lost when their numbers were decimated during the Sin War. All that remained were the portals themselves. They could be opened with a simple spell, assuming one was nearby. No one knew where all the portals were any longer. Finding one was just a matter of luck. Having it take you somewhere useful would be another improbably lucky break. A lot of the old abandoned Horadrim Portals were one-way trips to nowhere, so people were not inclined to explore them even when they found them.

Luckily, Tristram had a Portal whose nature was understood and well documented. Opening a Horadrim Portal within a day's journey or so of the town would transport the traveler into the heart of Tristram.

Griswold squinted, trying to see through the clouds of buzzing flies. "Aye, there it is," he said pointing down the road. "The obelisk." There was a stone marker at the top of a rise about a mile away. It was marked with the Horadrim symbol and told travelers that they were within range of the Portal to Tristram.

"Let's go, then," said Solo. "The less time we spend in the open, the better off we'll be."

They were exactly halfway there when the flies suddenly vanished.

"Uh-oh..." said Dolt.

The Zerg burst out of the ground in ambush. Three of the wasp-creatures that had savaged Red Vex took to the air and immediately reversed and dived at them. A half-dozen white Venom Tails wriggled out of the earth around them and began to move in for the kill from all sides. Their leaders were the last to emerge: a pair of towering serpentine Hydralisks. All were creatures that the Zerg had worked their twisted HellCraft on. The fliers had been bred from wasps. The Venom Tails had Scavengers as their forebears. The

Hydralisks had been plenty deadly even before the Zerg added Cave Viper DNA to their genetic makeup.

Solo yanked Red Vex's leash to invoke the power of the Collar of Submission. "Protect us!" she commanded detaching the leash, and freeing the Hell Spawn's hands, "Kill the Zerg!"

"Yes, Good Master," replied Red Vex gleefully. She unleashed a Bloodstar that sailed over Solo's head and brought down one of the fliers. The other two broke off their attack and retreated a bit, hovering.

Meanwhile, a sweeping blow from Dolt's axe brought a quick end to the three Venom Tails approaching from his side. Griswold was faring less well. Although the sword that he considered his Edge in Battle had dispatched one of the Venom Tails, simultaneously setting it aflame and knocking it away from him, the other two were on him. They lashed at him like huge white scorpions and, when one found its mark, Griswold let out a scream of agony.

Dolt attempted to rush to the Master Blacksmith's aid but found himself blocked by one of the Hydralisks. It reared up like a striking cobra, looming three feet over Dolt's head. Its mouth was at least two feet wide and full of needle-like teeth. The upper pair of appendages ended in scythe-like claws, the bottom pair wielded great scimitars. Dolt and the alien monster regarded each other for a silent moment, and then the battle was joined.

Red Vex was holding the other Hydralisk at bay, blasting away at it with Bloodstars. Her attack was keeping the creature from approaching too close, but its Cave Viper DNA made it resistant to the magical attack. Each flick of the Hydralisk's tail sent a volley of javelin-sized quills flying at Red Vex. Red Vex, who had evaded the arrows of veteran Rogues in the dark, had little trouble avoiding the monster's missile attack. It had only hatched hours ago and this was its first real battle. She had no doubt that she could be in real trouble if the other Hydralisk finished with Dolt and caught her in a crossfire.

Solo Stone Cursed one of the Venom Tails attacking Griswold, giving him time to quaff a Healing potion. Stone Curse took more out of Solo than it would have Adria, and she'd surely drain her ball if she tried to cast another one without having a Mana potion. One of the fliers seemed to recognize Solo's vulnerability and dived at her. Although the slashing attack did her no harm, it nearly depleted her Mana Shield. The second flier was following the lead of its brood mate and Solo knew that a second attack would tear through her Mana Shield and into her body. She went on the offensive. Draining her ball, Solo Stone Cursed the alien in mid-dive. Petrified, it slammed into the ground and shattered.

Griswold had managed to kill the unpetrified Venom Tail and was about to shatter the one Solo had Stone Cursed when the last flier snatched him off the ground.

"Red Vex!" commanded Solo, "Save him!"

Red Vex turned and blasted the flier out of the air and Griswold came to a soft but sticky landing in the creep. The Hydralisk, seeing Red Vex's back turned, lunged at the succubus, only to be met by Solo's swords.

Solo did not like going into melee without the protection of a Mana Shield, but there just wasn't time to drink a potion and cast the spell. She had The Grandfather in her right hand and her trusty short sword in the left. That gave her two blades to the monster's four.

Griswold recovered from his fall just in time to see that the Stone Curse had worn off on the last Venom Tail. Even if he hadn't been injured, he was stuck in the creep with his sword pinned under him. The creature came at him, its deadly tail held high. Then there was a flash of crimson and the Venom Tail burst into slimy pieces.

Griswold looked up and saw Red Vex standing over the slain monster, scarlet energy still arcing from her fingertips.

Solo was having what was turning out to be quite a fencing match with the Hydralisk. She'd scored a number of serious hits on the creature without receiving any herself, thanks to The Grandfather's reach. The Hydralisk moved more easily in the creep than she did, so she knew it was only a matter of time.

Then the Hydralisk's head became airborne. As what was left of it crumpled, Solo saw Dolt standing there, his axe dripping. Actually, Dolt himself was dripping. He looked as though he'd cut through the other Hydralisk and come out the other side. A quick glance at the other Zerg confirmed that this might have been the case.

"They're not so tough," said Dolt.

"Unless you want to put that assessment to a real test, we'd better be moving," warned Solo. The ground was bulging in numerous places behind them, and already, several Venom Tails had surfaced for a second attack.

"We can make it to the marker! Let's go!" yelled Solo. She downed a Full Mana potion as she ran. Dolt followed her. Red Vex helped pull Griswold out of the creep where he was mired, and they both followed as well. Behind them, no less than 30 Venom Tails and a dozen fliers pursued. More Hydralisks followed as well. Glancing back, Solo saw a few other varieties of Zerg that she wasn't eager to meet. Fortunately, Red Vex was bringing up the rear and her Bloodstars killed or discouraged any creature that came too close. Hell Spawns excelled at running battles.

When they reached the stone marker, Solo cast the spell to open the Horadrim Portal to Tristram. Almost as one, she, Dolt, Griswold and Red Vex dove through it. Solo slammed the Portal shut behind them.

They were safe, but "safe" was a relative concept. They were also in the heart of the Zerg-infested corpse of Tristram.

Chapter 6: Noon; Tristram

The creep was thinner in Tristram, more like a dirty purple-gray slush than the gooey blanket they'd seen before. Older, more established, Zerg resources needed less creep than newer ones did. Thus, the creep was always thickest near the borders of Zerg territory.

Despite the lack of creep, there was no question that Tristram was no longer a human town. Except for the buzzing of the flies, the town was unnaturally still. No human voice spoke. There was no evidence of human craftsmanship that wasn't in ruins. Even Red Vex couldn't smell a single human scent other than her companions.

To their right, all that remained of the Tavern of the Rising Sun was a few charred timbers and a pile of creep-slimed rubble. On the left, Griswold's smithy had fared slightly better. It too was charred and slimed, but only the back wall and part of the roof had been destroyed.

"The pasture I told you about is back this way," said Red Vex, gesturing behind them to the left.

"We should check m' workshop," said Griswold, "If the Zerg ha' not gotten into m' weapons lockers, there may be things we can use."

"Sweet Zakarum on a Pony!" breathed Solo. She was looking behind them, to the right. The old Horadrim cathedral that King Leoric had converted into his palace was now a towering alien bio-mass. It looked like a giant termite mound, except that it was clearly alive. Creep-filled veins pulsed across its surface, and even from the relative distance of town, they could all see drones and other Zerg creatures swarming over its surface.

There was a long silence, during which they could almost hear the alien structure's breath and heartbeat. Even Red Vex found herself repulsed by its other-ness.

"More weapons would be a good thing," whispered Solo, finally.

Without another word, they hurried into the dubious shelter of Griswold's workshop.

"Dolt, you make your way to the front of the shop and keep an eye on the Town Square," said Solo once they were inside. She wandered over to where Red Vex was standing and swiftly reattached her leash to the Collar of Submission. The succubus shot her an icy glare, but made no comment. "Red Vex and I will watch the back while Gris sees what he can salvage."

Red Vex sat down on a collapsed portion of the back wall and stared out at the giant Zerg hive. "There are thousands of them," she said. "Far more than there were when I was here two nights ago. I think they'd only begun transforming the old church."

Solo was only half-listening. She'd stubbed her toe on something soft and brown half-buried in creep. She bent to pull it free. It was a soiled stuffed bear.

"What's that?" asked Red Vex.

"It's Cecilia's friend, Theo," replied Solo. "She asked me to look for him before we left." She smiled and shook her head. "Poor kid, she said it was Theo's idea that they should try some of the 'grape jam.'"

Red Vex did nothing to hide the look of utter contempt that crossed her face as Solo slipped the bear under her belt.

It seemed impossible to Griswold that, only days ago, there had been a wall between the house and his workshop, and that Kella Griswold's perfect little dining room and kitchen had been on the other side of that wall. A tattered piece of canvass hung on what was left of the wall. Gently, the Master Blacksmith removed it and held it in his hands as if it were made of smoke that might drift away at any moment.

It had been nearly ten years ago. A painter had arrived with Caravan, and Kella had gotten the notion that a portrait of the family would be a good thing to have. It had cost a fortune and been sheer hell. With Caravan in town, Griswold had far too much work to do to sit in a tent while some skinny Eastern artist smeared paint on a canvass, but Kella had insisted. "Let your apprentice handle things," she had said. "You've taught him everything you know, haven't you?"

The truth was, Griswold hated sitting still. His little daughter, Hildy, took after him in this respect. She was only three at the time and had whined and carried on almost as much as Griswold had. No battle Griswold had ever fought compared with the ordeal of that day.

Now the canvass was scorched and torn. Griswold and half of Kella were missing from the portrait, but the children were as clear as the day they were painted. The artist had been more skilled than Griswold ever wanted to admit. Somehow he had captured Torvan's strength and discipline; Hogan's playful rebelliousness; and Hildy's indisputable adoration of Griswold.

Lost in the painting, Griswold sank to the dirty floor and did not move for long minutes.

When Griswold rejoined Solo and Red Vex, he had a sword, axe, and a shield. "Most of my weapons lockers had been broken into," said Griswold, "But they missed one o' the best ones." He handed Solo a broad sword. "It's a Dragon's Sword of the Vampire. It'll allow ye t'store extra Mana and t'drain Mana from your foes in combat."

Before Solo could respond, Dolt returned from the front of the shop. "Ah, there you are, Dolt," said Griswold. "I've found an axe that y'might find useful." He handed the Barbarian warrior a great axe. "It's a Strange Axe of Slaughter."

Dolt frowned. "A strange axe? Don't you know what kind it is?"

"No, lad, 'tis a..." began Griswold.

"Never mind," said Dolt. "I came back here to tell you that there's someone in the square, by the fountain."

Silently, the four made their way to the front of the shop. From behind a collapsed portion of the front wall, they could see a lone human figure dressed in the remnants of a blue robe. He was standing next to the fountain, with his back to the shop.

"I thought he was just a corpse until he got to his feet and wandered over to the fountain," whispered Dolt.

"Saints be praised!" breathed Griswold. "It's Cain!"

He started to get up, but Solo put a hand on his shoulder. "He could be a zombie, or worse."

Red Vex shook her head. "Not likely. The first thing the Zerg did in the labyrinth was to round up and destroy anything undead. If there was still meat on it, they ate it. Otherwise, they just annihilated them: skeletons, liches, skull wings, shr'dead, even black knights and bone demons. The Zerg don't seem to be able to work their craft on dead matter."

Griswold gently removed Solo's hand. "If anyone in Tristram could've figured out a way to escape the Zerg, it would've been Deckard Cain! Now lemme go see 'im."

"All right," said Solo, "but we're keeping you covered."

Griswold stepped into the sun and walked toward Cain. "Cain? Over here. 'Tis me!"

Cain did not move. Griswold crept closer. "Cain, are ye all right? Speak t'me."

This time, Cain turned. "Hello, my friend," he said. "Stay awhile and die!" Cain's face and torso had been replaced by a writhing mass of grubs and oozing pods.

Griswold drew in a gasp of horror, and, in that instant, Cain burst in a spray of spores and parasitic creatures. The attack caught Griswold full in the face.

Solo yanked Griswold back under cover with a Telekinesis spell while Red Vex blasted at Cain with a Bloodstar. The shot missed its mark, simply because nothing remained of Cain from the waist up. What was left toppled backwards into the slimy fountain with a splash.

"Don't heal him!" yelled Red Vex as Solo knelt next to Griswold. "Burn him! If those creatures burrow into his flesh, there'll be no saving him!"

Solo looked down at the hundreds of tiny white grubs wriggling across the Master Blacksmith's face and hands. Already, they were biting into his flesh and disappearing. That was enough evidence to take the Hell Spawn's warning as sincere. Solo cast an Inferno spell. Griswold screamed as the wave of liquid fire washed over him. The parasitic grubs sizzled and popped.

There seemed to be no trace of the creatures when the flames went out, so Solo quickly followed up with a Healing spell. Griswold gave a sigh of relief. "My thanks," he wheezed. Even though Solo's spell healed his burns and the tiny nicks and cuts left by the parasites, Griswold was still having difficulty. "I canna get a decent breath," he gasped, "an' I can't move."

Red Vex knelt close to Griswold and sniffed his breath. It smelled alien. "Your lungs are full of Zerg spores," she told him bluntly.

Solo readied another Healing spell, but Red Vex shook her head. "They're parasites. If you heal Griswold, you heal the spores too. You'll just make them hatch faster."

"How do we know ye're tellin' the truth, demon?" gasped Griswold.

"You don't," admitted Red Vex. "But we're deep in the heart of Zerg territory now, and the longer we can postpone your death, the better my chances of survival. Plus, if you die now, I won't have a chance to seduce you, force you to do my twisted bidding and ultimately devour your soul."

Griswold studied the Hell Spawn's unblemished face. Despite a hint of an ironic smirk at the corner of her lips, there seemed to be a genuine lack of malice in her expression. There might have even been a hint of concern. Griswold wondered at this, and accepted her explanation.

For her part, Solo was racking her brain for some solution to Griswold's predicament. As far as she could observe, Red Vex's assessment of Griswold's condition was accurate. A Healing spell would surely kill him. Not doing anything would also kill him. A skilled Healer might be able to cure the parasitic infestation. Solo herself knew of a number of herbs and fungi that could have at least slowed the parasites' progress. Unfortunately, the creep had long since consumed any plant life that might have been useful. "Where was Pepin's hut?" she asked. "Maybe we might find something there that we can use to..."

Dolt shushed her. A burrow opened near the fountain and three creatures that looked like giant spiny beetles emerged. One went to the fountain, gathered up what was left of Cain in its mandibles and went back underground. The other two wandered around the square aimlessly.

"I can take them," whispered Dolt shifting the weight of his new axe.

"They're just drones," whispered Red Vex. "They won't bother us, if we don't bother them. Probably."

"We should leave here as quickly and quietly as possible before something that will bother us shows up," said Solo. "Dolt, can you carry Griswold?"

"Sure, where are we going?"

"Red Vex's pasture," replied Solo. "With any luck, I might be able to find something to cure Gris."

Red Vex led the way out the back of Griswold's shop. Solo followed, holding the demon's leash. Dolt threw Griswold over his shoulder and brought up the rear. If the Zerg drones noticed them, they gave no indication, and went about their alien business.

The assault came almost immediately after they'd cleared the building. The Zerg had created the Venom Tails from Scavengers they'd found in the labyrinth. Not quite satisfied with the result, they continued to tweak their creation's genetic makeup and combined it with their own Zerglings. The end result was a wolf-sized monstrosity that was slashing claws in the front and poisonous tails in the back. They scuttled about on four legs and were encased in hard shells the color of bleached bones. Each had not one, but two scorpion-like tails.

There couldn't have been fewer than fifty of them.

Chapter 7: Afternoon; The Pasture

Solo, Dolt and Red Vex scrambled up onto a large rock and quickly formed a circular back-to-back-to-back formation with the paralyzed Griswold on the ground in the middle. They had each faced much deadlier opponents than the Venom Tail/Zergling hybrids. The problem was the sheer number of the beasts. Each time they killed one, the ground seemed to spit up two or three more.

Dolt remembered an off-color joke his father had once told him after a successful day of pillaging. 'Why was the ground all white after the Battle for the Temple of Baal? Because the Fallen Ones kept coming and coming and coming...' Swinging the Strange Axe, Dolt was able to take the creatures out in twos and threes with each stroke.

Solo had worked out a similar strategy using The Grandfather. Even though it handled like a short sword, she had to remember that it was six feet long. All its enchantments wouldn't do her any good if she stuck it in the ground, or in one of her allies, or somehow managed to stab herself in the back with it. She found that, by sweeping in a figure-S in front of her, she could also hit two or three at a stroke. With her left hand, she used the Dragon's Sword of Vampires to stab at anything that survived or avoided being hit by The Grandfather. In addition, with her teammates safely behind her back, Solo was free to cast Chain Lightning. She repeated the invocation over and over again, backing her swords up with sheets of electrical blue death. As an added bonus, the smell of ozone and burnt Zerg did an effective job of masking the cloud of pheromones that Red Vex emitted in battle. The downside was that the continuous spellcasting made it almost impossible to maintain a Mana Shield. She'd have to take her chances and rely on her swords to hit the enemy before they hit her.

Red Vex, momentarily free of the chain that controlled her collar, blasted away at the Zerg with barrages of Bloodstars. She didn't think there was any limit to the number of bursts she could generate, but she'd never needed to fire anything like this many. If she had had both wings, she would have fled at the beginning of the assault. She never actually flew, but she had been able to cover over sixty feet in a wing-assisted running leap.

For their part, the Venom Tail/Zergling hybrids were extraordinarily efficient, handing the bodies of their dead back to the troops behind them who, in turn, passed them back down into the burrows to be used as food. It didn't matter how many of them died; they would all serve the Brood in one way or another.

Despite their best efforts, Solo, Dolt and Red Vex had all been stung at least once. The poison did no harm to the Hell Spawn, and Dolt always fought better and harder when he was feeling some pain. Each sting made Solo feel a little woozy, however, and forced her to break her pattern of defense and attack to cast a Healing spell. Even with the Dragon's Sword of Vampires, she was running out of Mana.

Salvation came from above. A heavy blow from behind knocked the wind out of Solo, and she found herself squeezed in the crook of a massive arm, with her own arms pinned at her sides. She was almost nose-to-nose with Red Vex who was similarly pinned by the other arm. There was a rush of wind and a beating of wings like sails, and they were suddenly soaring over their Zerg attackers.

Whatever had them, it was massive, covered with hair, incredibly strong and smelled like a barnyard. Craning her neck, Solo saw a broad brown chest and the underside of an elongated snout. Solo couldn't identify the creature or guess its intentions, but it had separated them from the Zerg and was carrying them toward the pasture. Below them, the Zergling/Venom Tails scuttled along, trying to keep pace.

Dolt had felt a gust of wind when Solo and Red Vex were abducted, but assumed it had just been Red Vex's wing. A second later, massive arms gripped him around the waist and he found himself airborne as well. His captor's position made it impossible for Dolt to hit him with his axe. He might have been able to make the creature drop him with a head butt or a forcefully aimed elbow, but he didn't relish the idea of being dropped fifty feet into a hundred Zerg monsters. He'd decide whether to kill the creature or thank it once they were on the ground again.

Griswold had been having more and more trouble breathing as the Zerg spores filled his lungs. Even though he was blacking out, he was the only one who caught a glimpse of the flying creatures. Like Dolt, he too recalled a joke from his childhood. He didn't remember the exact joke, but he did recall the punchline: 'Boy, I'm glad that cows don't fly!' The creature picked him up and carried him away as he lost consciousness.

First Solo and Red Vex, then Dolt, and finally Griswold found themselves dumped unceremoniously in a grassy field a few short minutes later. The creatures dropped them hard enough to knock the wind out of them, but gently enough so as not to injure any of them. Dolt rolled and sprang to his feet first, his axe ready. The field was free of creep and seemed untouched by the Zerg. Something heavy moved behind Dolt, and the Barbarian whirled about to deal a devastating blow. He stopped in mid-swing. It was a cow. It mooed at him and wandered off.

Solo and Red Vex needed a moment to untangle themselves from one another. As they did, they saw the creatures that had carried them flying away over the fields. Based on the horns, massive builds and bat-like wings, both Bard and demoness identified the creatures as Balrogs. This was somewhat reassuring to Red Vex, and more than a little troubling to Solo.

"Ahem." The voice was like gravel pouring on a stone floor. Dolt, Solo and Red Vex looked around. Griswold, more unconscious than not, merely groaned.

The speaker appeared to be a stone Golem, but it was half-and-again as large as any that Solo had ever seen conjured. She had never heard of a Golem speaking. Also, it had a bull's head instead of the usual humanoid one. Solo vaguely remembered a very old story about flying men and a labyrinth. There was a monster in it that matched this description. Man-Bull? Tauro-Man? Minotaur! That was it. Not that any such creature had actually existed. What would be next? Elves?

"My master wishes to inform you that you are safe from the Zerg," said the stone Minotaur. "Rest and refresh yourselves. The Master will meet with you in two hours." A smaller Minotaur brought a tray with milk, water, fruit and cheese.

"Who is your master?" Dolt wanted to know.

"Griswold is infected with Zerg spores," said Solo at the same time. "Can you help him?"

"I will bring a remedy," said the big Minotaur. "In the meantime, you are free to wander the pasture. However, we cannot be responsible for your safety if you choose to leave and return to Zerg territory. Also, be careful not to step on any Brown Runes." With that, the Minotaur turned and lumbered off, the smaller one following him.

"Well, what do you make of that?" asked Solo. She wasn't really asking anyone in particular. She would have valued Griswold's opinion, but he was unconscious. Dolt's usual assessment of any situation involved hitting it with his axe, and she didn't care to put any more trust in anything Red Vex told her than she absolutely had to.

Red Vex volunteered some information anyway. "There is no scent of Zerg here and only vague traces of a human presence."

The ground where they had been deposited sloped downward toward the Talsande River. Clumps of creep floated downstream. Behind them was a rise that separated them from any view of the town.

"I'm going to the top of the hill to see if I can see where we are," said Dolt.

"Stay within earshot so we can back you up if you need it," advised Solo trying to see if she could make Griswold more comfortable. "Or if we need your axe."

Dolt nodded and turned to make his way up the bank. At the top of the hill, it was easy to see where the pasture ended and Zerg territory began. Hundreds of Zergling/Venom Tail hybrids were lined up along the edge of the field. They seemed unwilling to enter the pasture, however. After a moment, Dolt saw why.

The sheer volume of the crowd caused one of their number to be shoved into the field. Instantly, the Zerg creature was enveloped in and dissolved by a mass of brownish-green sludge. Dolt squinted. There were numerous small objects littered in the grass along the border. He had seen Runes of Fire and Runes of Lightning, but Brown Runes were a new one on him.

From somewhere within the Zerg mob, a Hydralisk fired a volley of quills at him. One of them struck and Dolt cursed. He ducked back behind the rise and drank a healing potion. There was no sense in being hurt if he wasn't going to fight, and what he had seen was more than even Dolt was willing to challenge single-handed.

When Dolt rejoined the others, Solo was helping Griswold drink a steaming bowl of white liquid while Red Vex leaned over them and watched with interest. "We're completely surrounded by Zerg," reported Dolt. "But they won't enter the pasture. There's some nasty rune stones scattered along the perimeter."

Solo nodded. "The Minotaur brought this for Griswold while you were gone."

Dolt knelt next to her. "A bowl of warm milk?"

Solo shrugged. "All he said was, 'It does a body good.'"

"Did you learn anything about the man-bull's master?" asked Dolt.

"Only that he'd busy receiving tribute from his loyal subjects," replied Solo, "And that he'd meet with us as soon as he can."

"He's making us wait to elevate his importance. He wants us to be impressed," said Red Vex. Centuries of dealing death by temptation had made Red Vex a keen student of human psychology. "He'll be favorable toward us if we act accordingly."

Dolt started to respond, but was interrupted when Griswold came fully awake, sneezing and coughing. The first sneeze jerked him back as if he'd been struck, and the subsequent ones just seemed to get louder and more forceful. Suddenly, he rolled away from Solo and vomited. He almost had a moment to catch his breath before the next sneezing fit started as his body attempted to rid itself of Zerg parasites.

Griswold's torture lasted several long minutes. Finally, he rolled over on his side in the grass. Tears mixed with blood streamed from his eyes and blood and mucous oozed from both nostrils turning his beard and mustache into a swampy mess. "I feel like hell," he whispered hoarsely.

"You're lucky to be feeling like anything," said Red Vex.

Dolt offered Griswold some water, which he accepted gratefully. He drank it and promptly threw up again. Another painful sneezing fit followed.

"Get some rest," Solo advised him. "We've got some time before we meet our mysterious benefactor."

"Who?" managed Griswold.

Solo quickly filled him in. "The question is," she finished, "what do we do now? One option is to read Adria's H. Portal scroll and leave. With Griswold injured, it might be prudent."

"I'll be fine," wheezed Griswold.

"I doubt it," said Red Vex. "At least, not right away. Your body temperature's been increasing steadily since you drank the Minotaur's remedy. A high fever may finish off the remaining parasites in your body, but you won't be able to sit up by yourself in an hour."

"We have not accomplished our mission," Dolt pointed out. "We haven't learned anything about the Zerg except that they're nasty and there's a lot of them. And we knew that already."

Solo nodded. "To tell the truth, that's my feeling too. I'd like to have some useful intelligence to show for our efforts. At the very least, we ought to find out who has managed to keep this field Zerg-free and how."

"So we may as well make ourselves comfortable," said Dolt. He sat down and began cleaning and sharpening his axe.

Solo spent another minute making sure Griswold was as comfortable as possible and began managing her own belongings. Her swords needed maintenance as well. She had two vials of Blacksmith's Oil in her pack. The question was whether to use them on the swords now, or wait until they suffered significant battle damage. Next, she checked her belt. She was down to her last three Mana potions. "This is not too good," she said aloud, "Even with the Sword of Vampires, I'm still draining my ball far too fast."

Dolt looked up. "Where does that expression come from? 'Drain your ball?' I've heard spellcasters use it all my life," he said.

"Nobody knows for sure," said Solo. "The most popular legend says that, to keep from being driven mad by an all-Mana potion diet, the ancient Horadrim wizards used to cut off one of their testicles. So, if he used up all his Mana, he was said to have 'drained his ball.'"

Dolt shook his head. "Sorcerers," he snorted.

"I'm not sure if I believe that story, myself," continued Solo. "One of the first exercises any spellcaster learns as an apprentice, or at university, is how to visualize Mana recharging. Almost everyone is taught to picture a sphere filling with blue energy. I still do it every time I drink a Mana potion. That's where I always thought the saying came from." As she was speaking, she got up and casually drifted closer to Red Vex, the chain to the Collar of Submission cupped in her hands behind her back. Swiftly, she reached up to attach it, but this time Red Vex was ready for her.

"Can we dispense with this?" asked the succubus gripping Solo's wrist in an iron grip. "It really doesn't work anyway." She released Solo's wrist and took a step away from her. Dolt watched carefully, ready to slay Red Vex at the slightest sign of real treachery. "You surprised me with it once when I was just coming off a Stone Curse. Since then, I've been playing a long to get me here." With that, Red Vex reached up and easily unfastened the collar and wristbands. She tossed them on the ground at Solo's feet. "Collar of Submission. What a joke," said Red Vex. "Adria may think she's a big, bad dominatrix prancing around in her open-nipple leather teddy and spiked heels, but next to me she's a virgin on a unicorn. Hearing her talk about her Collar of Submission would be like Griswold listening to someone boasting about what a fine weapon his pointed stick was."

Solo bent down to pick up the items in question. "All right then. What do you want and why should we trust you?"

"All I'm interested in is finding out what happened to Black Jade. Help me do that, and I'll help your cause. As long as you're interested in learning about the Zerg and not getting killed doing it, our agendas are parallel," said Red Vex.

"And once we find your Black Jade?" asked Dolt.

"Once we find her, if we find her, we'll probably still be surrounded by Zerg," said Red Vex. "Any act against you, Solo and Griswold would be both stupid and suicidal, and I'm neither. Even if we all get somewhere safe, I'd still be inclined to leave you in peace. I'd be stupid to survive the Zerg only to get killed for viciously turning on my own allies." She studied Dolt's face carefully. "As long as we're in the same situation, you can trust me exactly as far as I can trust you."

Dolt met Red Vex's gaze without blinking. "Then we had all better watch our backs." He sat down and continued sharpening his axe.

Red Vex nodded and perched on a tree stump where she could watch over Griswold who was already drifting off into a feverish sleep.

Solo sat down and felt something hard under her. It was Cecilia's stuffed bear, Theo. She examined the threadbare little toy and found a slit along Theo's spine, held shut by a row of burrs sewn into the fabric. That was an interesting idea, mused Solo.

She pried the slit open causing a loud tearing sound. Inside was a secret pouch containing a couple of gold coins, a pretty pebble and an amulet. The amulet had been inscribed with a set of runes that looked promising to Solo. There was one way to be certain. She held the amulet up by its chain and tapped it with a fingernail. It rang with a soft musical tone. She sang a soft note herself and the ringing of the amulet changed to match her before it faded out. Harmony. Solo slipped the braided chain around her neck. An Amulet of Harmony provided the wearer with increased mental focus and faster reflexes.

It was a good thing she'd thought to pick up the toy bear. Solo wondered for a moment if it was worth the effort of expending an "I told you so" on Red Vex, and then decided it wasn't.

Solo studied Red Vex for a few more moments. There was more to the demon than met the eye. That didn't make her any less dangerous, but it did make her more interesting. Maybe so interesting that her story might fetch a good price. Solo checked her swords and belt once more, and then sat and retrieved a leather-bound book from her backpack. She flipped through the pages until she came to the first blank one, pulled a charcoal stick from her pocket, and began writing.

Like all Bards, Solo was a professional storyteller. Some, like Bard Rhapsody, worked under contract for Scribes Guilds or libraries. Others were little more than long distance messengers. The majority, however, were freelancers, like Solo. She earned her living telling the stories of her adventures and selling the knowledge she gained. Her clients might be Scribes Guilds, libraries, royal courts, or even isolated farm families. In her twenty-nine years, she had wandered from one end of the continent to the other.

Solo wrote quickly, using mnemonic devices to recall the exact details of the day. The better her recall, the better her tale. And the better her tale, the higher price it would fetch. Of course, the fact that she currently had an exclusive story meant that she could write poorly and still be able to name her price at any Scribes Guild in the land. Nonetheless, Solo took pride in her profession and made sure that her descriptions of the Zerg and Tristram were flawless.

By the time Solo finished writing, Dolt had dozed off leaning on his axe. Red Vex crouched on her tree stump, watching over the sleeping Griswold. She reminded Solo of a cat watching a wounded fledgling. Solo stood and stretched. Her arms and shoulders ached from the battle. She had a little more of the food that the Minotaur had brought and then checked on Griswold.

"His fever peaked a few minutes ago," said Red Vex. "He's starting to cool down already."

"Whatever the Minotaur gave him, it sure works fast," said Solo. "What happened to your cloak?"

Red Vex had discarded the cloak Solo had given her and was basking in all her bare-breasted glory. "Well, since we've established that you can't actually make me do

anything I don't want to do, I decided to get rid of it. It slows me down," she said. "I'm keeping the boots, though."

Solo shrugged. "Whatever."

The big Minotaur returned, accompanied by four smaller ones carrying trumpets. A number of cattle wandered up with them. The small Minotaurs blew a loud fanfare, waking Dolt and Griswold. "Ladies and gentlemen," announced the big Minotaur, "All rise for the Divine Bovine." He waited for everyone to stand, and everyone except Griswold did. The Minotaur found this acceptable and nodded his huge head.

There was a clap of thunder and a dazzling flash of light. A great horned figure appeared in their midst. "I AM COWLORD!" he said in a booming voice. He stood just under seven feet tall and was clad in gleaming chrome armor. A scarlet cape flapped in an unfelt wind, and he held a polished metal staff topped with a stylized cow skull. His helmet had been forged in the shape of a bull's head, complete with long curved horns. An eerie green light emanated from the eye slits.

The gathered cattle seemed strangely undisturbed by the light and noise.

Red Vex smelled mortal meat inside the armor, but only barely. The amount of raw magical energy coursing through the form was comparable to, or may have even exceeded, her Infernal masters. She fought back a stab of fear and focused on the man-scent. If he was mortal, he had mortal weaknesses. That made him potentially controllable.

Dolt's nose was nowhere near as keen as Red Vex's supernatural senses, but he knew a sorcerer when he smelled one. The armored figure reeked of magic. He also suspected that the newcomer must have great physical strength to wear such a massive suit of armor. Assuming the armor wasn't just for show, or enchanted in some way to make it wearable for a weakling sorcerer, he might have physical prowess to match his armored form. He noted that, as good as CowLord's armor probably was, the helmet would not allow him any peripheral vision. Dolt edged to one side, just in case.

Solo felt cowed by the sudden dramatic appearance of the armored stranger. That thought was all it took to exclude her from any participation in the subsequent conversation. She had to bite her lip until it bled to stifle a giggling fit of, well, bovine proportions.

Griswold squinted up at the CowLord. His head was plugged up and he was seeing through a fever haze. Furthermore, the CowLord's voice sounded like it was coming out of a cave. Still, there was something vaguely familiar. "Conjurer Ichabod? Is that you?" he managed.

The armored bull's head fixed a piercing green stare on Griswold. "SO! YOU HAVE DEDUCED MY SECRET IDENTITY!" boomed CowLord, "WELL, HEAR ME, GRISWOLD! I AM NO LONGER THE CONJURER YOU KNEW! I AM THE MASTER OF THE PASTURE! I AM POWER INCARNATE! NOW AND FOREVER, I AM COWLORD!" A dramatic thunderclap from out of nowhere punctuated this statement. "I HAVE ASCENDED TO A HIGHER PLANE!"

Solo imagined CowLord grazing on a higher plain and nearly lost it again.

CowLord paused and raised his visor. His face was that of a thin middle-aged man whose life-long pursuit of the secrets of magic and the universe had led to a routine avoidance of

direct sunlight. Despite his harrowing experiences with the Battle Net, Conjuror Ichabod was, physically, none the worse for wear. "Of course the reason for moving to a higher plane," he continued, "is that the frequent flier miles really kick ass!"

No one knew what to say. Dolt suddenly realized that he had been waiting for Solo to say something. She always had something to say or some question to ask. Women were always yacking on and on, and Scribes were even worse. A woman Scribe had immediately struck Dolt as a particularly bad idea. Still, she had proved her worthiness on several fronts. He looked over at her. She was in tears and refused to look directly at the CowLord. She was obviously trembling with hysterical female terror. Dolt started to say something to her, but Solo just shook her head and turned away, shaking convulsively. Women!

Dolt turned to Griswold. "Do you know this man?"

"Aye," said Griswold. "His home an' workshop were destroyed when the first Zerg hive appeared." He tried to sit up, got dizzy, and leaned back again. "What happened t'you, Ichabod? The last I saw of you, y'were standing out in this very field in a cow costume. Y'wouldn't say a thing to anyone except 'moo,' and when we tried to bring you inside, y'became violent."

Conjuror Ichabod nodded. "I needed a little time to assimilate the knowledge I gained from the Battle Net," he explained. "But I'm feeling muuuch better now." He rolled his eyes wildly. "The question is, what brings the unlikely four of you here to the Field of Screams?"

"Your creatures carried us here," Dolt reminded him.

"Oh, yes. My bullrogs. But I meant why are you in Tristram? It's not safe here," said Ichabod.

Solo regained her self-control. She didn't know exactly what it was that struck her so funny, other than the fact that here was a man who had dressed up as a cow and proclaimed himself Lord of the Cows. Whether he called himself CowLord, or PigLord, or the Amazing Irving, his power was undeniable. There was just something about cows that was inexplicably silly. "Actually," responded Solo wiping her eyes, "it seems safe enough here. Why is that?"

Conjuror Ichabod looked out toward the edge of the pasture. Most of the Zerg creatures that had been massed along the border had returned to their burrows. A few drones and Zerglings circled about, but even they seemed to have lost interest in their escaped prey. "The Zerg know that they'll get turned into Swiss cheese if they try to violate my domain (www.cowlord.com)," said Ichabod winking broadly at a joke no one present could have possibly gotten, "Not that they don't test the limits every so often."

Almost as if on cue, a massive creature detached itself from the distant cathedral spire and flew toward the pasture. At the same time, four of the wasp-fliers emerged from the ground beyond the pasture's edge and waited, hovering. The large creature was easily the size of a small ship and looked for all the world like a giant crab. It flew without the support of wings, but achieved respectable speed. It covered the distance between the cathedral and the pasture in seconds.

For the first time, the cattle showed signs of fear and beat a hasty retreat to other parts of the pasture. The Minotaurs stood their ground, awaiting orders from their master.

"Excuse me a moment," said Conjurer Ichabod. He lowered his visor and flew into the air.

Even as CowLord took to the skies, the Zerg monster vomited up a blast of acid that rained down on the pasture. Dolt, Solo and Red Vex scrambled for cover as the green grass turned to scorched earth. Griswold, unable to move quickly, caught the worst of it. Only covering himself with his shield at the last second saved his life. The acid dissolved the waiting Minotaurs completely.

"I'm gettin' too old fer this," realized Griswold as Solo came to him with a Healing spell. "An' at this rate, I'm not likely t'get much older!"

"Keep your chin up, Gris," said Solo. Her spell quickly regenerated the tissues destroyed by the attack, and Griswold rested easier.

Above them, CowLord flew to meet the Zerg Guardian. Being airborne put him above the reach of the creature's acid attack. As deadly as Guardians were to ground forces, their only defense against flying attackers was their tough shells. That is, until the Zerg combined their DNA with that of the Familiars they found in the labyrinth. The Guardian unleashed a massive electrical discharge. While this new form of attack would make a very nasty surprise for the electrical systems of the next Terran Wraith pilot who flew too close, CowLord merely shrugged it off.

"FOOLISH ALIEN!" he bellowed, "LEARN NOW THE FOLLY OF ALL WHO WOULD DARE CHALLENGE THE MIGHT OF COWLORD!" At that, the Guardian's color changed from mottled gray-and-black to yellow. It wobbled in the air once and then crashed to the ground with a splat. Huge soft chunks of it splattered across the pasture.

CowLord addressed the waiting wasp-fliers. "SCURRY BACK TO YOUR HIVE WITH THIS LESSON: NONE MAY CONTEST THE POWER OF COWLORD!"

The fliers turned and buzzed back to the cathedral.

As CowLord landed, he restored his fallen Minotaurs with a glance. He raised his visor.

Solo picked up a piece of the fallen Guardian, not quite believing her eyes or her nose. "Cheese Curse?" she asked.

Conjurer Ichabod looked disappointed. "Gouda. I don't know if I'm ever going to get Swiss," he admitted.

Solo took a small bite of the cheese. It wasn't bad.

"Listen," suggested Ichabod. "It's awfully buggy out today. Why don't we all go inside where we can relax?"

"Inside?" asked Dolt. There were no structures of any sort in the pasture.

"Hay, just because I'm outstanding in my field doesn't mean I don't have a place to hang my horns," said Ichabod. He slammed the tip of his staff into the ground.

Nothing happened.

Ichabod looked annoyed. "All right, I'll recite the incantation:

*Hai! Senduh puh tipi, ay?
Eyem nottuhp ee kai!"*

The ground shimmered and a black-and-white Holstein-patterned Horadrim Portal opened. "Boys," Ichabod ordered the Minotaurs, "Gather up the cheese, find some crackers and hang a few No-Pest Strips. And let me know if any more bugs need swatting. Everyone else, follow me!" With that, he strode through the portal. A few cows followed him.

Red Vex shrugged and followed him too. Dolt and Solo helped Griswold up. "Are you sure your friend is..." Dolt racked his brain for a word and couldn't manage it. "...all right?" He tapped the side of his head for emphasis.

Griswold shook his head. "No," he replied.

They followed him through the portal.

Chapter 8: Evening; The Court of the CowLord

On the other side of the portal was the biggest cavern Solo had ever seen. A luminescent fungus or mineral covered the ceiling and provided light equivalent to that of a cloudy afternoon. That light shined down on rolling green pastures surrounding a crystal blue pond. Cattle of all breeds and types grazed on the hillsides. The portal opened onto a gravel path that led down to a small stone cottage by the edge of the pond. A dozen Minotaurs of all sizes lined the path. One of the giant winged bullrogs stood at the end of the line.

"Ladies and gentlemen, cows and bulls, golems and demons," announced the bullrog, "Let's all give it up for the Divine Bovine and Master of the Pasture, and one Bad Muthah Udder: The CowLord!"

"Moo! Moo! Moo!" cheered the Minotaurs waving their fists in the air. Throughout the cavern, cattle moored their greetings to their master.

"Gods, I love that," confided Ichabod.

Solo was in awe. "It's like... like some sort of Secret Cow Level!" she breathed. She realized Dolt, Griswold and Red Vex were all staring at her. "What?" Solo made a mental note to come up with some other name for the cavern when she chronicled the adventure.

"I'm so glad you like it," said Ichabod walking past the Minotaurs. He nodded at some, shook hands with others. Two even held their beefy hands up for high fives. Several cows were also nearby, chewing their cud. Those within reach received affectionate pats on the nose. "The pond is a Purifying Spring. All the free Mana you can drink."

Dolt whispered into Griswold's ear: "The man's been down here alone with unlimited blue potions and a bunch of cows. There's a story that doesn't need telling."

Griswold winced. "Please, dinnae make me laugh. It hurts."

A small Minotaur trotted ahead and opened the gate in the low stone wall surrounding Conjuror Ichabod's cottage. "Home sweet home," said Ichabod inviting the others to follow him. "Fetch some refreshments for our guests, Jeeves."

The little Minotaur who had opened the gate closed it and went into the cottage.

"Make yourselves comfortable," said Ichabod. There were chairs and benches around the courtyard. "Gris, why don't you take the hammock over in the corner and get some more rest."

Griswold accepted Ichabod's invitation and lay down in the hammock strung between a small fruit tree and the courtyard wall. Dolt found himself a seat that allowed him to have his back to the cottage wall. Red Vex sat on the wall circling the cottage. The CowLord armor was not made for sitting, so Ichabod remained standing. Besides, he didn't want to wrinkle his cape. Solo pulled up a chair and sat near him.

"You were explaining why the Zerg have left you alone," prompted Solo. "Granted, you handled the giant crab..."

"It was a Guardian-Familiar hybrid," supplied Ichabod knowing of the Bard's desire for accuracy and details.

"But it was just one creature. From what I've seen the Zerg tend to attack in swarms," said Solo.

"Two reasons," said Ichabod. "The first is that I can tap into the Purifying Spring any time I like, wherever I am." He lowered his visor. "I AM ALL-POWERFUL!" He raised his visor again. "That means my ball never drains. But the main reason they leave me alone is because I know what they're afraid of."

"And what would that be?" prompted Solo. This could be the information they had come looking for.

"Are you kidding? I'm afraid of it too!"

Dolt stood up, his axe in hand. "Tell us, sorcerer."

Ichabod looked at the Barbarian warrior, started to lower his visor, and then stopped. "Nope, can't do it. There are some things mortals weren't meant to know."

Dolt scowled and advanced a step.

Ichabod cupped a hand to his ear. "Oops! I think I hear some of my loyal subjects calling." He lowered his visor. "COWLORD FEARS NOTHING! I MUST FLY!" And he did, through a Horadrim Portal that opened thirty feet above the cottage.

"Oh, that was good, Dolt," snapped Solo as the portal winked shut. "I realize interviewing skills probably aren't in Chapter One of the Barbarian Training Guide, but that was..."

"You have to show these sorcerers who's boss," interrupted Dolt firmly.

"If you'd showed him any more, we'd be spreading you on crackers right now!" returned Solo.

Griswold decided to intervene before blood was shed. "Did y'notice how he changed whenever he had his visor up or down?" asked Griswold. "Almost like he was two different people."

"Do you think he's possessed?" asked Dolt.

"Aye," replied Griswold. "When the visor's up, he's pretty much the Conjurer Ichabod I knew before the troubles. Maybe a few potions short of a full belt, but mostly th' same old Ichabod. When the visor's down, though, he calls himself..."

"CowLord," finished Solo. "And shouts a lot. I'd noticed."

"Ye're the demon," Griswold addressed Red Vex, "D'you know of any creature like CowLord who might try t'possess Conjurer Ichabod?"

"It's been my experience," said Solo, "that in four out of five cases of demonic possession, the demons are of the victim's own making."

"Nine out of ten," corrected Red Vex. "There is no scent of demon anywhere about our host. He is as human as any of you."

"Well, whatever he is, or whoever he is," said Griswold, "he may know what it takes t'defeat the Zerg."

"But the coward's afraid of it himself," snorted Dolt.

"No," said Solo thoughtfully, "Ichabod's afraid of it. CowLord fears nothing."

Before Solo could pursue the train of thought any further, Jeeves, the small Minotaur came out of the cottage carrying a huge tray of food. He set it on a table in the middle of the courtyard, bowed and went back into the house. Griswold's appetite had come roaring back and he climbed out of the hammock to help himself. Whatever magic CowLord had used on him to speed his recovery, it was certainly effective. Watching Griswold eat made Solo and Dolt hungry and they quickly joined him.

Chapter 9: The Tale of Red Vex

Food was optional for Red Vex. When she wasn't feeding on the immortal souls of her victims, she preferred her food struggling and screaming. Still, the more she acted like a human being, the less her allies would think of her as a demon. That suited her purposes very well, so she joined them. It had been centuries since the last time she had eaten fruit, she mused, trying a strawberry.

She took a moment to consider her allies' perceptions of her. Dolt would slay her at the earliest opportunity. Griswold was much of the same opinion, but was starting to have some ambivalent feelings. Solo, a professional observer, seemed content to wait and see what reaction Red Vex's behavior merited. She knew that the truth could be as powerful as any lie, if told at the right time. She wondered what would happen if she painted some shades of gray into their vision of a black-hearted demon.

"Y'seem amused," Griswold observed watching Red Vex pondering a slice of star melon.

"I think this used to be my favorite," she said, "when I was mortal." She looked at Griswold. "You look surprised. I didn't always have wings and horns." She cupped her breasts. "I think these were smaller too. Anyway, I was as human as any of you."

"But you turned to evil," said Dolt.

Solo had been observing Red Vex intently in order to remember every nuance of the story she was about to tell. So, even though it lasted a mere fraction of a second, she saw the expression of rage and pain that crossed Red Vex's face at Dolt's blunt accusation. Red Vex smiled at Dolt. "Dolt, you are an ignoramus."

Dolt just grunted and nodded, not knowing the meaning of 'ignoramus,' and not really caring.

"What do you know of the Prime Evils?" asked Red Vex.

"There are three of them," answered Griswold recalling decades-ago Sunday school lessons. "Baal, Diablo and Mephisto." He crossed himself.

"Actually, there were, and are, more," said Red Vex (Solo made a mental note to do some research if she ever got to a library.), "But the three you mentioned are the Lord of Destruction, the Lord of Terror, and the Lord of Hatred. They've been the most active in a conflict that the Horadrim call the Sin War. Of the three of them, Mephisto is by far the worst, and I'm not saying that just because I'm a creature of Mephisto either. Figure it this way: Destruction happens every day. Things get destroyed; it's a part of the nature of the universe. And Terror; every creature that lives knows fear, otherwise, it doesn't live long. But Hatred is the deadliest, most corrupting force that will ever touch your life. Hatred is greedy. It consumes everything and, in doing so, makes more Hatred. It doesn't matter whether you hate a deed or a person or an institution or a country. Mephisto thrives on it all."

Red Vex took a moment to study Griswold's face before continuing. Satisfied with what she saw, she said, "When a woman is killed in hatred - and far too many are - and if her heart, in turn, is filled with hate, sometimes it attracts the attention of the Lord of Hatred."

The Hell Spawn paused thoughtfully. There were a number of ways to go from here. Starting out with Mephisto probably wasn't the best one. Even she didn't like to think about the Lord of Hatred when she could avoid it. Being summoned into Diablo's service had almost been a relief. "I guess I should start out by telling you that Black Jade isn't really my sister," said Red Vex. "Our relationship has always been much more complex than that."

She turned the remainder of the star melon over in her hands. "I remember summertime, when the star melon flowers were in bloom," she said. "There are a lot of things that I don't remember anymore, but I do remember those melon fields in bloom. It must have been three or four centuries ago now.

"When I was mortal," continued Red Vex, "My father ruled a small kingdom and the surrounding countryside. The name of the kingdom has long since been forgotten and the farmlands have turned to forest, but at the time, it was as nice a life as a mortal could ask for. Then, one year, a pestilence swept across the land. Hundreds died before it ran its course and, once all the bodies were burned, I was suddenly lord of the manor. I was, I think, sixteen years old.

"I had fully expected to be married off as a matter of political convenience," said Red Vex. "I wasn't prepared to rule but, as the only surviving member of my family, I had no choice. I would have been completely lost if it hadn't been for Black Jade. She was the daughter of the largest landholder under my father. Like me, she had lost her family to the plague and found herself in charge. She came to beg the aid of the king on behalf of the farmers who worked her land but found a girl her own age with absolutely no clue what to do.

"Black Jade was one of those people who had to have a plan for every eventuality," explained Red Vex. "On top of that, her ideas were never anything less than brilliant. I had the resources of the manor and a knack for getting people to do what I wanted them to. Together, we were a magnificent team.

"Within a month, we had salvaged enough of the harvest to get everyone through the winter." Red Vex stood and began pacing around the table as she spoke. "It was a mild winter. That was both good and bad. Good because it gave people still weak from the plague a chance to recover, but bad because it meant that the vermin who carried it would survive too. We put the people to work on two tasks over the winter: Exterminating the plague carriers and improving sanitary conditions in the town.

"By spring, our kingdom was thriving while our neighbors were still recovering," said Red Vex. "By summer, we were anticipating a record harvest even though we'd lost a quarter of our population to the plague."

Red Vex paused and looked across the cavern at the cattle grazing on the hillsides. "I've forgotten many things over the course of my long existence: My name, Black Jade's name, the name of our kingdom, the faces of my parents. But I'll never forget the first night of summer that year. The star melon fields were in full bloom and a warm breeze carried their fragrance into the manor. That was the night Black Jade came to my chambers.

"Actually, she was in my bedchambers on a pretty regular basis," explained Red Vex. "She did her best thinking at night, so she'd always be showing up at my bedroom door with an idea for a new project or plans for an improved irrigation system or something. That night though, the only plans she had were for me. From that night on, she had to do more of her planning during the daytime.

"Our subjects were mostly farmers and craftspeople. They were pragmatists who didn't complain about taking orders from a pair of teenaged girls as long as we produced results. At least, that's what we thought. Maybe if we'd known better, we would have kept a lower profile or been more patient in pushing through our reforms. But we were young. We saw all the possibilities and none of the dangers. We thought we were making the kingdom a better place for everyone by giving the farmers more rights in their dealings with landholders, or by permitting girls to seek apprenticeships in any field they chose."

Red Vex gave a weary sigh, perhaps for her long-lost innocence. "I think the last straw was when I decreed that any woman could be a landholder, and that if she married or remarried, the land would remain in her name, not become her husband's property. Since the plague, about half of our active landholders were women anyway. Black Jade and I figured we might as well make it official. We didn't think anyone would really care. That was probably the worst error in judgment since Izual said, 'I think we can take 'em.'

"At that point, we had been running the kingdom for three, nearly four years. We thought all was well and that we were loved and respected by the people. And maybe we were, but the Church and the old landholders had another opinion. The Sunday after I made my decree about women owning property, the Church denounced it as against God and Nature. They claimed that it would force mothers away from their children and promote witchcraft.

"We were naïve enough to be amazed at how quickly things spun out of control," said Red Vex. "We were accused of being soft on witchcraft and, by the end, accused of practicing it ourselves. The fact that Black Jade and I had been too innocent to make a secret of our love for each other didn't help matters either. By autumn people were being beaten or raped for supporting us. Girls who had started apprenticeships were driven back to their homes only to be rejected. Even the powerful landholders who lent us their support started having mysterious fires and accidents. The ones who suffered the most were those men who shared their love with other men and women who shared their love with other women. A mere allegation was enough to result in a beaten body turning up in a ditch somewhere."

"We had a small, loyal army and tried to maintain law and order," said Red Vex, "But many of our soldiers were blackmailed into leaving our service for the sake of their families. Some of them just disappeared. We never learned whether they fled, defected or were taken and killed.

"It was on the last night of autumn that a mob led by Church officials dragged us out of bed to the temple. They carried us to the basement, stripped us and tied us to racks, making sure we could see each other. Everyone else in the room wore hoods to hide their faces. The high priest read the charges against us: Witchcraft, Crimes Against the Natural Order, Crimes Against God. He announced to his congregation that it was their duty to

cleanse our souls. But first, they were going to cure us of our unnatural love for one another."

Red Vex's voice had lost all tone. It was like listening to an echo, thought Solo. What Red Vex went on to describe was inhuman, even by demonic standards.

"By the end of the second day," continued Red Vex, "I was begging them to do whatever they wanted to Black Jade if they'd only let me go. Black Jade didn't hear. She was too busy offering them my life if they'd only stop hurting her.

"When the high priest took his final turn at me at the end of the third day, he whispered in my ear to renounce my ways and give my soul to his Lord. I was very weak. I hadn't had any food or water, and I was bleeding pretty badly inside. Plus, someone had bitten off the tip of my tongue somewhere along the line. I had just enough strength to respond: I told him that if it took all eternity, I'd find some way, do anything it took, to make him and all his brethren pay for what they'd done.

"I don't know if he heard what he wanted to hear, or I'd said what he wanted me to say. He took off his hood and blessed me. Then he actually smiled at me. Then he cut my throat. Across the room another priest was doing the same to Black Jade."

Red Vex paused and studied her audience. Solo was pale and tears streamed down her face. Griswold looked outraged and was trembling. Dolt merely sat motionless, looking grim.

"What they did to us," said Red Vex, "is not the sort of thing that you do to another human being unless your heart is filled with hate. And your heart doesn't get that full of hate unless, whether you know it or not, whether you admit it or not, you've given your soul to the Lord of Hatred. I think they all knew. No one there could have been so deluded as to think that their actions were to save our souls or to protect their community or family values.

"We awoke in Hell, in the Court of Mephisto. There were hundreds of other girls and women with us, and we watched as Mephisto spoke privately with each one. At the end of each interview, the women would either evaporate in flashes of white light, or be led through a great red door at the end of the chamber.

"When our turn came to speak with Mephisto, we both told the Lord of Hatred of our hatred of the men who tortured and killed us. He offered us a chance to act on that hatred and we took it. A pair of Magma Lords led us through the red door and into an initiation that made what we'd just been through look like a lover's caress. It was meant to rid us of every last trace of human compassion. When it was finally over, new demonic bodies were created to house our souls and we were sent back to the world of mortals as Hell Spawn."

"Did you find the men who killed you and make them pay?" asked Dolt.

"Each and every one of them," replied Red Vex.

"Then perhaps there is justice in Hell after all," said Griswold.

Red Vex frowned at him. "Haven't you been listening? This wasn't about justice. It wasn't even about revenge. It was about hatred. We wanted to find the men who tortured and

killed us and make them suffer as much as possible, and by any means necessary. I'll give you an example: We abducted the high priest who killed Black Jade. We tied him up and drove him into Lust Frenzy for three solid days and nights. Then we turned him loose in a nearby convent. When the townsfolk caught him in the act, they cut him to pieces. Slowly."

"It still sounds like a fitting end," commented Dolt.

"Perhaps, but what of the nuns in the convent? They suffered greatly at his hands before he was stopped," said Red Vex. "That's the difference between vengeance and hatred. Hatred simply doesn't care. If making one of our tormentors suffer required killing his family, then that's what we did. We rarely killed anyone with our own hands though. We used Lust Frenzy and guile to incite acts of betrayal and brutality. Those acts bred hatred of their own. Within a year, the crops and town had burned to the ground, and what was left of the kingdom was at war with three neighboring kingdoms. There's nothing like a good war to create hatred. Mephisto was pleased. The number of innocents who suffered as a result of our actions is beyond counting and, even centuries later, that number continues to climb as parents pass their hatred on to their children."

Solo had been listening without commenting. Somehow, she had to make sure she survived to retell the Hell Spawn's tale. Whether it was true or not, its lessons were too valuable to be lost. She actually considered using Adria's Horadrim Portal right then, but one thing bothered her. Why was Red Vex telling them this? "Your story has the air of a confession," she said. "Do you seek redemption?"

Red Vex shook her head. "Everything I do is for Hatred."

"What of your desire to find Black Jade? Your love for her has transcended death and damnation."

"You still don't get it," said Red Vex. "Black Jade and I are bound to one another for all eternity. She is a vital part of me and I am a vital part of her. I cannot bear to be away from her. I think I would die without her."

"But ye just said everything you do is fer hatred," said Griswold.

"It is," said Red Vex, "and I hate Black Jade. My hatred of her gives my existence meaning. I don't know what I'd do if someone else succeeded in killing her. I know she feels the same way about me. Mephisto turns all love into hatred."

"Mephisto sounds like a demon in desperate need of slaying," said Dolt thumbing the blade of his axe and drawing blood. He cursed and stuck the bleeding digit in his mouth.

Red Vex smiled. "Let me know when you're ready to go on that quest. I'll help. I hate Mephisto too. All of Mephisto's servants hate him, and he hates us. He expects nothing less. Hate," she shrugged, "is a funny emotion."

"Funny like a gouged out eye," muttered Griswold. "Ye've been with Black Jade all this time and yet ye've never succeeded in killing one another."

"The Lord of Hatred is not without a sense of humor," said Red Vex. "He made Black Jade and me vulnerable to each other's Lust Frenzy pheromones. Whenever we fight, they kick in and we wind up..." She paused, searching for the correct term. 'Making love'

would have been exactly the wrong description. 'Having sex' still generally described an activity involving people who were fond of one another on some level. Even 'fucking each other's brains out' indicated something that could be thought of as fun. She gave up. "...and we wind up not fighting. Usually for hours, sometimes for days. Afterwards, when we're both spent and exhausted, we just hate each other all the more.

"Like I said, hate is a funny thing," concluded the Hell Spawn.

There was nothing left to say. No one seemed interested in eating anymore.

Chapter 10: Night; The Court of the CowLord

"Put that girl in the Witches Protection Program!" Conjuror Ichabod had returned. He had listened to the end of Red Vex's story before landing next to the table. "How are you, Gris? Much recovered?" asked Ichabod stuffing his face with fruit.

"Aye," nodded Griswold.

"And how are your loyal subjects?" asked Dolt pointedly.

"Adoring as ever," said Ichabod. "You know, history shows that the stupider the subjects, the more successful the ruler. I think this Lord of the Cows thing really has legs."

"So," asked Solo, "Did you go back up to the pasture?"

"Yeah, had to put down another Zerg incursion. They just don't seem to get it," said Ichabod.

Red Vex moved closer to him. "Surely a man of your unmatched power should be able to sweep the land clean of the aliens," she purred.

The visor came down. "AWAY VILE TEMPTRESS," boomed CowLord, "YOU SHALL NOT TAINT THE PURITY OF ESSENCE OF COWLORD!"

Red Vex backed off. She had been hoping to coax a little more information out of the conjurer. Obviously, he required a more subtle approach.

"Red Vex raised a good point," said Solo, "Can you defeat the Zerg? Are you the one thing that the Zerg fear?"

CowLord hesitated. He started to raise his visor and then lowered it again. He opened a Horadrim Portal, then closed it again. Finally, he raised his visor. "No one man is a match for the might of the swarm," said Ichabod. "They've already overrun all of Khanduras and are headed toward the Westmarch border."

The news sank in. Only Red Vex seemed to brighten. She started to say something, but Dolt spoke first.

"There are several keeps between here and the border, many with magical and military defenses," said Dolt.

"Were," corrected Ichabod. "They didn't stand a chance."

"If you can't stop them, you've got to tell us what can," insisted Solo.

"Look, I really can't talk about it now. I'm still having issues," said Ichabod. "But I'll give you a hint: It rhymes with... ahhhh... schmoojum."

"Ichabod," pleaded Griswold, "If ye've got..."

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no!"

Dolt was fed up. He did not like people. He liked sorcerers even less. He decided he liked Conjuror Ichabod or CowLord, or whoever he was, least of all. He sprang like a cat, and the skinning knife he kept in his boot was at Ichabod's throat. "You will talk, little man," snarled Dolt, "Or I will rip you out of that armor in pieces and eat the pieces!"

There was no question that the Barbarian was utterly serious. "The Boojum! The Boojum!" shouted Ichabod. "The Zerg are afraid of the Boojum!"

Dolt let go of the sorcerer, and shot an unveiled 'I told you so' glance at Solo.

"When was the last time you changed your armor?" grumbled Ichabod. "Talk about B.O."

If Solo was chagrined that Dolt's method of information extraction had produced results, she did not let it show. "So, what's the Boojum?" she asked.

Ichabod sighed. "There is a balance to the universe," he began. "There are things that belong and things that don't. The Zerg are definitely in Column B. Frankly, I'm at a loss to explain why the whole swarm didn't simply lag out days ago." Ichabod paused. The blank expressions on the faces of his audience reminded him of his loyal subjects. "Let me try it this way," said Ichabod turning to Griswold. "You've forged a few suits of armor in your day. What's the Armorer's Holy Grail? What would be the equivalent of transmuting lead into gold for an armor smith? Hitting 70 home runs in a..." He decided to quit while he was ahead.

"Tha's easy," answered Griswold, getting the general gist if not the references. "Godly Plate of the Whale."

"Even when someone has the skill, finances and raw materials to make one, what usually happens?" asked Ichabod.

"It's unstable," said Griswold. "It disappears, usually after a few seconds. The only one in existence is on display at the University of Runestaff School of Sorcery. They keep it in a magical stasis field. It toured with Caravan when I was a wee lad."

"The most sought after class of magic armor in the world," said Ichabod. "There's nothing wrong with the enchantments involved. They use the hardest metals known to anyone, yet they just keep evaporating. What makes that happen?"

"Well..." Griswold realized he was stumped. He knew it couldn't be done, but not the reason why. Theoretically, anyone with the skill and the incredible amount of money that the materials would cost could forge one. Hell, given time, skill and money, you could outfit an entire army. "It's like my Grandfather Montgomery Griswold always used t'say," said Griswold finally, "Y'canna change the laws of magic."

"Actually," replied Ichabod, "you can. I'm living proof. But you didn't answer my question. What makes GPOW disappear? I'll tell you what does it: It's the Boojum."

"So what's a Boojum?" asked Solo for the second time.

"When I first encountered it, I thought it was just a monster," said Ichabod, "But it's much more than that. Which brings us back to where we started. Certain things and a few people simply do not belong in this universe. They upset the natural balance. The Boojum is the force that removes them. The Zerg don't belong and they know it, that's why they fear the Boojum."

"And you fear it because you don't belong either," guessed Dolt.

The visor slammed down with blinding speed. "COWLORD FEARS NOTHING!"

"Then it falls to you to stop the Zerg invasion," said Solo pointedly.

The visor came part way up and then fell again. "THE SERVICES OF THE DIVINE BOVINE DO NOT COME CHEAPLY."

"Name your price," returned Solo.

"YOU MUST AGREE TO BE MY COW-BRIDE!"

"If that's what it takes," replied Solo evenly. The idea of being introduced at functions as CowLady appealed to her not at all, but she wasn't going to let him know that.

The visor came up. "I'm not ready to settle down yet," admitted Ichabod.

"Will y'help Tristram in 'er time of need?" asked Griswold.

"Tristram's time of need is long past, but I get your meaning. I was hoping the Zerg would just go away by themselves, but for some reason, that's not happening," sighed Ichabod. "I have an idea, but it's dangerous."

"I have a dangerous idea too," volunteered Red Vex. She had been sitting quietly with a thoughtful expression on her face while Ichabod was speaking. "You said no man can stand against the Zerg. I know a demon who could. I can't believe I didn't think of this sooner. We're practically on top of him." She turned to Griswold. "One of the Prime Evils has been imprisoned beneath your town for centuries. That was the cause of all your troubles before the Zerg showed up."

"Saaay," said Ichabod brightening. "That *is* a dangerous idea. Not as dangerous as mine, but it just might work. You think we could sic Diablo on the Zerg?"

"Diablo?!" said Solo and Griswold together. "D'you mean the Lord of Terror's been livin' beneath Tristram?" asked Griswold.

Red Vex nodded. "Black Jade and I were sent to Tristram to help secure a host body for him and prepare for his liberation."

Dolt had not gone to church much growing up and knew little about Diablo or the Prime Evils. Demons were demons as far as he was concerned. What bothered him was the idea of letting one loose that might be a threat to the Zerg. If he was powerful enough to destroy the invaders, then who or what would have a hope of standing against him afterwards? "So releasing this Diablo is better than the Zerg," said Dolt doubtfully.

"I can't promise that," admitted Red Vex. "He might blast us all to ashes the second he lays eyes on us, me included. But frankly, he's the devil we know, so to speak. Or, at least, the devil I know."

"And that's what worries me," said Dolt. "You've already pretty much promised us that nothing good comes of anything you do."

"Look at it this way," suggested Red Vex. "We were going to release him anyway. At least this way, there's a chance you and humanity will benefit, and even if you don't, you're no worse off under Diablo than you were under the Zerg."

"Well, we could try my plan," said Conjurer Ichabod. "Let's see, we'll need the Bovine Plate and some Aerosmith tickets..."

"We'll try the demon's plan," said Dolt. Later, when Solo asked him what changed his mind, Dolt replied, "Red Vex may be evil and treacherous, but the sorcerer is nuttier than one of my mother's Yuletide cakes. I'll take my chances with Diablo over that any day."

Red Vex quickly outlined where they'd need to go and what they'd need to do in the labyrinth under Tristram. "Lazarus controls access to the portal leading to the level where Diablo is imprisoned," she explained. "It's a mystic pentacle that the Horadrim created to keep him in. We've been maintaining it to keep heroes..." She nodded at Dolt. "...out while he regained his strength. I doubt the Zerg could have gotten past it."

Ichabod had excused himself early into Red Vex's briefing and went into the cottage. He came out several minutes later followed by a pair of Minotaurs carrying armor and an assortment of odds and ends. "Let's see," said Ichabod, "Who's in need of an upgrade? What kind of armor are you wearing, Dolt?"

"Grand Scale Mail of the Wolf," replied the Barbarian with some pride. He had single-handedly put down a whole nest of sand demons to win that armor.

"That is so Level Ten," said the Conjuror disdainfully. "Why don't you step into some real armor, little man."

One of the Minotaurs presented Dolt with a suit of Holstein-patterned plate armor. Dolt took one look at the Bovine Plate, particularly the giant pink udder protruding from the belly, and passed. "I'd rather eat brown runes," he said grimly.

"That can be arranged," replied Ichabod. "But if you're not secure enough in your masculinity to wear the Bovine Plate, then that's your loss. How about you, Gris? I know that gothic plate's been in your family for ages, but you're really going to need something tougher that will provide a little fire, lightning and magic resistance."

Griswold looked at the armor critically. It was forged of pure mananite and as hard as any metal he had ever worked with. There was a good chance that it was indestructible. However, he had never seen such fine materials wasted on such poor workmanship.

"Look," said Ichabod after Griswold had shared his analysis of the armor. "It's indestructible, AC 150, plus 30 percent resistance to fire, lightning and magic. And, it's one hundred percent legit."

"Ichabod," wondered Griswold, "how is it that each thing y'say makes less sense 'n th'last thing y'said?"

"You should talk," retorted Ichabod, "Every time you speak, I expect you to say, 'Captain, me engines canna stand th' strain much longer!'"

"That made less sense than anything you've said so far," Solo pointed out.

"Anyway, aesthetics aside, the Bovine Plate is the hardest armor you're likely to find," said Ichabod.

"Aye, and it also drains the wearer's Mana and glows like a bonfire," said Griswold.

"It's not like you use the Mana for anything anyway. Put the armor on and stop being such a snob. You'll need the extra protection where we're going," argued Ichabod.

Griswold finally relented and put the Bovine Plate on. "Where did ye get this anyway?"

"Farmer Lester traded it to me for a conjuration I performed a few months ago," said Ichabod. "Don't ask me where he got it." He turned to Dolt. "I have a suit of armor that may appeal to you."

The armor that the Minotaur dragged over to Dolt was unlike anything any of them had ever seen. Even Griswold would not have known quite how to describe it. Dolt climbed into it rather than donned it. A Minotaur helped secure him in the armor and it closed around him with a series of hums and reptilian hisses. In the armor, Dolt stood nearly as tall as Ichabod in his CowLord armor.

"It's the armor of the Zergs' traditional enemies," explained Ichabod, "Marine armor of the Firebat!"

Dolt found that, despite its enormous bulk, the armor was weightless once he was in it. If anything, it made him stronger and faster. The visor was made of some sort of unbreakable glass and allowed him to see in the dark. Every so often, strange multi-colored runes would flash across the inside of the visor.

"If you need to drink a potion," Ichabod told him, "Say 'Activate Stim Pack 1.' If you need to drink another one, say 'Activate Stim Pack 2' and so on. You have six healing potions in there with you."

"What's a Stim Pack?" asked Dolt.

"It's not important. Finally, be careful who you point at," warned Ichabod. "Those blackened nozzles on the backs of your wrists are flame throwers." He tried to put it into a context that the others would understand. "Think of it as a Staff of Flame Wave on each arm with 150 charges apiece."

"How does he recharge them?" asked Solo.

"Stand in the sun for an hour," replied Ichabod.

Dolt nodded inside the domed helmet as he picked up his axe. "It'll do."

Chapter 11: Dawn; The Caves

There was a carefully concealed tunnel at the far end of Ichabod's cavern. It led down into the volcanic caves under Tristram. As they reached the other end of the tunnel, it took Solo's eyes a few seconds to adjust to the change in light. These caverns were illuminated by the hot glow of lakes of molten rock. Obsidian in the walls reflected the ruddy glow into every corner.

A sealed pouch dangled from Solo's belt. It jingled softly, as if it was packed with coins or something similar. Ichabod had given it to her. "What's this?" she had asked.

"Don't open it," replied the conjurer. "I'll tell you if we need to use it."

She attempted to get him to clarify, but he assumed his CowLord persona and began boasting, loudly, about how the Zerg would fall before his might. Later, when the visor was up again, he pretended not to remember anything about the pouch.

Ichabod accompanied Solo, Dolt, Griswold, and Red Vex into the caves. He brought with him a pair of the winged bullrogs and an entourage of six minotaurs. They were on a ledge looking down over the cavern and the molten lake that dominated it. Zerg growths lined the edges with twisted tendrils reaching out over the magma. It almost looked like they were warming themselves in the heat. Zerg drones carried softly glowing packets or sacs from the structures.

"Hmm," said Ichabod looming over Solo's shoulder. "Extractors. They provide energy to the hatcheries and supplement the sustenance provided by the creep. Helps 'em breed more and deadlier mutants faster."

"I don't see anything other than drones down there," said Red Vex.

"They probably figure there's no one left to threaten them this far underground," said Ichabod. "Saaay, we could do an awful lot of damage here if we tried. Suppose Solo, Griswold and I work our way around the lake clockwise from six, and Dolt and Red Vex go counter-clockwise. We destroy all the extractors in-between and meet at twelve o'clock."

"What's a clock?" asked Dolt.

Ichabod bit his lip.

Solo didn't know what a clock was either, but got the general gist. "You and Red Vex go to the left and we'll go to the right," she said, "And we'll meet on the opposite shore."

Ichabod didn't bother to correct Solo on the distinction between clockwise and counter-clockwise. "Leave nothing standing," he said. He turned to his Minotaurs. "Boys, I want you to follow the path those drones are taking to the surface. Flatten any Zerg creature or construct you encounter. We don't want anyone sneaking up behind us. Go, and may the Force be with you." The Minotaurs lumbered off dutifully. Lastly, Ichabod addressed the two bullrogs: "Wilbur, you provide air support for Dolt and Red Vex. Orville, you spot for us." The winged Minotaurs took to the air. "Let's rock and roll," grinned Ichabod lowering his visor. "NONE MAY CHALLENGE THE MIGHT OF COWLORD AND LIVE!"

CowLord bounded down from the ledge, and there was nothing to do but go along with the plan. Griswold and Solo followed him. The Zerg drones continued harvesting energy

sacs from the extractors, almost oblivious to the intruders. They made some effort to avoid colliding with the invaders, but that was it.

Solo wore a Valiant Breast Plate of the Stars that she had won in battle a year ago. Being less encumbered than Griswold and CowLord allowed her to move to the front and use Chain Lightning to sweep a clean path before them. A half-dozen drones burst open, sizzling, as did the nearest extractor. Its tendrils flew out of the magma and jerked spastically as the voltage flowed through it.

Not to be outdone, CowLord launched a magical attack at the next extractor in the line. Solo was familiar with the Fire Elemental spell. She could cast it herself, but preferred the explosive force of Fireball. CowLord's Elemental was easily ten times the size of any Fire Elemental she'd ever cast. Instead the standard humanoid form, CowLord's Fire Elemental was a charging bull. It barreled into the extractor and set it alight.

He followed up with a virtual stampede of Firebulls, and Solo decided to conserve her Mana and help Griswold keep an eye on their flanks and rear.

Meanwhile, Dolt was learning about his new armor. Whenever he pointed with either hand at a target he was looking at, it turned into a ghostly red silhouette. He quickly found that, when he pressed the heel of his palm against the inside of either gauntlet, a jet of flame would leap at the target from the nozzle on the back of his wrist. Red Vex was making sure to stay well behind Dolt to avoid sharing the fate of the drones and extractors in their path. Normally, Dolt would never have allowed the Hell Spawn out of his sight unless he was sure she was trussed up, Stone Cursed and/or dead, but, at the moment, he was having far too much fun with his new armor to care.

Dolt and Red Vex had destroyed about half the extractors on their side of the lake when the Zerg finally responded.

Torchants, along with the Venom Tails and the Wasp Fliers, were among the first new strains the Zerg bred upon their arrival underneath Tristram. Though less well armored and weaker in melee than Zerglings, the Torchant strain compensated with speed and immunity to fire. Their ability to spit explosive balls of plasma marked them as members of the same strain that included the spare-faring Scourges. Furthermore, they were so simple genetically, that three could be grown from a single larva.

Dolt first became aware of the arrival of the worm-like Torchants when a huge ball of fire nearly knocked him off his feet. Four more blasts struck him as he struggled to get his bearings. Despite its insulation, the armor heated up like a furnace and Dolt could feel himself being cooked alive. He ducked and rolled behind the oozing remains of the last extractor he had destroyed. He remembered Ichabod's instructions for taking a Healing potion. "Activate stim-pack one," he commanded. He expected that the armor would somehow allow him to drink the potion. Instead, it injected the potion directly into his left buttock.

Dolt yelped and jumped into the path of an oncoming fireball. He struggled to his feet and blasted the offending Torchant with both flame-throwers. The Torchant did not mind this at all. As Dolt ducked back under cover, he remembered one of the few pieces of useful advice that his father ever gave him: "Only a fool fights fire with fire..."

The Torchant and several of its friends were slithering around to get a clear shot at Dolt. Dolt was busy remembering the rest of his father's advice: "...A true warrior charges into the flames swinging his blade and shouting his name for the gods to hear!"

"DOLT LUUUUUNGREEEEENNNN!!" he roared leaping to his feet and swinging the Strange Axe of Slaughter. Up until now, charging into the faces of a pack of fire-breathing monsters had always seemed like a bad idea, no matter whose name one shouted. In fact, it could well explain why he had never heard another warrior utter the second part of that advice. Nonetheless, Dolt could not deny how good it felt. Caught completely by surprise, the nearest two Torchants could do nothing but die, spewing flaming blood, as the Barbarian's axe cut through them. The remainder of the pack backpedaled furiously, hoping to find safe positions from which to shoot at their foe. Dolt caught up with and cut down a third Torchant, and the others turned and fled. Their flight was cut short by a barrage of Bloodstars hurled by Red Vex as she stepped out from behind the cover of a boulder.

Realizing the creatures' dislike of physical combat, Dolt found it was easy to chase them wherever he wanted them to go. As long as he kept them on the run, they couldn't shoot at him. He began herding them into corners and against walls where he fed them to his slashing blade. Red Vex made herself useful by picking off the strays that managed to get around to Dolt's sides and rear. She also returned fire at any Torchant who popped up out of the magma where Dolt couldn't reach them. The bullrog Ichabod had sent with them made his presence known by swooping down and goring the occasional Torchant with his horns. However, a Minotaur is not a creature designed for aerial combat, even one with wings. It took him a long time to circle around for the next attack.

Meanwhile, CowLord, Solo and Griswold were stirring up a Zerg response of their own. When the Zerg had first penetrated the volcanic caverns, they encountered packs of acid-spitting hounds. One pack in particular gave them an unusual amount of trouble, and many Zerglings and even a few Hydralisks died before the swarm was able to overwhelm them. Zerg drones dutifully scraped up the remains of the pack leader for genetic analysis. Ultimately, they combined the hound's DNA with Mantis Screamer DNA. The result was a smarter, smaller, faster, lightly armored Mutalisk with a vicious pack mentality.

Griswold was the first to hear the banshee wail of the pack of Deathspit Mutalisks as they flew to attack the intruders. He barked a warning to his comrades and raised his sword and shield to battle the creatures. The flying monsters ignored him. They assessed their opponents and moved to eliminate the biggest potential threats first. Half the pack climbed and began spitting acid at the flying Minotaur. They literally flew circles around him and it was only a matter of seconds before his lifeless corpse dropped into the magma below.

The rest of the pack descended on CowLord. The caustic acid splattered his armor and quickly turned his bright red cape to smoking tatters.

"FOOLS! YOU DARE INCUR THE WRATH OF COWLORD?" boomed CowLord. "LEARN NOW THE FOLLY OF YOUR WAYS!" Firebulls took to the air to deliver flaming death to the Mutalisks.

Solo sighed. She would remember every single word she heard. Her training allowed no less, and it was impossible not to hear CowLord's speeches. But no real person said, "learn now the folly of your ways" in battle. If she survived, she would tell this tale with flawless accuracy. But it wasn't going to be easy.

CowLord used a variation on another spell that Solo recognized. It caused bright stars of energy similar to Red Vex's Bloodstars. These, however, were green and slimy. There was nothing else to call them but Cudstars. Solo sighed again. At least, by now, she'd gotten over the giggling fits.

The Deathspit Mutalisks had noted Griswold and Solo. They saw armor, swords, and no spells and categorized them as a lesser threat. After all, as long as they were more than a sword-length away, they could strafe the humans with impunity. Solo was quick to take advantage of this mistake. The fact that they were staying well out of reach made it easy for her to blast them with Chain Lightning without fearing for the safety of her allies.

The Mutalisks suddenly found their number decimated by the unexpected magical attack. Six broke away from their attack on CowLord and converged on Solo. She ducked as the first strafing run halved her Mana Shield. They quickly reversed course and flew for a second pass, skillfully navigating through the gaps in Solo's Chain Lightning counter-attack. Griswold pulled Solo down to lend her the protection of his shield. It was a gothic shield enchanted with magical amber, and it gave the wielder the power to block blows and missiles with blinding speed.

The Deathspit Mutalisks changed tactics once again, this time circling around Solo and Griswold. They knew that his shield would only be effective from one direction at a time. They stayed far enough away to navigate around Solo's Fireballs and Chain Lightnings, but close enough to shoot at their less maneuverable ground-bound foes.

The rest of the pack was faring less well. No amount of tactical genius could change the fact that, against CowLord, they were simply overmatched. Their attacks did not seem to penetrate his armor and the Fireballs were difficult to elude once they had found a target. Furthermore, in the extreme heat of the cavern, Cheese Curse was an especially lethal spell. Affected Mutalisks simply melted.

Solo had taken a hint from CowLord and switched from Fireball to Fire Elemental. She had better luck connecting with her targets this way, but was doing less damage. Also, it was draining her ball faster.

Suddenly, a huge blob of bleu cheese splattered against Griswold's shield. CowLord had finished with his portion of the pack and was coming to their aid. Within seconds, it was over.

Before anyone could offer thanks or congratulations, there was a loud spattering hiss. They looked and saw Dolt coming, axe-first, through the last standing extractor. His armor was scorched and glowing with heat. Red Vex strode up behind him, her fingers still arcing with residual Bloodstar energy, but not a hair out of place. To make their mission a further success, Dolt and Red Vex had found some giant beetle-like Zerg squatting in the backs of side caves. They offered little resistance and, once they were dead, the drones in the main cavern ceased their work and scurried to flee the noise and fire.

Solo drank a Mana potion. She was down to her last two now. Griswold grimly tried to clean the salad dressing off of the shield that had been in his family for generations. CowLord's cape had miraculously healed and his armor had somehow found the time and means to polish itself.

"We'll find a shortcut into the lower levels toward the back of that cave," said Red Vex gesturing.

"That's where those flyin' spitters came from," said Griswold.

"More bad news for you, Gris," said Red Vex. "It smells like demons back there. Lots of them."

"No Zerg?" asked Solo.

Red Vex sniffed. "Who can tell with these oozing extractors and dead whatever-they-ares?" she shrugged. "I can't tell for sure, but I know demons when I smell them."

Solo recast her Mana Shield. "I'll scout ahead," she said, confident that she could avoid detection.

"Be careful, lass," advised Griswold.

"Naturally," replied Solo.

She returned less than a minute later. "Your nose is correct," she told Red Vex. "There are pens and pens full of Fallen Ones, Carvers, Devilkin, Dark Ones, and even a couple of Goatmen."

"Why would the Zerg leave them alive?" asked Griswold.

"They stay fresher that way," remarked Red Vex. "At least, that was the idea when we originally built the pens to hold humans."

"Whatever," said Griswold. "As long as they're locked up, we d'nae have t' worry about them."

Dolt snorted. "Fallen Ones! As if we'd have to worry about them even if they were free!"

They headed into the cave. Red Vex led the way, followed by Solo and Griswold, Dolt and CowLord and finally by Wilbur, the surviving bullrog. The wooden pens were packed with Fallen Ones. They hissed and grunted and cursed as the four humans, Hell Spawn and bullrog walked by. The Zerg hadn't thought enough of them to take their weapons away, so many rattled swords and waved spears.

Solo wrinkled her nose. "Nasty little goblins."

"I don't know," replied Dolt looking down at one that had come up with a particularly creative obscene gesture. "I think we should free them."

Solo was surprised. "Compassion?" she asked turning around.

Dolt's not-very-nice smile was hidden under his helmet. "Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of catapult fodder."

"That's not a bad idea," agreed Red Vex.

Griswold shook his head. "Are ye serious? These creatures'd kill us as soon as look at us. We canna trust them."

"You have to earn their trust," said Red Vex. "Let me show you how." She strode over to the nearest gate. The Fallen Ones leaped and clawed at the sides of their pen. Red Vex opened the gate and a Carver lunged at her brandishing a scimitar. She blasted him and his companions fled to the far corner of the pen. Red Vex stepped over the body and into the pen. She fired two more Bloodstars, killing two more goblins. "Now I have their trust," she told Griswold.

"You!" Red Vex addressed a scaly red Devilkin cowering in the corner. "Come here!" He was a fraction of a second too slow and Red Vex blasted him. "You come here," she ordered a bluish goblin.

He scurried over and threw himself at her feet. "No hurt Snotspill?"

"Not if you and your little friends do as I say. Now stand up."

Snotspill stood.

"I want you to take your band to the surface," instructed Red Vex. "Kill any Zerg creatures you encounter and destroy any Zerg structures you find."

Snotspill nodded. "We do! You no hurt, we obey!"

"See that you do," said Red Vex. "Spread the word: I will find anyone who fails me and mate with him."

Snotspill's complexion changed from dark blue-gray to a delicate shade of baby blue as the ichor drained from his face at the threat. "WE DO! WE OBEY!" he swore.

"Good," said Red Vex stepping out of the gateway.

"What kind of threat was that?" asked Dolt as the goblins scrambled past him, desperate to get away.

"Maybe you should mate with me and find out," suggested Red Vex sweetly.

Dolt was startled to realize that it had been a long time since he'd had an offer that appealed to him less.

Red Vex repeated her performance with eight more pens full of Fallen Ones. Although he didn't offer to mate with anyone, Dolt found that he too had a knack for winning the loyalty of the vicious little goblins. In all, Solo counted nearly two hundred of the creatures sent to the upper levels to harass the Zerg. No one expected them to do anything other than get killed the first time they encountered any Zerg resistance, but hopefully it would be enough to distract them. Ichabod conjured six more Minotaurs to help keep busy any Zerg who might be sneaking up on them.

The entrance to Red Vex's shortcut to the lower levels was inside the last pen. As Dolt "negotiated" with the occupants, Red Vex made her way to the back of the pen and rolled aside a large boulder blocking a steep stairway down.

"We should send this gang down ahead of us," suggested Dolt.

Red Vex peered down the stairs and nodded. "How many?" she asked.

"Twenty-three," said Dolt. One of the creatures panicked and charged at him. "Twenty-two," he corrected himself, swatting and crushing it with the flat side of his axe.

Properly motivated, the Fallen Ones filed into the stairway. They were more than eager to prove their worth to their new masters and continue their existence. Dolt and Red Vex followed their troop. Ichabod and Griswold followed them, with Solo and Wilbur, the bullrog bringing up the rear.

"Psst! Over here!" A voice called to Solo just as she was about to follow her comrades.

Solo turned to see a one-legged Dark One hobble out from behind a rock. He was using a crutch made from a human thighbone.

"Shouldn't you be up front with the rest of your pack?" asked Solo. She could handle a single crippled goblin with no trouble, so wasn't worried about talking to him alone.

"Do I look stupid to you? Don't answer that," said the Dark One. "Listen, can you cast Town Portal?"

"Maybe."

"Cast it for me and I'll pay you." He held up a battered leather cap. "It's a Holy cap of Protection. It's enchanted to give you nearly twice the protection of an ordinary helmet."

"You've got to be kidding," said Solo. "No protection twice is still no protection."

"C'mon, give me a break," whined the Dark One. "You can see I'm not fit for battle. I'll throw in this book I found." It was a Teleport spell book. "Do we have a deal?"

Solo smiled. She didn't know who the strange little goblin was, but there was certainly more to him than met the eye. It was a pity she didn't have time to hear his story. "You know, the Zerg have overrun Tristram," she warned him.

"I know," replied the goblin. "I was there. I'm hoping I can make it to the river, find some scrap lumber and float downstream. I don't stand a chance here unless the Zerg suddenly get interested in buying the stuff I find."

Solo opened a Horadrim Portal to the surface. The Dark One limped toward it and paused. "When you see Griswold, tell him Wirt said, 'Good luck.'" He waved and disappeared through the glowing blue portal.

As the portal closed, Solo flipped open the spell book to the Preface. As with most such books, the first few pages contained the text for a powerful Reader spell developed by the secretive Horadrim. She read the pages to invoke the magic. The book turned to ash as it fed the knowledge it contained directly into her mind. Solo now knew the art of Teleportation magic as well as the author of the tome and, as a side effect, the Reader spell had refilled her ball.

The Horadrim had developed Reader magic to make it easier for its members to learn new spells, and more difficult for everyone else to do the same. It would have done the Horadrim power base no good to leave powerful spell books lying around where anyone could learn their secrets.

Solo put the Holy cap of Protection on her head. If nothing else, it would keep cheese from getting in her hair the next time CowLord transmuted a Mutalisk.

Chapter 12: Morning; Hell

The stairs down were steep, dark and treacherous. They became more so with each step. Even Red Vex, who had had wings the last time she navigated the passage, felt a need to take extra care. The stairway finally gave way to a vast subterranean world where the hot air stank of scorched flesh and ash. It was, at the same time, unbreathably thin and oppressively heavy. Despite the thin layer of creep, the ground crunched underfoot like millions of tiny bones or insects. The walls seemed carved from the bones of some great beast, and a slimy black mist hid the ceiling. Even the troop of Fallen Ones found the new environment threatening. Only Red Vex took comfort in what were, to her, familiar surroundings.

"We must be getting close," said Dolt.

"Well, duh," commented Ichabod.

"This cavern is unnatural," observed Solo. "Have we crossed over into..." She hesitated.

"Hell?" supplied Red Vex. "No. These are just more caverns. Diablo's influence has made them like this, that's all."

"Which way do we go now?" asked Griswold.

"The pentacle is this way," said Red Vex indicating the direction they should go.

The Fallen Ones fanned out before Dolt and CowLord. They treaded cautiously, not daring to stray too far ahead of their new masters. Red Vex followed a few paces behind them to give directions, while Solo, Griswold and Wilbur brought up the rear. As they approached one of the cavern's walls, a wide passageway leading to two separate chambers became visible.

"The pentacle's through the passage on the left," said Red Vex. "We'll need to find the Staff of Lazarus to get into the Temple."

"Temple?" asked Solo.

"We kept access to Diablo's level tightly controlled," explained Red Vex. "You need the Staff of Lazarus to get to the Temple. You can only open the way to Diablo's level from the Temple."

"What if we can't find the staff?" asked Solo.

"Then the portal will already be open," replied Red Vex.

"Hold on!" warned Griswold. "I thought I saw somethin' move!"

Something roughly humanoid darted through the shadows across the first chamber.

Griswold held his sword and shield ready, but shook his head. "These old eyes must be playin' tricks on me," he said. "For a second I could've sworn tha' was Gillian!"

Suddenly, it was on him; a whirlwind of slashing claws. Despite his skill with the sword he'd forged on the Anvil of Fury, Griswold seemed unable to connect with the creature. Wilbur lumbered forward and threw a massive fist at the attacker, but the only thing the bullrog managed to hit was Griswold's shield.

"Get down," Red Vex warned Solo. A crimson Bloodstar sailed through the air, but somehow, the creature managed not to be in its path. The blast struck Wilbur in the chest causing him to bellow and stagger.

Claws raked across Griswold's side, drawing sparks from the Bovine Plate. He swung Griswold's Edge, once again to no avail. "It's almost as if the beastie knows where I'm goin' t'strike next," breathed the Master Blacksmith.

Solo found herself seized by an impulse to throw herself into the middle of the melee. Suddenly, she was between Griswold and the creature. His sword clanged off the back of her armor, knocking the wind out of her and scorching her hair. At the same time, The Grandfather cut deep into the creature's abdomen. A blue-white flash of lightning danced along the length of the great blade as it sent the creature spinning to the ground dead.

"Are ye daft, woman?! I could ha' killed you!" shouted Griswold.

Solo said nothing. She stood staring down at the body lying face down at her feet. It looked like a young woman, nude with long brown hair.

Griswold spied the corpse and began shaking.

Solo just shook her head and rolled the body over with her boot. The illusion of humanity ended at the neck, knees and elbows. Her face was that of a praying mantis. Her forearms were also mantis-like and ended in razor-sharp talons. The feet were insectoid too, and there was an extra joint at mid-ankle.

"Good Lord," said Griswold. "Fer a minute, I thought tha' was Gillian!"

"Not Gillian," said Solo. "Giselle."

For countless centuries, the Zerg had prospered in their native universe. They moved from world to world, incorporating the DNA of the life forms they encountered into their genetic repertoire. Eventually, their expansion brought them into contact with a species called the Protoss. Knowing that their strictly ordered hive mentality would be especially vulnerable to these telepathic warriors, the Zerg sought to incorporate the genetic patterns of creatures of psionic ability. Unfortunately, such species were few and far between. An incursion into Terran space brought the swarm some hope of harvesting telepathic humans, but even there, the Zerg encountered unexpected resistance.

It wasn't until the Zerg arrived, entirely by accident, in Tristram that they found what they were looking for. Bard Giselle with her "second sight," as Gillian called it, had easily been the second most powerful psi in Khanduras. Only her granddaughter, who was completely unaware of her gift, had greater potential power. Once the Zerg realized what they had, they wasted no time incorporating Giselle's genetic material into their larvae. The Gillioids, as Solo would soon dub them, were only a prototype strain. They were able to use Giselle's precognitive talent to give them an edge in battle. More powerful strains able to unleash more of Giselle's psionic potential were already evolving in the caverns under Tristram.

The Zerg were not the only ones who had some of Bard Giselle's essence, however. The Grandfather was imprinted with the spirit of every warrior who wielded it well, including Bard Giselle and her husband. Through the enchanted blade, Solo could feel their outrage at the violation. From that moment forward, The Grandfather would deal triple the

damage to Zerg opponents that it would to ordinary enemies. The voice of its righteous fury at the aliens would be electrical.

The encounter and revelation had only taken seconds. Dolt and Ichabod, at the front of the party, had barely had time to react to the threat before it had passed. They had just started to turn back to see what had happened when one of the Fallen Ones shouted at Dolt, "Master! Knights come!"

A platoon of the undead demon knights who had terrorized the underworld before the arrival of the Zerg was approaching from the pentacle chamber.

"I thought you said the Zerg'd destroyed all these creatures," said Griswold.

Red Vex shrugged. "I thought they had."

"Don't worry about it," said Dolt. "This is my kind of fight!" Saying this, he leaped past Ichabod toward the approaching Steel Lords. As he landed at the mouth of the chamber, the floor caved in beneath him. Dolt, Ichabod and all the Fallen Ones plunged into yet another subterranean chamber. Wilbur took wing and flew into the pit after his creator. Almost before they could get to their feet, they were set upon by a nightmare horde of twisted horrors.

A blue-white spark of electricity traveled up and down The Grandfather's blade. "More Zerg," warned Solo. A pack of Gillioids came bounding out of the shadows from the rear flank. Meanwhile, the Steel Lords were filing along the edges of the pit to attack from the front.

"I've got the Zerg," shouted Solo. "You two take the knights!"

Griswold was already engaging the lead Steel Lord, and the clang of their swords and shields echoed throughout the chamber. Red Vex moved off to Griswold's left and began taking pot shots at the knights marching along the edges of the pit.

Solo let loose a blast of Chain Lightning, but the Gillioids knew exactly where the gaps were going to be and made sure they were in them. Not a single one was even singed. Solo got her back up against a wall and cast a Fire Wall in front of her. That, at least, made the Gillioids pause. Since it was a passive attack, there was nothing for them to do but to go around it. They split into two groups and started working their way along the wall of fire to get at their prey.

* * *

The chamber that Dolt and Ichabod had landed in was about two hundred feet wide and twelve-to-fifteen feet high where they had fallen through. It had the infernal appearance of the caverns above, but with a slimy Zerg twist. The bone-like walls were overgrown with alien bio-matter and pods of all shapes and sizes littered the floor, walls and ceiling. Throughout the chamber were pools of bubbling primordial ooze from which countless types of creatures slithered, crawled, hopped, or flew.

The bestiary almost defied description. Not every strain the Zerg attempted to create could be the wild success that the Gillioids or Deathspit Mutalisks were. Many were hopeless rejects cast down into this pit to be eaten or, if they were strong enough and lucky enough, breed and hope that their offspring did a little better. Some were variations

on existing Zerg strains. Others were combinations of native animals and Zerg sensibilities. It looked to Dolt as if the Zerg had attempted to crossbreed with every organism they encountered. In that respect, they reminded Dolt of a number of Barbarians he knew. If this was the result of cross-species dalliances, then Dolt thanked The Sword that none of his former comrades had produced any offspring as a result of their drunken celebrations.

Dolt got up and started swinging his axe and flaming the creatures. CowLord positioned himself at Dolt's back and began blasting away at creatures approaching from the other direction. The Fallen Ones quickly scattered throughout the cavern, seeking creatures weak enough for them to kill and running away from those who posed a danger. The ensuing chaos was enough to prevent the twisted mass from converging on Dolt and CowLord.

* * *

At the beginning, Red Vex had been helping Griswold by firing Bloodstars at the advancing demon knights. Now she had her hands full keeping them away from her. Only the fact that they had to come around the edges of the pit single file prevented her from being overwhelmed. Each knight seemed to be taking five or six Bloodstars before falling. They were slowly forcing their way closer. Like Red Vex, the knights were creatures of Mephisto. It didn't matter to them whether or not they died. All that mattered to them was their hatred for their enemies. Right now, they counted Red Vex among that number. Solo was battling Gillioids behind her, so fleeing was not an option. Red Vex hated the idea of standing and fighting, but that was exactly what she was going to have to do unless she killed every single knight trying to make its way around the pit. She redoubled her efforts.

It had been many years since Griswold had been in a life-or-death battle against an opponent using man-made weapons. Despite that, he was more than holding his own against the demon knights. Each blow of the sword named Griswold's Edge threw his opponent backwards, negating any opportunity to launch a counterattack. The fast-block shield canceled out the chance that any of the knights might score a lucky hit on Griswold. Griswold felt thirty years younger. He had battled far too many monsters in the last day or two. This kind of fight, dueling, had an art to it that he had missed. Watching the evil, twisted warriors explode in black flames as he slew them almost made Griswold forget the pain and emptiness that had been his companion for so many months.

* * *

Solo waited as the Gillioids filed into the corridor between the cavern wall and the Fire Wall she had cast. The Fire Wall was over a hundred feet long and would burn for a long time. They were approaching from both sides, but Solo waited until they were as close as she dared allow them. Then she Teleported to the other side of the Fire Wall. The Gillioids knew what she was going to do seconds before she actually did it, but knowing about it and being able to act on it were two different things. Even as the Gillioids turned and tried to scramble clear of the corridor, Solo filled it with a Lightning Wall parallel to the Fire Wall. Several Gillioids died struggling with their comrades to get free. Others managed to leap over or run through the deadly barriers of fire and lightning. This time, none came through unscathed.

The first Gillioid reached Solo, its carapace smoking. The Grandfather sliced through it, delivering a devastating lightning strike as it did. The other Gillioids moved in on Solo.

* * *

"Hello again, morsel."

Dolt looked around. Out of the biggest slime pool rose a giant creature that seemed to combine the worst features of a silverfish and a squid.

"SO, WE MEET AGAIN, DEFILER!" stated CowLord.

"I almost didn't recognize you," taunted the Defiler, "The last time I saw you, I was watching your backside flee in terror."

"COWLORD FEARS NOTHING!" He punctuated the boast with a barrage of Cudstars and Firebulls.

The creature sank back into its pool and avoided the brunt of the attack. It rose again and its long sticky tongue snapped out and snared a Fallen One and the beetle-like creature it was grappling with. The Defiler's burns healed as it consumed the two creatures.

Dolt was distracted from the CowLord-Defiler reunion by a calf-sized creature leaping at his face. He peeled it off before it could do any damage and then beheaded it. Then he beheaded it again. Eventually, he managed to chop off all six heads.

Suddenly, the air in the chamber was alive with buzzing, biting, and stinging insects. Neither Dolt nor CowLord could see the Defiler through the cloud of insects. Dolt found that his flame-throwers were useless in the midst of the swarm. He could burn up a lot of bugs, but his armor's targeting system had been blinded. He wasn't about to take his helmet off either.

CowLord, on the other hand, was unimpressed. "YOU DO NOT FACE A RAG-TAG BAND OF Confederate MARINES AND A FRIGHTENED CONJURER THIS TIME, CREATURE! TODAY, YOU FACE THE MASTER OF THE PASTURE! COWLORD COMMANDS THE COWS AND ALL CREATURES OF THE FIELDS!" To prove his point, CowLord summoned a swarm of flies. The flies immediately engaged the alien insects in tens of thousands of tiny aerial dogfights. The air began to clear.

The Defiler had been a mere hatchling when it eluded the Boojum and followed Conjurer Ichabod to Tristram. It was a juvenile when it killed the Sorcerer, Mr. Mojo. The Defiler who faced CowLord was an adult at the peak of its powers. It belched out a cloud of poison gas and spores. The inside of Dolt's visor lit up with red warning lights that told him, in no uncertain terms, to get out of the corrosive cloud.

"Your little human tricks will not save you from the might of the Swarm!" said the Defiler, "We will take your lands and feed on your people like the cattle they are. We will craft your land to serve the Swarm just as we have crafted Hell itself. We are the Masters of HellCraft!"

The corrosive cloud was tarnishing CowLord's gleaming armor. "I AM THE GOD OF HELLFIRE!" he boomed, "AND I BRING YOU..." He paused dramatically. "...CATTLE!"

Dolt was already diving into one of the pools to get out of the cloud when CowLord cast the Bova spell. He only caught a glimpse of it, but it was impressive. A stampede of

spectral cattle radiated outward from CowLord. The thunder of their hooves was deafening and the dust cloud they raised danced with charges of static electricity. Any creature smaller than an elephant was mowed down. Even the Defiler was knocked backwards as the phantom herd trampled over its shell and many legs and tentacles.

* * *

The last demon knight in the line was a hardy warrior. Griswold had been sparring with him for at least twice as long as it had taken him to kill the others. There was something about its fighting style that was familiar to Griswold. The longer they fought, the more familiar his opponent seemed. He prayed he was wrong.

Griswold faked a step forward with his left foot. As he predicted, the demon knight's shield dipped toward the movement, briefly exposing his hip and thigh. Griswold had counseled him time and time again about falling for that move.

"Torvan," called Griswold, "Son!" Torvan Griswold had been a knight in King Leoric's guard when the Black King had called his terrible curse down on them. Griswold had thought - prayed - that the curse had merely killed his son. He knew now that wasn't the case.

If Griswold recognized his eldest son, the demon knight gave no indication of recognizing his father. If anything, he seemed to fight harder.

"Torvan, listen t'me, lad," Griswold called. He was being driven back toward the Fire Wall Solo had cast, but he couldn't bring himself to strike back. Griswold knew he had to do something or he would soon be dead. He drove his sword into the ground and reached into his backpack for the burnt and tattered family portrait he had saved from their home. He unfurled the canvass across his shield and the demon knight froze.

The glowing red points of light could hardly be called eyes any more than the surrounding blackness could be called a face. But Griswold saw a glimmer of recognition in them all the same.

Torvan Griswold's voice was all pain and loneliness. It echoed from the bottom of some unknowable void. "Papa," it pleaded. "Kill me." He lowered his sword and shield.

Griswold pulled his sword out of the ground and raised it high to deliver a decapitating blow.

He lowered the deadly blade. "I... I canna do it, son."

"That's all right," said Red Vex. "I can." The first Bloodstar exploded in the Steel Lord's face and sent him reeling. The next four burst across his shoulder, chest, arm and chest again. Torvan's weary sigh was almost lost in the explosion of black flame as his armor released its tainted energy.

The Hell Spawn standing some yards away, over the smoking remains of the last Steel Lord. She had managed to bring it down only inches from where it would have been close enough to do her harm. This was lost on Griswold. All he saw was the demon who had killed his son. He howled and charged at her, intending to drive Griswold's Edge through her black heart.

Red Vex folded her hands behind her back and didn't move. She waited, looking the veteran warrior straight in the eye.

At the last possible instant, Griswold raised the tip of his sword. The blade passed over her left shoulder, cutting her cheek and piercing her remaining wing. Black ichor bubbled over the blade as its magical heat cauterized the cut. Red Vex winced, but did not move. She continued to meet Griswold's accusing stare.

"Why?" demanded Griswold finally.

"Because, for a moment, his soul was his own," said Red Vex. "You can strike me down if it makes you feel better, but take this one piece of advice before you do: If you ever have the opportunity to die free of Mephisto's control, take it."

Hesitantly, Griswold withdrew the sword, causing the wound to Red Vex's cheek and wing to bleed again. Red Vex still didn't move.

"Believe me," she said, "I know of what I speak."

It was only as Griswold sheathed his blade and turned away that a smile played across the Hell Spawn's lips.

* * *

Even for a creature of the Defiler's bulk and armor, being caught in a stampede was nothing to just shrug off. The thundering hooves had kicked holes in its shell and severed tentacles. It submerged into the relative safety of its pool of primordial ooze.

"NOW YOU BEGIN TO LEARN THE HARSH LESSON LEARNED BY OTHERS WHO DARED CHALLENGE THE DIVINE BOVINE!" bellowed CowLord.

Like the Defiler, Dolt had sought the shelter of one of the slimy pools. Now he felt something huge moving underneath him. It was the Defiler! Underground channels connected the pools. Before he could act, he was sliding off of the monster's shell. All he could do was try to warn CowLord. "Sorcerer!" he shouted.

"EH?" CowLord turned a fraction of a second too late.

Oozing tendrils grasped him, pinning his arms. "Morsel," rasped the Defiler. "You have annoyed me." One of the tentacles sported a heavy bony growth with a serrated edge. It brought this weapon down on CowLord's helmet, splitting it open. Two more tentacles tore the pieces of the helmet off and flung them away.

Conjurer Ichabod found himself face-to-unprotected-face with the alien monster that terrified him more than anything except the Boojum itself. The last time he'd had a similar view of a Defiler, it had been devouring Confederate Marines like candy.

Dolt had seen men panic in battle before. From his vantage point on the ground in a mass of sticky shattered pods, he could see that Ichabod was showing all the signs. In a moment, he'd be screaming and struggling and absolutely useless for anything but monster food. He did not like Ichabod, but he was not about to let his personal disdain for the man cost him a powerful ally. He struggled to his feet. There were still enough insects swarming around to make his flame-throwers unreliable. He was going to have to do this

the old-fashioned way. Marine Armor of the Firebat or no, it felt good to have the weight of his axe in his hands.

The Defiler's tongue lashed out and began reeling Ichabod into its dripping maw. He remembered how impressed he'd been when he saw a doomed Marine in the same position spit into the monster's face. For his part, Ichabod was on the verge of fainting.

Wilbur the bullrog barreled out of the air and rammed the Defiler. The flying Minotaur was in sad shape after tangling with some of the Zerg experiments and then flying unprotected through both the swarm and the Defiler's toxic cloud. However, his mass was still sufficient to crack the alien's carapace. At the same time, Dolt came up behind the Defiler and chopped off its rearmost left two legs.

More startled than hurt by the unexpected assault, the Defiler loosened its grip on Ichabod. Ichabod grasped a tentacle and one spell bubbled to the surface of the chaos into which his mind was descending. For just an instant, Ichabod's panicked senses perceived a huge disembodied gauntlet pointing at the Defiler and a crimson aura surrounding the monster.

He cast Cheese Curse.

Normally, such a spell would not have held a creature with the Defiler's size and natural resistance for more than a second. However, this time, Ichabod finally got Swiss Cheese. When the transmutation wore off a split-second later, the Defiler literally turned inside-out as its innards rushed out the gaping holes that the Cheese Curse had left in its body.

Ichabod fell to the ground with a wet thud and did not move.

"Sorcerer?" called Dolt. Carefully, he made his way across the smear of gore that had been the Defiler. "CowLord?"

Ichabod looked up at Dolt and blinked his eyes. "I'm not CowLord," he said, "I'm Sybil."

* * *

The last Gillioid went down in two pieces. A maze of Fire Walls burned around Solo. A Lightning Wall that she had cast just for variety's sake crackled off to her right. It would be several minutes before they burned themselves out. The heat was almost unbearable, so Solo decided to spend a little more Mana and Teleport herself out of the inferno she had created.

She materialized in the connecting chamber between the pentacle chamber and the large cavern they had come through. She saw Griswold kneeling in silent prayer over the charred and twisted remains of a Steel Lord. Dolt had climbed out of the pit and the bullrog was handing an unconscious Conjurer Ichabod up to him. She noted that Ichabod had been stripped of most of his CowLord armor, which was probably a bad sign. On the other side of the pit, Red Vex was examining the remains of more Steel Lords.

They were starting to test the limits of their luck. Solo noted that not a single one of them had come out of the chaos unscathed. Even Red Vex was bleeding ichor from a gash in her face. Although she had been able to maintain her Mana Shield for most of the melee, Solo had received several deep cuts from raking Gillioid talons toward the end of the battle. She was also drenched in sweat and alien blood. Her hair had been singed by her

close proximity to her own Fire Walls. Solo took a moment to cast a spell of Healing on herself. That would at least keep her from bleeding all over the place, but if she didn't get out of her armor and let it air out a bit, she risked squishing around in her own sweat until it drove her mad. Not that she wasn't thankful just to be alive.

Miraculously, eight Fallen Ones had survived their visit to the Defiler's pit. The little goblins were nothing, if not tenacious.

"I've got it," said Red Vex. "We can enter the Temple." She was holding an ornate golden staff festooned with miniature human skulls.

No, not miniature human skulls, Solo realized, the skulls of children. She felt ill.

Red Vex was impatient to open the Horadrim Portal to the Temple, but everyone else needed time to rest and assess the physical and/or emotional damage of the last series of encounters. Even the Fallen Ones were acting tired and whiny until Red Vex blasted one to shut them up.

"That was a waste," noted Dolt. He had fashioned a torch out of some Zerg creature's leg and was using it to burn the tiny creatures still trying to eat their way through the flexible joints of his armor. Most of the red warning lights visible on the inside of his helmet had either gone out or turned yellow. He had no idea what any of them could have meant specifically, but the fact that they were meant to be a warning was pretty plain.

Conjurer Ichabod seemed beyond help. He sat by himself rocking and muttering. Every so often, he'd shout out something nonsensical and then resume his rocking and muttering. He seemed unable to acknowledge the existence of anyone else. His bullrog was doing a fair impression of a rotting zombie. His wings were in tatters and huge chunks of flesh had been eaten away by the Defiler's parasites and corrosive gas. Gleaming white bone was visible in places. Healing spells did not seem to work on the conjured creature, but he didn't seem to be in any pain either. He just stood and watched over his master in silence.

Once they had made sure the cavern was secure, Solo stripped off her armor, drank a Mana potion and took the time to bring her journal up-to-date. There were still many Bards in the field who shunned the written word in favor of song and the oral tradition of storytelling. Solo had once traveled with a Bard who was a compulsive rhymer. His flawless recall was almost as uncanny as his ability to generate spontaneous verse no matter what he was doing. Unfortunately, what had started out as clever and charming quickly turned out to be as annoying as hell. She could have coped with his inventing songs out loud in battle, but it completely ruined a number of intimate moments. Frankly, there were parts of her body that she just didn't need to know rhymes for. ("Who the hell is Dolores?" she had demanded, grabbing him by the hair. After that, it was pretty clear that things weren't going to work out.)

In any event, Solo was a storyteller who needed a pen or charcoal stick in her hand before she could organize her thoughts properly. She was busy recording Griswold's tragic reunion with his son. The cavern echoed with the steady clang-clang-clang of Griswold using his enchanted sword to dig a grave for Torvan in the cavern floor. No one knew better than Griswold how bad that was for any weapon, but it didn't matter. He had refused offers of help from Solo and Dolt, saying that it was something he had to do

himself. He seemed to tolerate the proximity of Red Vex as she stood nearby, watching him work.

Red Vex was still holding that horrid staff in her hands. Solo had come to rely on the Hell Spawn in battle, and even trust her to some extent. The Staff of Lazarus was a graphic reminder of how big a mistake that really was.

Tenderly, Griswold laid Torvan's remains into the shallow grave in the stone floor. There was nothing that was really even recognizable as having once been human. All that was left of the Steel Lord was a pile of scorched and twisted metal. He covered the remains with broken rocks and said a silent prayer. At last, he laid the tattered family portrait over the grave. He walked away without looking back.

Red Vex paused and knelt next to the grave. Griswold had his back turned and Solo and Dolt were wrapped up in their own tasks. Ichabod didn't even know what planet he was on. She looked down at the painting of Griswold's smiling family and her lips curled in a sneer. She almost spat on the canvass, but stopped. She hadn't spent centuries manipulating human emotions without learning a thing or two about her own. Red Vex recognized a telltale tinge of envy in her hatred.

Thanks to her, Torvan's soul had slipped out of Mephisto's grasp. There would literally be Hell to pay for that. It had been centuries since she had cared about anything, and she didn't care about this either. She picked up the painting, rolled it up tightly, and tucked it behind her wing.

Chapter 13: Mid-morning; The Lair of Lazarus

Red Vex slammed the Staff of Lazarus into the ground. A crimson Horadrim Portal opened. Solo had never seen a Horadrim Portal that color before and found that it added just an extra bit of hellishness to their mission.

"Oooh," breathed Ichabod. "A Laz run!"

Red Vex shook her head. "Look, he's going to be more of a liability than an asset now."

"Call me Dances with Cows," intoned Ichabod.

"And the rest of you aren't in such great shape either," continued Red Vex. "Why don't you just rest here and I'll go in and open the portal to the final level."

Dolt, Solo and Griswold all shook their heads.

"No," said Dolt.

"I don't think so," said Solo.

"I'll come with ye," said Griswold.

"I shall become a Cow," said Ichabod, "to strike terror into the hearts of criminals (a superstitious and cowardly lot!)."

"Anyway," added Griswold, "What if ye're temple is swarmin' with Zerg beasties?"

"It's not," Red Vex assured him. "The Staff of Lazarus is the only way to open and close this portal. If the Zerg had gotten in, the portal would have still been open when we got here."

"I am Cow hear me moo," sang Ichabod, "In numbers too big to be true."

"If the Temple really is as secure as you believe, it will be a good place for me to try to get Ichabod back to some semblance of reality," said Solo. "I know his chain mail was missing a few links, but CowLord was a powerful ally."

Red Vex shrugged. "Have it your way." She strode through the red portal. Griswold, Solo, Dolt, Ichabod, Wilbur and the seven Fallen Ones followed her.

The chamber on the other side of the portal was man-made, probably by the same architects who built the great cathedral in Tristram. When he arrived, Conjurer Ichabod pitched forward in a dead faint and would not move.

Solo sighed. "I guess I'll stay here with Wilbur and look after him."

"It'll only take me a minute to open the portal," Red Vex assured her. "You," she commanded one of the Fallen Ones, "Come here."

The goblin scurried to her side.

"What do you need him for?" asked Solo.

"Opening the portal requires a blood sacrifice," said Red Vex matter-of-factly. "His will do."

The Fallen One whimpered softly, but did not try to flee.

Red Vex strode to the door at the far end of the room and opened it. "Whoa!" she exclaimed, seeing what was on the other side of the door and slamming it shut.

Everyone waited expectantly as Red Vex turned to face them. The expression on her face was one of irritation rather than fear or alarm. "Wrong again," she sighed. "The hall is full of Zerg pods."

Red Vex frowned. "Somebody had to have let them in here and then closed the portal behind them," she said, "That somebody could only have been Lazarus or Black Jade."

"So there's a fifty-fifty chance that Black Jade is wandering around here somewhere," stated Solo.

"Yes." Red Vex seemed distracted.

That was why she had been trying to get them to stay behind while she opened the portal. Her bare breasts made no secret of the fact that she was excited at the prospect of encountering her old lover again. Except for the fact that Red Vex wanted to kill Black Jade, it all made perfect sense, thought Solo. It also explained the nagging urge she had to take off all her armor. Red Vex was leaking pheromones again. All the more reason to hurry things along.

"You can follow the hallway either direction to reach the altar," said Red Vex.

"You go one way, and I'll go the other," suggested Dolt.

Red Vex nodded.

"I'll come with ye," Griswold told Red Vex.

"I don't know if that's such a good idea," cautioned Solo. Between the pheromones and the hatred, Gris would be collateral damage waiting to happen.

"I'll be fine," Griswold assured her.

"I still think..." started Solo.

"I said, I'll be fine!" snapped Griswold.

Solo backed down. Every passing second made her feel less and less comfortable with their situation.

Red Vex just shrugged. As far as she was concerned, Griswold was a non-issue at the moment. All that mattered to her was finding Black Jade again. She didn't dare wonder what would become of her if it turned out that Lazarus was the one who let the Zerg into the Temple and Black Jade was dead. All that would be left for her would be her eternal unrequited hate. If she was lucky, some hero would come along and kill her.

Dolt opened the door just as a drone carrying a pod was scurrying by. He swatted it with his axe. He stepped into the hallway and let loose blasts of flame in both directions. Pods burned and burst open, their contents sizzling. "There," he said, "That'll get us started." He gestured at the remaining six Fallen Ones to follow him, and they did so obediently.

Red Vex, Griswold and their goblin followed Dolt into the hallway and turned the other direction. That left Solo and Wilbur to look after Ichabod.

* * *

The pods ranged in size from about grapefruit to a few that could have held three or four people. After his initial blast of fire, Dolt relied on his axe to destroy them. The Fallen Ones took great delight in bursting the pods as well. Some of the pods sprayed acid when burst, a few others contained items ranging from random junk to gold coins and other treasures. Several pods contained creatures in the midst of some sort of metamorphosis. Three of the bigger ones contained sleeping succubi. Dolt axed them before they could regain consciousness.

They also encountered a few drones whose job seemed to be moving the pods up and down the hall at random intervals. The goblins killed and ate these.

Dolt's route took him around a corner and through a door into another pod-filled chamber. After clearing that room, he and his troop of goblins turned another corner into a second hallway. The pods in this passageway tended to be of the bigger variety. Dolt found and executed four more succubi. The last two were obviously turning into some sort of Zerg-succubus hybrid.

Dolt opened one more human-sized pod and stopped. "Well," he mused as a well-slimed humanoid form tumbled out, "who do we have here?"

* * *

"Come on, Ichabod, wake up," pleaded Solo shaking the semi-conscious Conjurer.

"MAMAS, DON'T LET YOUR BABIES GROW UP TO BE COWLORDS," moaned Ichabod.

A thought struck the Bard. She dug through her pack until she found the Collar of Submission. She fit it around Ichabod's neck and fastened the choke chain.

"Snap out of it, Ichabod!" she commanded giving the chain a forceful yank.

"Yes, Good Master," said Ichabod sitting up.

"That's more like it," said Solo. "We need CowLord."

"We're sorry. Your call cannot be completed as dialed. Please hang up and try again," said Ichabod, "Good Master."

Solo interpreted that as a "no." As she was puzzling over what to do next, Ichabod spoke again.

"I have looked into the mouth of the Beast and seen the Light, my child," he said.

"Say again?"

"I had an epiphany. Luckily, it was only a small one. I was able to treat it with ointment and did not require surgery," said Ichabod. "No, that's not right. That's a hemorrhoid. What's an epiphany?"

"A sudden insight or revelation," supplied Solo.

"That's it!" shouted Ichabod. "That's what I had!"

Solo waited.

"So what was it?" she asked once it became apparent that Ichabod was not going to volunteer any information.

"What was what?"

"Your epiphany."

"That's rather a personal question. I mean, I've grown quite fond of you over the last day or so, and maybe if we got to know each other a little better..."

Solo gave a sigh of exasperation and yanked hard on the choke chain. "Now, please tell me about this insight of yours," she ordered.

"Yes, Good Master," said Ichabod. "We're all going to die."

* * *

Griswold knew in his heart that, when Red Vex had killed Torvan, she had done both father and son a favor that could never be fully repaid. He also knew that, if she had never come to Tristram in the first place, King Leoric would never have gone mad and inflicted that horrible curse on his men. In fact, his entire family would be alive today.

But then, if the Horadrim had not buried Diablo under Tristram, Red Vex and Black Jade would never have come to Tristram to begin with. And if the Horadrim had not imprisoned Diablo? The Lord of Terror would be running around free, and then where would they all be?

Centuries of events linked together like a suit of the finest chain mail. Life had seemed so simple when he was working at his forge or having dinner with his family. That simplicity had been nothing more than a cruel illusion. Tragedy had started its journey toward his town and family hundreds of years before there had even been a Tristram.

Then there was Red Vex. She was both victim and villain. Every single one of the girl-demon's motives was corrupt. Even saving Torvan's soul had been more out of her desire to thwart Mephisto than out of any compassion for Torvan. Griswold knew the road to Hell was paved with good intentions. Ironically, Torvan's road to Heaven had been paved with bad intentions. Who would save Red Vex's soul? Did she even have a soul to save? If not, whatever became of the innocent girl put to such a brutal death by her own people? So many questions without answers. Griswold's heart ached for her.

* * *

It would have been against Red Vex's nature to be unaware of Griswold's conflicted feelings about her. For the moment, however, he didn't matter. All that mattered was Black Jade. They had been apart for days, and she already knew exactly what would happen. They'd attack each other on sight. First with Bloodstars, which wouldn't do either of them any harm, and then physically. Eventually, one of them would draw blood and, once those supernatural pheromones hit the air, they'd succumb to Lust Frenzy and fighting would be over except for the hatred. A shudder of revulsion ran through Red Vex at the thought Black Jade's hungry fingers having free run of her body. She also longed for it at the same time.

Having Griswold along was not helpful either. She and Black Jade would be all over each other and completely vulnerable for hours at the very least. There was an excellent

chance that their combined pheromones would affect him too and he'd try to join them. It had happened before. Always, they had simply killed the intruding party and gotten on with their business, or pleasure. Afterwards, the freshly killed meat made a welcome meal. The truth was that Griswold would probably be doing them both a tremendous favor if he simply ran them both through while they were engaged.

They reached the chamber containing the sacrificial altar. It was thick with Zerg pods and other growths. Drones, mostly small ones, scurried to and fro carrying pods in their mandibles. As ready as Red Vex was for an attack, she was still caught off-guard when a huge pod-encrusted growth lurched out of a shadowy corner and began firing Bloodstars at her.

"Look out!" shouted Griswold. He jumped into the path of the blasts and blocked most of them with his shield. One clipped him across his sword arm, making him gasp in pain.

"Oh, get out of the way," snapped Red Vex trying to get around the Master Blacksmith.

As if in response, a huge serrated claw brushed Griswold away. He came to rest, thoroughly winded, against a leathery pod at the other end of the chamber. The goblin they had accompanying them took the opportunity to run for cover behind the altar.

"Hello, lover," cooed a voice that Red Vex knew better than any other. It came from above her, and Red Vex whirled toward the sound. Her Bloodstar fizzled in her hand and her jaw dropped in shock.

It was Black Jade. There was no question about that. It was her almond-shaped eyes, set in that perfect oval face with flawless olive skin. Her long black hair framed that face, spilling over her shoulders and breasts. There had been a time when Red Vex had loved nothing more than the feel of that endless river of ebony hair flowing over her body. Her arms still ended in slender wrists and delicate hands with fingers whose merest touch could arouse ecstasy that the gods themselves could only fantasize about in frustration.

But that was it. Her horns had changed into a pair of twitching antennae and her wings had grown into huge multi-jointed legs that reached over Black Jade's shoulders to touch the ground in front of her. It was with one of these legs that she had brushed the interfering Griswold aside. From the waist-down, Black Jade had the body of a gigantic bloated wasp. It came complete with six legs and a set of gossamer insect wings that could carry her in steady, but ponderous flight. Like a bumblebee's wings, Black Jade's new wings had an aerodynamically impossible load to carry. The abdomen of the insect portion of her body was a grotesque bloated mass of pods and oozing creep. Drones crawled over and around it, removing pods, placing them, moving them and replacing them. The humanoid portion of Black Jade sat on top of this mass, over ten feet above the ground.

The class of demons known as succubi had been created for seduction, not reproduction. They did not bear young except under extraordinary circumstances. That did not change the fact their bodies were based on those of young women at the peak of their fertility and desirability. Thus, when the Zerg encountered succubi, they recognized them as nothing less than reproductive dynamos. It was a simple matter for them to reactivate the genes that enabled reproduction and nurturing young. After that, all it took was several

additions from the Zergs' vast library of DNA to turn the succubi from temptresses into huge mobile hatcheries.

It was another triumph of Zerg genetic engineering. A Succu-Nest could carry pods equal to five times the troops that an Overlord could carry. Succu-Nest pods did not produce helpless hatchlings either, thanks to the vast latent nurturing potential the succubi all carried in their genes. Each Succu-Nest could accelerate the growth of pods in her charge to adulthood and peak efficiency within minutes.

"Do you like the new look, sweetie?" asked Black Jade. Seeing that her old lover was still at a loss for words, she pressed on. "When the Wasp Fliers returned with nothing but your wing, I knew I'd see you again."

Red Vex let out a shriek and lunged at Black Jade. The giant Succu-Nest rapped her on the top of her head with the flat side of one of her great claws.

"You nasty thing," teased Black Jade. "Your eyes say 'kill, kill,' but your body's saying 'do me, do me.'"

Red Vex shook her head and backed away. Black Jade was toying with her. That blow that left a giant goose egg on her head and knocked her on her backside could have, and should have, been aimed to decapitate her. It was the same old Black Jade; always with some scheme or other. As a mortal, it had driven Red Vex crazy waiting for her partner to get to the point.

"Look," said Black Jade, "We've been doing the same thing for centuries. What say we forgo our traditional catfight and multiple orgasms in favor of something new? I had a little surprise made from your wing."

On that cue, cantaloupe-sized pods all over her abdomen burst open. Tiny versions of Red Vex, no more than six-inches high hatched from them. The little Vexlings had antennae and insectoid wings. They also had whip-like tails equipped with sharp stings.

"What do you think? Cute aren't they?" said Black Jade. "They remind me of you so much that I've been squishing them for fun while I was waiting for you to come back."

They flew at Red Vex, peppering her with tiny pinprick Bloodstars. Then they were on her, scratching and stinging. Red Vex rolled away, trying to shield her eyes and face from the little sprites. The Vexlings were out to insult as well as injure. They pulled her hair, and Red Vex could feel lewd little touches over her breasts, bottom and crotch. At least one of them urinated on her.

Griswold was standing over her, waving his shield and trying to shoo the little creatures away, but to no avail.

Then one of the Vexlings noticed Black Jade watching the assault with sadistic amusement. A ripple of hate went through the swarm. Red Vex's hatred of Black Jade was so deeply ingrained that it transcended the genes used to create the Vexlings. Within moments, Black Jade found herself fending off the scratches and stings of the vicious little Vexlings. She waved her arms and great claws, but her ponderous bulk made it hard for her to defend herself against them.

Realizing that her miscalculation had been a big one, Black Jade burrowed into the floor. Her claws shoved aside the stonework floor and underlying earth with ease.

Red Vex howled. "Come back here!" She leaped to her feet to follow, but Black Jade, and the Vexlings tormenting her, were gone, and Black Jade had filled the burrow in behind her.

Red Vex dropped to her knees and began trying to dig after them with her bare hands.

"Lass," called Griswold.

Red Vex continued to dig.

Griswold reached out to put a restraining hand on her shoulder. "She's gone, lass. She'll be..." he stopped as Red Vex turned to face him. He realized that he had not felt so aroused since he was a teenager. He wanted to take her right there, on top of the pile of broken stonework and overturned earth, amid the Zerg pods and scuttling drones. Red Vex, knowing that controlling Griswold would be the fastest way to bring her own raging hormones under control, was willing to let him.

With her left hand, Red Vex moved his hand down from her shoulder to her breast. With her right, she reached inside Griswold's armor to feel for the buckles holding it together. Her nimble fingers had spent centuries learning how to get warriors out of every type of armor ever forged, so even the Bovine Plate offered no protection against this type of attack. Her hand stopped briefly to unfasten the metal udder before continuing its downward journey.

"Hey Gris!" called Dolt entering the chamber from the far hallway.

"Whoa! What can I do fer ye?" responded Griswold, badly startled. Griswold's face had turned a shade of red that made his beard, mustache and remaining hair look white by comparison. He turned and stumbled over the Bovine Plate's udder, which was now dangling by a single leather strap.

"Does anyone know who this is?" asked Dolt. He was half-leading, half-dragging a naked man. The man was glistening with slime from having been inside a pod. Around them, Dolt's troop of Fallen Ones was gleefully smashing pods and tormenting drones.

Griswold had his back to Dolt and Red Vex had been hidden from view behind him, so Dolt could not see what had been going on between them. Red Vex's goblin, however, had been crouched behind the sacrificial altar watching the action with wide eyes. He mimed the details to his fellow goblins who took obvious delight in mimicking the series of obscene gestures. As discreetly as possible, Griswold tried to refasten the Bovine Plate's udder. It let out a loud "moo" when his fumbling fingers accidentally squeezed one of its teats.

All this was lost on Dolt, who rarely noticed anything unless it was trying to kill him or he was trying to kill it.

Red Vex was merely annoyed until she saw who Dolt had with him. It was Lazarus.

Lazarus saw her at the same time and, slick with slime, squirmed out of Dolt's grasp and ran to her. "Red!" he greeted her. "I feared you had been lost. All praise to the Master!"

"You!" accused Griswold recognizing the man who had brought the wrath of Hell down on his hometown and on his family. He moved to intercept him, but Red Vex motioned him to stay still.

"Praise the Master," repeated Red Vex automatically.

"Praise and glory to the Overmind!" He rushed to embrace her. If he recognized Griswold, he gave no indication. He only had eyes for Red Vex.

"Who?" asked Red Vex. "Don't we serve Diablo?"

The former ArchBishop of Tristram looked puzzled. "Now we serve the might of the Swarm," he insisted. "All hail the Overmind!"

"That's what I thought," accused Red Vex. "You were the one who let them in here." With that, she grabbed Lazarus by the scrotum and dragged him toward the bloodstained altar. The move had the added bonus of temporarily paralyzing Dolt and Griswold with sympathetic pain.

She threw Lazarus on the table he had used to send the souls of children to his Master. The truth was, as long as the Prime Evils were all trapped in their respective Soul Stones, Red Vex's allegiance to any of them was mostly academic. Nevertheless, she was not fond of surprises, and if being sold out to a bunch of hungry alien bugs wasn't a surprise, then nothing was. Furthermore, Red Vex had a sensitive spot when it came to betrayals. She loved dishing them out, but nothing made her more furious than being betrayed herself. Finally, while sex was usually the preferred way to alleviate Lust Frenzy, Red Vex had learned early on that murder worked just as well.

"Wait!" gasped Lazarus as Red Vex pulled the sacrificial blade out of its holder beneath the altar. "You don't understand!"

"Lass, no!" cried Griswold. "Don't do it!"

"Your madness ends here, betrayer!" She plunged the knife into Lazarus. As his blood flowed through the channels in the edges of the table, the pentacle outside the Temple began to glow with a harsh crimson light.

Red Vex, spattered with blood, turned to face Griswold. Her eyes silently dared him to tell her that he hadn't wanted to do exactly the same thing to the former ArchBishop. For the second time in barely as many minutes, Griswold felt deeply ashamed.

Dolt was savvy enough to realize that he was missing several pieces of vital information needed to understand what had just transpired. Solo would have insisted on details and explanations. Dolt ordered his goblin troop to fall in and decided not to get involved.

Chapter 14: Late morning; Hell

"I'm going down to Cowtown, the cow's a friend to me. Lives beneath the ocean and that's where I will be; beneath the waves, the waves, and that's where I will be. I'm going to see the cow beneath the sea!" sang Ichabod.

Solo pulled hard on the choke chain again. She knew the Collar of Submission would lose its effectiveness after invoking its power so many times in rapid succession, but keeping Conjurer Ichabod focused was presenting a major challenge.

Ichabod gagged. "Yes, Good Master?"

"I need you to at least try to get a grip on reality here."

"Reality?" Ichabod began laughing. "Oh, that's a good one." He laughed harder and harder. Even the Collar of Submission could not stop his laughing fit. Tears streamed down his face and he wet himself. His bullrog dissolved into a pile of rotting cow parts. Finally, Solo Stone Cursed him.

He seemed much subdued when the spell finally wore off. "There is a war going on between the Forces of Order and the Forces of Chaos," he said without preamble.

"You mean the Sin War?" asked Solo.

Ichabod shook his head. "The Sin War is nothing but a pale reflection of the true conflict. The Boojum represents Order. Eternal changeless Order. It removes anything or anyone that threatens its sense of Order. If things get too out of hand, the Boojum resets things to a time and situation more to its liking."

The fact that the doubt on Solo's face was immediately visible to Ichabod was a testament to how tired she was feeling.

"You're wondering how I can know this," said the Conjurer. "After all, if the world resets with all of us in it, how would we be able to tell?" He sighed. "You see, the Zerg invasion is all my fault. I went beyond the boundaries of the universe into the Battle Net."

Solo had heard legends regarding the Battle Net, but she had always assumed that it was some kind of magic weapon or artifact. Ichabod was speaking as if the Battle Net was a realm or a place. She would need to do more research.

"I was hoping to conjure up a hero to come save Tristram and defeat Diablo. Instead, the Defiler followed me back through the portal and built a nest under my house. The rest you know," said Ichabod.

"But I didn't come away from the Battle Net empty handed either," said Ichabod. "The sum of all the knowledge of the gods of the Battle Net downloaded into my mind. It was terrifying. So much of the wisdom of the gods was actually garbage. It took a long time for me to make any sense of it at all, but eventually some of the pieces began to fall together."

Ichabod tugged at his robe trying to get more comfortable. The nearest change of pants was a long way away. "You see," he continued, "it turns out that the Boojum has held sway over this world, and Tristram in particular, for... Well, since it seems to stop, reset and restart time at will, there's no telling how long it's been."

True to her training, Solo was trying to be objective. Trying very hard.

"You're looking at me like I'm crazy," said Ichabod, "and I guess I've earned that. But bear with me: There's another force in the universe. It represents chaos, conflict and change. It has many names. Some call it the Hand of Fate because it sometimes manifests itself as a huge disembodied gauntlet. Others call it the Strife Bringer. Most of the people who are aware of its existence simply call it the Cursor, presumably because everything it touches is cursed.

"I saw the Cursor while I was struggling with the Defiler," said Ichabod. "It's with us right now and, somehow, it's keeping the Boojum at bay. It used me to bring the Zerg to Tristram and somehow the Zerg have anchored themselves in this reality so that the Boojum can't cause them to lag out."

"So what happens if the Boojum comes back in and removes the Zerg?" asked Solo, "Wouldn't that make us all its prisoner again?"

Ichabod shrugged. "Maybe, but I feel like more things have changed than the Boojum may be able to reset. It's just a feeling. No proof or anything. I just feel like events have been set in motion that can't be altered by anyone or anything. I don't know how many of us will see another sunrise."

Solo said nothing. He seemed unusually lucid, but Ichabod's tortured mind was such a mess that there was no telling whether anything he said was even remotely reliable.

"So, I'm going to choose my last words now while I have a chance," said Ichabod. "How about, 'I regret that I have but one life to give for Tristram.'" He thought a moment and then shook his head. "No, giving one life is plenty. How about, 'Hasta la vista, bay-bee,' or maybe, 'Say goodnight, Gracie.'"

Ichabod was on his way back to that special place in his head where fat, happy cows munched on green, green grass. Solo considered using the Collar of Submission on him one more time but decided against it. There seemed little to be gained by it.

"Goodnight and have a pleasant tomorrow," said Ichabod.

* * *

Red Vex was the first one through the door, followed by Griswold, and then Dolt, and finally all seven Fallen Ones. "We can proceed," said the Hell Spawn walking through the room to the red portal. Solo noted that she was spattered with blood.

Griswold just nodded and followed her.

"What happened to Wilbur?" asked Dolt noticing the decomposing remains of Ichabod's bullrog.

Solo shrugged. "I think Ichabod may have accidentally dispelled it."

"And that's the way it is," agreed Ichabod absently.

Dolt picked up Ichabod, threw him over his shoulder, and followed his goblins through the portal. Solo glanced around the room one more time and joined them.

On the other side of the portal, the great pentacle glowed with a bloody light. Solo caught up with Griswold and he told her about Red Vex's reunion with Black Jade and Lazarus. Solo sensed significant gaps in his telling of the tale. She also noted that his udder was crooked. The Fallen Ones were excitedly pantomiming a variety of obscene acts that they seemed to embellish each time around. Based on these two facts, Solo was able to make an educated guess about the part of Griswold's story that was missing. Before she could get Red Vex to confirm her suspicions, the Hell Spawn stepped into the center of the pentacle and vanished into a red mist.

Griswold stepped around the jeering Fallen Ones and followed Red Vex.

"Time for Tubby bye-byes," shouted Ichabod squirming off of Dolt's shoulder. He threw his arms wide open and skipped after Griswold and Red Vex. "No matter where you go, there you are!"

"Perhaps it would be kindest to put him out of our, I mean, his misery," suggested Dolt.

Solo shook her head. "If he wanted to be dead, he's had plenty of opportunities. I think being crazy is just his way of coping."

Dolt shrugged and ordered his Fallen Ones into the pentacle. "And stop doing that!" he commanded after observing four of them acting out the most bizarre (presumably) sexual act that he or Solo had ever seen. The rest of the Fallen Ones were applauding and cheering wildly.

Despite its ominous appearance, the pentacle worked just like any Horadrim Portal that Solo had ever been through. The exit point was at the top of a staircase fashioned from the combined bones of demons and mortals. When Solo and Dolt arrived, Red Vex, Griswold and Ichabod were already at the bottom of the stairs and the Fallen Ones were on their way down. Like the previous chamber they had been in, this was a huge subterranean cavern. The ceiling was so high as to only be barely visible, and there was no chance of seeing all the way across it from one wall to the other.

A man in a tattered robe and headdress appeared near Red Vex. His body was covered in Zerg growths and writhing parasites. The Hell Spawn turned and blasted him. The impacts sent him reeling away and, when he hit the ground, his body burst open in a spray of toxins and parasites.

A second one materialized near Griswold. Griswold's Edge knocked him back and the fast-block shield protected Griswold from the resulting spray of poisons.

"They were infested, just like Cain," observed Griswold as Solo and Dolt joined them.

"Don't cry for me, Argentina," nodded Ichabod.

"That's disturbing," said Red Vex. "It's possible that they were infected on one of the upper levels and made it down here afterwards, but it more likely means that the Zerg have penetrated even here."

As if to confirm the Hell Spawn's dire assessment, a bolt of electricity danced up and down the length of The Grandfather. Then the ground shook as if a giant boulder had just rolled off a cliff.

"They're heeere," observed Ichabod.

"I really may need to kill him," grumbled Dolt.

The ground shook again, and once more. It was definitely the footsteps of something very big. Then they heard the creature bellow.

Dolt, Griswold and Solo each recognized the battle cry at once. "O. Lord!" they said together.

It was not a prayer. None of the three was particularly religious. Griswold had not gone to church regularly for years. Solo knew a lot about many religions and, therefore, had a hard time putting her faith in any of them. Dolt had pillaged several churches and temples in his time.

In fact, 'O. Lord' was short for Obsidian Lord, the most aggressive and dangerous species of horned demon. The fact that most people who found themselves in the path of these charging rhino-like monsters uttered "O. Lord" in its more traditional context was merely a convenient coincidence.

Baal had created the creatures as to be living siege engines. They could topple castle walls, splinter reinforced gates, and turn catapults or other such weaponry into kindling; and heaven help anyone too slow to get out of their way. As a species, however, horned demons were clumsy and stupid, especially in close combat.

Everyone spread out. They knew that anyone who was not the target of the monster's charge would get a clean shot at its flanks and back. Even the would-be victim might be able to jump out of the way at the last second, if he kept his wits about him.

It wasn't an Obsidian Lord. The creature that charged out of the gloom would have been twenty feet tall if it had been standing upright. Its outstretched arms ended in scythe-like claws that gave it a span of eighteen feet. Its head had a mouth full of jagged teeth and serrated mandibles. Right between its giant compound eyes, it had a single four-foot curved horn.

When the Zerg had discovered Baal's living siege engines under Tristram, it was only natural that they combine them with their own living siege engines. The O. Lord-Ultralisk hybrids were literally a smashing success. So far, not a single man-made structure in Khanduras had withstood the charge of these great beasts.

It had targeted Ichabod. Being crazy, but not stupid, Ichabod took to the air and let the monster pass under him. "You are the wind beneath my wings," he said.

Although she was busy trying not to get killed herself, Solo took note of this. She had thought that Ichabod could only fly in his CowLord persona. This ran through her head as she hit the ground to dodge under the giant sweeping claw. Either she was lucky or The Grandfather was starting to manifest an ability to take independent action against the Zerg. Solo landed with the great sword sticking straight up. Its keen blade severed the monster's arm at the first joint behind the giant claw.

On its other side, Dolt jumped over the other claw in a hydraulically assisted leap while Griswold rolled under it. Red Vex had been out of harm's way and scored Bloodstar hits

across its left flank. With the exception of the one who was crushed under the O. Lord-Ultralisk's massive foot, the Fallen Ones all scurried to relative safety.

The O. Lord-Ultralisk dug its remaining claw into the ground and braked to a stop. It looked down at the spurting stump where its right claw had been and seemed to shrug. It turned for another attack.

Solo hit it with a Fireball and Dolt let loose with both flame-throwers. That assault, combined with another barrage of Bloodstars would have been enough to bring down just about any creature any of them had ever encountered. The Zerg war machine just kept coming. This time, it had chosen Dolt as its target.

Dolt leaped over the great horn, intending to bring his axe down on the creature's neck. At the last moment, the monster tossed its head back, catching the Barbarian and throwing him further back. His axe struck the creature's dorsal spines and cracked its carapace before he tumbled to the ground.

Meanwhile, Solo drove her Dragon's sword of Vampires into the monster's flank while cutting across its left rear knee with The Grandfather. Griswold's Edge struck the right front knee, causing the O. Lord-Ultralisk to stagger. Its charge fouled by the attacks to its legs, the monster pivoted and snapped at Red Vex with its mandibles and jagged teeth. The Hell Spawn jumped back and scored hits on its eyes and face with three more Bloodstars.

The O. Lord-Ultralisk reared up on its hind legs and bellowed its rage. Solo rolled under it and drove The Grandfather's entire length deep into the beast's belly. The sword further voiced its disapproval of all things Zerg with an electrical charge to its gut. Dolt got to his feet and swung at the monster's back, cracking the carapace again.

Griswold's Edge also found a joint in the hybrid's natural armor and penetrated deep. The sword had been in pretty bad shape following Torvan's burial, and there was only so much Griswold could do in the way of field repairs. Fortunately, Solo had given him one of her Blacksmith Oils to help restore the enchanted blade. Griswold quietly broke his vow never to use the stuff, and now he was glad that he had.

The O. Lord-Ultralisk had had enough. The final insult was a Fallen One, seeing which way the battle was going, running up and jabbing it with a spear. It toppled sideways to the tainted earth with a booming thud.

It took Solo a few minutes to work her swords out of the creature's body. The Grandfather was wedged in its carapace and continued to feed voltage into the dead monster until she finally pulled it free.

"The armor I could fashion from tha' shell," said Griswold.

"Godly Plate of the Whale?" asked Solo.

"Certainly Godly quality," agreed Griswold, "an' maybe a wee bit better!" A thought struck him. "I've got t' go an' have a look at that claw y'severed. I bet it would make a fine sword."

Ichabod came to a landing on the creature's back.

"You weren't much help," commented Dolt.

"I've always depended on the kindness of strangers," explained the conjurer.

"Well, the Zerg are certainly here," said Red Vex. "The infested Counselors were iffy, but this one's definitely not one of ours."

"Does that change our plan?" Solo wanted to know.

Red Vex shrugged. "Assuming Diablo's still down here, no," she said.

"Ach, oh no!"

"What is it, Gris?" called Solo, turning toward the sound of his voice.

The Master Blacksmith of Tristram was carrying a body in his arms. It was a handsome brown-haired boy, still in his teens.

"Zak's Light!" gasped Ichabod. His recognition of the corpse snapped him back to reality. "Tell me that isn't..."

Griswold laid the body down tenderly. "Aye," he nodded. "I found him over yonder." He gestured past where the O. Lord-Ultralisk's claw lay. "It's Prince Albrecht."

"Aww no," said Ichabod. "He was a good kid."

"Aye," agreed Griswold. "He'd ha' made a fine king. A real people's king. He was always in town minglin' w' the common folk. He joined us for dinner many a time."

Ichabod smiled at the memory of the young prince. "He always used to say, 'Please, my father is Your Majesty; I'm just Albrecht...'"

"...But you can call me Al," finished Griswold.

"There's not a mark on him," observed Solo, "except for that wound to his forehead. What do you think..."

She was interrupted by a choked cry from Red Vex. She was backing away from the body, pale and shaking in terror.

"What is it, lass?" asked Griswold.

Red Vex shook her head and seemed unable to speak on the first few attempts. "Prince Albrecht was Diablo's host body," she managed, "I was there when Diablo possessed it. I arranged it myself."

Dolt snorted. "You would have thought that the Lord of Terror would have picked a sturdier body."

"You don't understand," said the Hell Spawn. "This body's dead and the Soulstone is gone!"

The Grandfather suddenly came alive with a blast of lightning that almost caused it to leap out of Solo's hand.

By this point, they had all seen Zerg creatures burst out of the ground to attack. The new creature exploded out of the ground in a blast of flames and a shower of rock and debris. Like many Zerg creatures, this one seemed to be a mass of multi-jointed legs and claws. Four long legs supported it and another quartet of clawed appendages protruded from its

back, some twelve feet above the ground. Its face was a nightmare combination of needle-like teeth, antennae, mandibles, and six multi-faceted eyes. This was no mere Zerg monster; she was the Hive Warden. A Zerg Queen.

It was no ordinary Zerg Queen either. She was reddish in color and a pair of great white curved horns protruded from her head on either side of her feelers. Two rows of curved white horns ran down the length of her back, from the back of her head to the tip of her abdomen. A malevolent crimson light glowed from between her two largest eyes. It was the Soulstone of Diablo.

"Oh," groaned Ichabod. "We are so screwed."

Chapter 15: High Noon; Hell

No creature that knows fear can resist the initial impulse to flee in terror when confronted by the Lord of Terror. The truly courageous or suicidally insane can master their fear and face Diablo, but the initial panic reaction is always there. As a result, everyone, Red Vex included, found themselves tearing a path up the stairs, desiring nothing more than escape.

With a gesture, Queen Diablo turned the world around them to fire. It was Diablo's own special brand of Apocalypse spell that came with a head full of fear. So much so that victims barely noticed the second- and third-degree burns.

For Dolt, it was being unable to move or fight as the unnamable doom that had been looming over him for days crept closer and closer.

Solo's first assignment as a professional Bard had been a simple gossip run between a couple of kingdoms on the western coast. Her mentor had assured her that the route was relatively safe and well traveled. She had been excited and confident. Until nightfall. Something was following her. Not following her, tracking her. It never quite caught up to her, but she somehow knew it meant her great harm. It was with her each of the three nights it took her to reach her destination. She never saw it, but she had a distinct impression of a faceless man with skin that glowed like the moon. She had been so rattled that she was barely able to deliver the news she had been carrying. She delayed returning home for almost a week and, ultimately, received substandard marks for her performance. But she never saw the faceless man again. Until now.

After all he'd been through, Ichabod could cope with anything. There was just one thing that he really feared: It was waiting for the Boojum as he lagged, and then softly and suddenly vanishing away. The writhing eels were just gratuitous.

Red Vex was treated to a replay of her last hours as a mortal at a level of detail that she had thought she'd repressed.

Griswold had never gotten over discovering Hildy's abused and murdered body deep in the caves, and then coming home to find the bodies of his wife and younger son, Hogan. He got to discover them again and again.

Ironically, the Fallen Ones were the least affected. They feared everything, so they were more or less used to the sensation.

Having already lived their worst fears, Griswold and Red Vex recovered first once they had come through the pentacle and were out of Queen Diablo's immediate presence. Red Vex ordered the Fallen Ones to heel. Only one was missing, and that was nothing short of incredible. Dolt and Solo were both still quaking with fear, but looked like they would recover. Red Vex was familiar with their breed of hero (she had killed many and fled from many more) and they were pretty reliable. Ichabod was singing, so there was no telling with him.

"I'm going to go get the Staff of Lazarus," she told Griswold. "We can close the portal and lock Diablo up down there."

"O. Lord!" cried Griswold.

"Snap out of it!" Red Vex began. "I need..." She stopped, suddenly understanding what the Master Blacksmith had actually meant. Another O. Lord-Ultralisk was charging out of the gloom.

Griswold's fast-block shield did not fail him. Unfortunately, no magical protection or enchantment could change the fact that Griswold weighed a mere 260 pounds to the O. Lord-Ultralisk's eight tons. The shield kept him from being killed on the spot, but there was nothing it could do to keep him from being driven like a golf ball through the red Horadrim Portal to the Temple.

Red Vex darted after him. After all, it was where she was going anyway. The others would just have to cope with the O. Lord-Ultralisk themselves.

If someone had taken the time to take Dolt aside to a safe setting and discuss his fears calmly and rationally, the approach would have failed miserably. The one thing that Dolt needed to counter the nameless dread consuming him was a great big, easily identifiable dread like the O. Lord-Ultralisk towering over him. Dolt let out a whoop of glee and leaped at the monster like a man reaching for the last life preserver.

The O. Lord-Ultralisk was a bit taken aback. It had had no idea that such small prey could behave so aggressively. It tried to step back and circle around, and this gave Dolt a perfect opportunity to jump on its back. Dolt's axe bit deep into the creature's armored hide and it reared up on its hindmost legs in an effort to shake him off.

Dolt held on and the O. Lord-Ultralisk charged off into the gloom, past the Defiler's pit and into the adjacent chamber, leaving Solo and Ichabod alone with the Fallen Ones.

The Fallen Ones, seeing that it was now safe, crept back toward Solo and Ichabod. They saw that their masters were distracted. Maybe distracted enough to be easy pickings.

"Don't even think about it," said Solo as the bravest goblin came almost close enough to touch her. It was not clear if Solo was warning the Fallen One off, or giving herself good advice. Either way the goblin hesitated.

Solo stood up straight. Her skin had broken into so many goosebumps that she could have lit a fire by rubbing a piece of flint across her forearm. She drew her swords and felt immediately reassured by their weight in her hands. Though unable to act, she had seen all that transpired: Dolt riding off on the O. Lord-Ultralisk, and Red Vex and Griswold going back into the Temple to close the pentacle. She wondered where Diablo was. She didn't have to wonder long.

A red mist swirled in the center of the pentacle and Queen Diablo emerged. She had been famished after her metamorphosis and had hungrily devoured almost all her Counselors. That last Fallen One had finally taken the edge off of her appetite. Albrecht had been little more than the second pick of a pretty dismal lot. This body was a living weapon, and it was time to see what it could do.

As Queen Diablo stared down at Solo, Ichabod and the Fallen Ones, Solo immediately understood that the Queen had so many ways to kill them that she was having difficulty choosing one. Solo used the moment to light a Lightning Wall under her and hit her with a Fireball. She succeeded only in snapping the Queen out of her contemplative mood.

A fiery Apocalypse blast exploded between Solo and Ichabod. This time the fear effect was much less, but the fire hurt more. At the same time, Queen Diablo seemed to inhale deeply. At her throat, a huge pouch, like a bullfrog's, inflated. The Zerg Queen snapped her head forward and the sac squeezed tight again. She spat out a mass of writhing worms. Their diameters ranged from about the size of Solo's pinkie to about the size of her wrist. Their lengths ranged from just under a foot to just over three, and each had a three-jawed mouth lined with saw-like teeth.

Solo got a good view of the Glave Wurms as they missed her head by inches and struck one of the goblins. The worms tore into the hapless Fallen One with a gusto that reminded Solo of a species of tropical fish she'd once heard about. Their toothy three-way jaws cut pieces out of their victim's flesh as easily as a tailor's scissors cut pieces out of a strip of fabric. In less than a second, the goblin was gone and the worms had turned on each other. A moment later, only one bloated worm remained. Having consumed both the goblin and its fellows, it had grown to the size of a donkey cart and was unable to move. In fact, Solo realized, it looked just like a Zerg pod now.

The pod hatched, releasing not one, but two Broodlings. The new creatures were six-foot, barrel-chested humanoids covered with leathery red skin. The bone white horns protruding from their heads and backs made them look more demonic than Zergish. In fact, Solo realized remembering illustrations she'd seen in texts on the Prime Evils, they looked exactly like miniature versions of Diablo. True to their lineage, the Diabolical Broodlings attacked viciously and with fire. Liquid fire similar to her own Inferno spell washed over Solo. She was going to die here unless she got somewhere where she could cast a Healing spell on herself and regroup.

Queen Diablo lunged at Solo, but one of the attacking Diabolical Broodlings got in her way. Irritated, Queen Diablo devoured the Broodling in three bites. There were more where he came from.

Solo took advantage of the confusion, grabbed Ichabod and ran.

"There's no place like home, there's no place like home," Ichabod was saying.

Solo actually agreed with him for once, but didn't have time to say so. They just missed taking the brunt of another Apocalypse blast and two more Diabolical Broodlings were hatching out of the remains of another goblin. Having nowhere else to go, they dove into the Defiler's pit.

* * *

In his career, Dolt Lungren had battled two dragons and a gydra. He had been a teenager and a prisoner of war when he encountered the gydra. His captors had offered him amnesty in return for agreeing to serve as catapult fodder in the battle against the mighty gorgon-hydra. Dolt had been lucky. His squad had drawn a high number and the monster had grown full and sleepy after devouring his fellow prisoners. The archers and sorcerers from whom Dolt and his squad were distracting the monster were able to finish it off and Dolt had escaped unscathed.

Dolt had been part of a small band of adventurers when he battled the acid-spitting swamp dragon. Not all of them had escaped with their lives, but they ultimately slew the beast. He had had a respectable hoard of treasure and the tale of the battle had earned

Dolt and his surviving companions free drinks for a year at any tavern in the dragon's former territory.

Things had not gone nearly so well when he and his band took on their second dragon. This one was a mountain dragon, a fire-breather. He was a wily old drake with an appetite for destruction and a wide repertoire of spells at his disposal. Dolt had been the only survivor, and he had done this by diving off a fifty-foot cliff into a river and nearly drowning. He lost his armor and weapons and had had to make his way out of the dragon's vast territory armed with nothing more than a rabbit skin full of rocks and a crudely made spear.

Dolt considered the O. Lord-Ultralisk a dragon-class monster and, considering that this was the second he had fought in a single hour, things were going swimmingly. The creature finally bucked hard enough to throw Dolt off its back and sliced at him with one of its great claws. There was the clang of metal hitting metal as Dolt parried with his axe. Although Dolt succeeded in preventing a decapitating blow, the force of the impact threw him backwards several feet.

The O. Lord-Ultralisk reared back and struck like a snake, grasping the Barbarian in mandibles capable of crushing boulders. It opened its toothy maw to receive the armored morsel.

Staring down the O. Lord-Ultralisk's throat, Dolt drew on his experience as a dragon slayer. Specifically, what is the only unarmored part of a dragon's body? He was looking at it. In the case of the mountain dragon, the knowledge had done him no good because fire came out of that dragon's mouth. As far as Dolt knew, he was in no danger of that here. In fact, fire gave him an idea. He reached into the O. Lord-Ultralisk's mouth and let him have it with both flame-throwers. The O. Lord-Ultralisk's brain was small. It cooked quickly and evenly.

Dolt squirmed out of the dead monster's grasp and landed on his feet. Almost before he hit the ground, what felt like a flying castle wall slammed into him and sent him flying across the chamber. He hit the bone-like cavern wall with equally jarring force. Crimson warning lights lit up all over the inside of his visor. His head was still ringing from the two impacts. He could feel sticky blood between his helmet and his scalp. He peered into the darkness of the cavern. Another O. Lord-Ultralisk was stepping over the body of its fallen brood mate and lumbering his way. Off in the distance, he thought he could make out the huge shapes of at least five more of them.

Dolt thought about having a healing potion and then decided against it. He didn't relish the idea of being jabbed in the ass again. Besides, he found that a little pain focused him wonderfully in battle. "There are only six of them," he decided out loud and gripping his axe in both hands, "I don't need a potion yet."

Dolt hesitated. That was, without question, the stupidest thought that had ever entered his head, and he was a man who had entertained legions of stupid thoughts in his lifetime.

"Activate Stim-Pack 2," said Dolt. The armor injected the potion into his right buttock and Dolt winced. Somewhere inside Dolt's chest, an artery on the verge of a massive hemorrhage mended itself. The feeling of doom that had been hanging over Dolt since his arrival at the Tristram refugee camp evaporated.

The O. Lord-Ultralisk lowered its head and charged with a thunderous bellow.

Dolt raised his axe high and charged too, with his own battle cry: "DOLT LUUUUUNGREEEEENNNN!!!"

* * *

The force of the O. Lord-Ultralisk's blow had carried Griswold right through the Temple's first chamber. He had struck the door at the other end and splintered it. That must have hurt, mused Red Vex.

Strangely, Griswold was not dead or unconscious on the other side. His shield lay on the floor, but there was no sign of Griswold. Red Vex stooped and slipped the shield on her arm.

She followed the hall around to the main chamber where she had killed Lazarus and left his staff. Griswold's sword and helmet lay at the entrance to the chamber amid a cluster of cantaloupe-sized pods. The pods continued up the side of the doorway, and Red Vex guessed that there were at least thirty.

"Hello, again, lover," said Black Jade.

This time the voice came from even higher up than it had before. Black Jade was crouched in a corner near the ceiling. She reminded Red Vex of nothing less than a gigantic spider, and Red Vex said so.

Black Jade laughed. "Come into my parlor." She was holding Griswold tightly in the crook of one of her great claws. "You didn't tell me that your little champion here was our friend Angus Griswold. I see you tasted a little piece of his soul too." She shook her head sadly. "And so soon after our reunion? I'm a little hurt."

"Well, you were too busy playing with your toys to satisfy me," retorted Red Vex. She edged a little closer to the pods growing up and down the doorway. "And, I might add, that's not the first time that's happened either."

"If you want something done right..." began Black Jade. She changed her mind. "Let's not get into that argument in front of Griswold here. Gris and I were just getting reacquainted. I know we didn't get to know him while we were in town, but it turns out that I had an opportunity to get quite close to his daughter." She leered at Griswold. "Quite close."

Red Vex arched an eyebrow. "Oh? When was that?"

"You were off tormenting Alchemist Zhar that weekend," said Black Jade. "Lazarus and I needed to take some Counselors down to meet Diablo, and we needed poor little Hildy to open the portal for us."

She shook her head sadly at Griswold. "She was such a sweet little thing. It was really quite touching how convinced she was that her Papa was going to come and save her. Of course, you didn't." Black Jade let out a sigh of mock-pity. "One can only imagine how confused and disappointed she must have been when Lazarus drove the knife into her heart. Do you think she died hating you for not finding her in time? Who knows, maybe she's just like us now. Maybe she'll come back and visit you some night." Black Jade

paused thoughtfully. "Just the off-chance that that might happen is worth letting you live." With that, she dropped Griswold to the floor.

Griswold said nothing as he scrambled to his feet. His face was crimson and veins stood out on his neck and forehead. Black Jade may have changed masters, but she still did her job with remarkable speed and efficiency. With a few well-chosen cruel words, she had stoked an inferno of hatred within Griswold that would consume anything it touched. The first thing he wanted to destroy was Black Jade, then probably Red Vex, and then anything that got in his way.

Red Vex couldn't abide by that. "You know what? I think it's pretty rude to be hanging up there talking to Griswold and ignoring me." Griswold's hate was almost as distracting to her as her own hatred for Black Jade was.

"Oh, don't be like that," cooed Black Jade. "I've got something for you too."

"And I have something for you as well!" Red Vex swung Griswold's shield into the pods clustered around the doorway. A score of them burst open releasing another swarm of Vexlings. "Why don't you take your toys and go rape yourself?"

"You stupid tart," swore Black Jade, "Do you have any idea how long it took me to kill the last batch?" She burrowed into the ceiling with the Vexlings in hot pursuit. "Don't you even think about running away again," shouted Black Jade. "I'll be back."

"I'll kill 'er," swore Griswold reaching for his sword.

Red Vex shook her head. "Angus Griswold." She had her foot planted firmly on the blade. "Are you sure you want to start down that road?" His hatred was roaring out of control. "Before you answer, I have something to show you." She drew the Griswold family portrait from behind her wing and unrolled it. "Do you think anything you do to Black Jade will do any of them any good?"

Griswold stared at the faces of his lost wife and children.

"Look at her," said Red Vex drawing his attention to Hildy. "Do you think the little girl in this painting could have died hating her father? Or anyone?"

Red Vex waited. The inferno had died down to embers.

"Do you want to remember her for what was done to her, or do you want to remember her for who she was?"

The storm of hatred in Griswold's heart subsided. This was a first for Red Vex, but it had been an unusual week. Besides, she could hardly pass up an opportunity to thwart Mephisto and undo Black Jade's handiwork at the same time.

"Now then," continued the Hell Spawn. "Two things: First of all, I'm the only one here allowed to hate Black Jade. Secondly, do you remember how I told you that if you ever had a chance to die free of Mephisto's influence, you should take it?"

"Aye?" said Griswold nodding.

"Well, this is your lucky day!" The point-blank Bloodstar caught Griswold right in the neck and fused his windpipe shut. The Master Blacksmith toppled backwards clutching his throat and trying to draw air.

He looked up and saw Red Vex looking down at him, watching him die. Her eyes were full of contempt. He looked deeper into her eyes. There was something there. Something beneath the hatred. If only there was more time, but Torvan was waiting...

Red Vex looked down at Griswold's body and sneered. Had she ever been so frail and gullibly human? She shook her head.

There was a rumble of rocks as Black Jade emerged through one of the chamber walls. "It's just you and me now, lover," said Red Vex without turning around.

"I see you've prepared a meal for us for," Black Jade too was resigned to what would inevitably happen when the Lust Frenzy took effect, "afterwards."

Consume Griswold? The thought hadn't occurred to Red Vex even though she had tasted human flesh on many occasions. She just shrugged.

"Shall we?" asked Red Vex. There was always the chance that the monstrous alien bulk would wind up on top of her in the throes of their passion. That might be enough to put an end to her ridiculous existence.

"Let's," agreed Black Jade.

Red Vex shrieked and leaped at her old lover. Griswold's fast-block shield saved her from a swipe of Black Jade's huge claw. She raked her nails across Black Jade's cheek, just missing her eyes. Black Jade used her humanoid hands to push Red Vex away.

Red Vex tumbled off of Black Jade's massive body and landed near the doorway. She started to get up and then stopped. Black Jade was bleeding from the scratch Red Vex had given her. She herself was bleeding from a gouge Black Jade had left in her breast pushing her away.

Something was very wrong. Black Jade sniffed the air and recognized the scent of Red Vex's ichor. Red Vex sniffed too.

"Your pheromones," gasped Red Vex. "They're alien."

"You're repulsive!" breathed Black Jade wonderingly.

Their eyes met and, for the first time since they'd become Hell's Pawns, Black Jade and Red Vex shared something akin to a moment of joy.

Red Vex picked up Griswold's Edge and stood.

The same thought entered their heads at the same time. The same words left their mouths at the same time: "Now, you die, bitch!"

* * *

Solo and Ichabod tumbled into the Defiler's pit. It was, as far as she could tell, devoid of life. CowLord's Bova spell had seen to that. Solo wasted no time casting Healing spells on herself and on Ichabod. She then cast a Mana Shield and guzzled her last Mana potion to replenish her depleted ball.

"I have an idea!" said Ichabod brightly. "Now that Diablo's in a female body, perhaps we can introduce a gender-identity crisis and he'll become so confused that he'll make a mistake."

"Like what?" snapped Solo. She spied something metallic nearby. It was the battered remains of the CowLord armor. The bovine helmet lay in two pieces. If this wasn't an instance of desperate times calling for desperate measures, then nothing was. She picked up the two pieces of the helmet. The Defiler had cleaved it cleanly in two and the pieces fit together neatly. She found her last Blacksmith Oil and began applying it to the helmet. "Ichabod, come here a minute," she said when she had finished.

"What?" asked the Conjuror.

Solo spun around. With one hand, she slapped the helmet on Ichabod's head, with the visor down. The Blacksmith Oil had repaired the helmet just barely. If Ichabod sneezed hard, it would probably split in two again.

With her other hand, Solo attached her choke chain to the Collar of Submission around Ichabod's neck. "I need CowLord NOW!" she shouted giving the chain as hard a tug as she could without breaking Ichabod's neck.

Above them, a Diabolical Broodling had discovered their hiding place and was calling to its fellows. Queen Diablo was following.

Nothing seemed to be happening.

"Come on, CowLord," breathed Solo.

A dim green glow flickered inside the visor's eye sockets.

The first of the Broodlings were scrambling down the side of the pit. Queen Diablo's ghastly head peered over the edge.

Ichabod grasped the choke chain and yanked it out of Solo's hands. "COWLORD SUBMITS TO NO ONE!" A violent nimbus swirled around Ichabod as he conjured a new suit of CowLord armor from his tattered robe and the Collar of Submission. The energy field surrounding him seemed to consist of thousands of tiny hexagons like a honeycomb. The hexes flashed on and off like insane fireflies. Watching it, Solo got a vivid mental image of Ichabod literally hacking at the rules of reality.

When the smoke cleared, CowLord towered above Solo in a gleaming new suit of armor. She had been in Ichabod's company far too long. She knew this because she had an insane impulse to introduce Queen Diablo and CowLord: "CowLord, the Lord of Terror. Lord of Terror, CowLord." That impulse went away as the first pair of Diabolical Broodlings reached her. Solo's swords flashed and The Grandfather delivered lightning strikes at each touch. The Broodlings' hides were incredibly tough, however, and only the most precise strikes even drew blood.

An Apocalypse blast caught Solo and both Broodlings flat-footed. Solo's Mana Shield held, but it wouldn't take very much of that kind of punishment. The Broodlings hadn't had any such protection, and both screamed in pain. Solo Teleported behind them and drove her swords into their backs. The one that The Grandfather found died instantly. The other jerked free and turned to face her. Solo hit it with a Lightning spell and finished it off.

Queen Diablo threw her head back and spat globs of worms at the two bodies. As before, the worms consumed the bodies and then each other. Moments later, two more Diabolical

Broodlings hatched out of each body. Although math had never been one of her favorite subjects, Solo had no trouble calculating her odds of survival if Queen Diablo was going to continue to spawn two Broodlings for each one she killed. If she was to have a prayer of living to tell her story, she was going to have to take the fight directly to Queen Diablo herself.

Solo Teleported up to the edge of the pit, behind Queen Diablo, and learned an important lesson about looking before one leaps. The area around Queen Diablo was packed with her Broodlings. Not only had she spawned them out of the bodies of the hapless goblins that had accompanied them, she had even used the dead Gillioids that Solo had left lying around. Solo found herself surrounded.

Luckily for Solo, the Diabolical Broodlings were slightly more surprised to see her than she was to see them. There was no time to think. Solo's swords went to work. The Grandfather hungrily sought out all things Zerg, creating a dazzling lightning show as it did so. The vampiric sword transformed the blood of its victims to Mana, refueling Solo's powers.

Meanwhile, CowLord had taken to the air to confront Queen Diablo. He did not know whether or not the Glave Wurms could eat through his armor, so he avoided them. The parasites sailed through the air and, finding no nourishment from the rocky floor when they landed, starved to death.

Solo had achieved an altered state of consciousness that she had only read about. A battle high, it was called. She felt as if she was made of liquid, rushing from foe to foe like the blood pounding in her veins. She killed when she could, and wounded or harassed when she had to. She used her Teleport spell to keep moving and keep the Diabolical Broodlings off balance.

Despite this, Solo was, first and foremost, a professional observer. She observed CowLord pounding Queen Diablo with a barrage of Holy Bolts. CowLord's Holy Bolts were a mottled black-and-white rather than the standard pure white. Regardless of whether or not Solo was willing to call them Holstein Bolts, they were effective in forcing Queen Diablo back from the edge of the pit.

"YOU'LL NOT FIND COWLORD TO BE SUCH EASY PREY, LORD OF TERROR," boasted CowLord.

It was good to have him back, thought Solo.

"FOR COWLORD FEARS NOTHING!" he finished.

Queen Diablo paused and then seemed to grin, showing even more needle-like teeth.

"Ness," she said.

"WHAT?"

"CowLord Fears Nothingness," clarified Queen Diablo. Her voice reminded Solo of thousands of tiny black spiders crawling over her naked flesh and burrowing in to lay their eggs.

To prove the point, the Lord of Terror summoned Ichabod's greatest fear. The floor and walls and the very air itself was suddenly alive with disembodied eyes and tentacles.

"YOU FOOL!" cried CowLord. "YOU'VE DOOMED US ALL!" The Boojum had come to remove everything that didn't belong.

All of this was lost on Solo and the Diabolical Broodlings. Ichabod and Queen Diablo were the only ones present who could see the Boojum. Solo kept fighting. As long as CowLord was keeping Queen Diablo distracted, she couldn't spawn any more Broodlings. She Teleported to the edge of the pack and lit into them with Chain Lightning. The nearest Broodlings responded with fire, but Solo was long gone by the time the flames reached the ground she had stood on. She materialized near one on the right rear flank and drove The Grandfather through its neck. She Teleported again.

The Boojum struck at CowLord with a mass of tentacles, yet not one of them made contact. He was looking straight into dozens of its eyes, but wasn't lagging. He understood the reason when he saw a tendril strike at The Grandfather only to be deflected. For an instant, it looked as if Solo was enclosed in a huge metal gauntlet that kept the Boojum from making contact.

"DOLT LUUUUUNGREEEEENNNN!!!"

Solo, the Broodlings and even Queen Diablo turned to see the source of the booming battle cry.

An O. Lord-Ultralisk staggered into the melee. It was missing a claw and a leg. Its great compound eyes were nothing more than smoking sockets. Dolt Lungren was astride its neck and cleaved half of its skull away with his axe. He jumped to the ground as the creature fell.

Solo Stone Cursed it as it toppled. The Glave Wurms Queen Diablo spat found no host in the stone body and went hungry.

Dolt Lungren was a sight to behold. The Marine Armor of the Firebat had exceeded every system tolerance built into it when Dolt was only on the fourth O. Lord-Ultralisk. The unbreakable visor had been shattered. If it hadn't been, the helmet's HUD would have shown that every single system from offensive weaponry to personal hygiene processors was functioning at less than five percent of peak efficiency. The intricate hydraulic and cybernetic systems that had amplified Dolt's strength and agility had been reduced to high-tech trash. The only thing moving the 250-pound armor now was Dolt's own considerable strength. The right flame-thrower had exploded when an O. Lord-Ultralisk had bitten down on it. The monster had been killed, but Dolt's right gauntlet was now fused to his axe. For its part, the Strange Axe of Slaughter glowed cherry red with heat from Dolt wielding it while using the flame-throwers. Dolt's unshielded face was a mass of blisters and first-degree burns.

Since the melee with the last O. Lord-Ultralisk had played itself out, Dolt eagerly leapt into battle with the Diabolical Broodlings. An arc of flame followed Dolt's axe as he swung, and blade and fire cut into his foes.

Ichabod could see that the Boojum wanted Dolt's armor badly, but the great metal fist of the Strife Bringer protected him too. He began to understand what was truly at stake, even if no one else did. In recent weeks, Ichabod's mind had become a series of strictly organized and separated compartments. It was the only way he could cope. He willed CowLord into one of those compartments and locked it tight. For all his power,

CowLord's arrogance would not help him here. Besides, Queen Diablo had already had his number.

"Solo!" he called. "I need that pouch I gave you!"

Queen Diablo had analyzed the situation. The Teleporting Bard and the armored Barbarian were proving themselves an admirable match for her Diabolical Broodlings. She would need to make more. The bovine-armored madman was difficult to gauge, however. The one thing that had to change immediately was the fact that her attention was divided between attacks from two different directions.

She fixed her gaze on CowLord. Glands at the corners of her numbers two and four eyes squirted thick jets of sticky mucous at him. Not the ideal attack against an airborne foe, but it might distract him while she dealt with his two companions. She blasted him with an Apocalypse for good measure and CowLord went spinning into the pit. She turned and spat a wad of Glave Wurms at Dolt, but he incinerated them in midair. The next Glave Wurms were directed at a dead Broodling on the ground behind him. Within moments, the dead Diabolical Broodling was two live ones.

Solo had heard Ichabod call and saw that he was in trouble. As she Teleported after him, it occurred to her that she had heard Ichabod call, not CowLord. She materialized at the bottom of the pit near him. He was a blackened, sticky mess, but was not seriously hurt.

"I need that sealed pouch I gave you," Ichabod told her.

Solo had almost forgotten about it. It was a soft leather pouch that jingled as if packed with coins or some such. Solo handed it to him. She needed to get back to the battle and give Dolt some support. She wondered where Red Vex and Griswold were.

"Thanks," said Ichabod. There was a questioning look on the young Bard's face. He considered explaining to her that this was the final battle between the Boojum and the Strife Bringer and that history and free will hung in the balance. He decided against it. She couldn't see them, and it would only make her think he was crazier than ever. It's possible that he was. Either way, he needed her confidence right now. "Listen, your target should be the Soulstone. Try to separate Queen Diablo from it. If you can, I'll be able to use this to its best effect."

There was no time for further explanations. Solo nodded and Teleported away. She'd pin him down afterwards and get the full story, if they both survived. Ichabod launched himself into the air.

Solo materialized behind Queen Diablo. This time, she was facing away from the pit. Dolt was in dire straits. No fewer than four Diabolical Broodlings had his arms pinned back and Queen Diablo had all of them ensnared in a thick spray of mucous. She had reared her head back and her throat sac was fully inflated as she prepared to spit Glave Wurms at Dolt and the Broodlings holding him.

Solo Teleported directly underneath Queen Diablo and The Grandfather flashed up and sliced open the sac. It was like opening a piñata. Glave Wurms spilled down Queen Diablo's front and on top of Solo. Solo screamed as the parasites tore into her flesh. Only the Amulet of Harmony allowed her to Teleport before they could consume her.

Queen Diablo screamed too. Both from the pain of Solo's attack, and from the freed Glave Wurms attempting to tear into her legs and chest. Once expelled from her throat sac, the parasites did not care who they consumed. Unable to Teleport to safety as Solo had, Queen Diablo lit an Apocalypse at her own feet to destroy them.

Dolt had watched Solo's brave assault on Queen Diablo with awe. Aside from the fact that she had surely saved his life, he had never seen anyone do anything so risky and live to tell about it. He hoped he'd be around to thank her properly at the end of the battle.

CowLord rose into the air behind the wounded Zerg Queen. He directed a barrage of Holstein Bolts at the Broodlings holding Dolt. The attack killed one and loosened the grips of the others. Dolt twisted and, despite the sticky glue Queen Diablo had sprayed on them all, he was able to shake his captors loose. He stepped back and turned his axe and flame-thrower on them.

When Solo materialized, she knew how lucky she was to be alive. The heads of six Glave Wurms had Teleported with her when she escaped, their hooked teeth sunk deep into her arms, leg and shoulder. Her Mana Shield had been a casualty of the attack and she was bleeding badly from the bites. She cast a Healing spell on herself to keep from bleeding to death and, hopefully, to stave off any venom or infections the Glave Wurms might have been carrying. She'd have to pry the Glave Wurm heads from her body some other time.

Solo Teleported to within striking range of Queen Diablo. This time, the Zerg Queen saw her and lashed out with a set of wickedly curved claws. The touch of the Lord of Terror caused Solo to recoil in primal fear. It was a terror that went to the most primitive part of her brain and she realized that she had fled nearly fifteen feet before she mastered it. It was almost as if Queen Diablo had picked her up and had thrown her backwards.

Dolt burned his way out of the ensnaring mucous and launched himself at Queen Diablo's flank before she could hit Solo with an Apocalypse blast. Queen Diablo screeched as the hot axe cut into her flesh. She turned to deal with the Barbarian, even as six more Broodlings rushed to her aid.

Solo Teleported onto the back of Queen Diablo's neck. She had sheathed the Dragon's broad sword of Vampires and used both hands to drive The Grandfather through Queen Diablo's skull. While this would have been fatal to any terrestrial creature, the Zerg Queen's skull contained mostly receptors for receiving instructions from the Overmind. The primary nerve cluster that served as her brain was actually located in her abdomen.

Despite this, Solo's attack was entirely successful. When the tip of The Grandfather emerged from Queen Diablo's forehead, it dislodged the Soulstone. The glowing red stone fell through space. Queen Diablo threw Solo off her back and lunged after it, The Grandfather still embedded in her head and sparking with electricity.

It was exactly what Ichabod had been waiting for. He hurled the pouch at the ground where the Soulstone would land. They hit the ground at the same time. The pouch burst open, scattering its contents: A pair of Gnarled Root rings, a Dreamflange amulet, a Lightforge amulet, a pair of Aerosmith backstage passes and a pirated CD-ROM containing a beta version of D2.

The Boojum went wild.

Ichabod cast the Etherealize spell. The results were even more spectacular than the last time Ichabod had used the dangerously unstable Lost Spell. This time, nothing less than the entire labyrinth and Tristram itself were yanked into the Battle Net.

Dolt and Solo found themselves on a realm that few people had ever visited, and that even fewer ever returned from. It was an obsidian-black plane criss-crossed with countless glowing threads of all colors and traveling in all directions and dimensions. Horadrim Portals of all colors opened and closed at random as far as the eye could see.

Now, on its home turf, the Boojum wasted no time ridding itself of everything that it found offensive to its sense of order. The hacked items in Ichabod's pouch were the first to go. Then the Diabolical Broodling's lagged and disappeared at the Boojum's touch.

Ichabod saw that Queen Diablo was about to retrieve the Soulstone. He dove and grabbed it at the same time she did. Around them, the Battle Net writhed with eyes and tentacles. Ichabod and Queen Diablo moved slower and slower as they began to lag.

"Let's do the Time Warp again," grinned Ichabod as a black Horadrim Portal opened to engulf them.

Solo quickly cast a Healing spell on Dolt and they decided that discretion was the better part of valor in this instance. They were on an unknown plane and an unknown entity had just dispatched the most powerful players on the field. In short, they were in far, far over their heads. Solo read the Horadrim Portal scroll Adria had given her.

As Dolt ran for it, the Boojum morphed the Marine Armor of the Firebat into a much more acceptable suit of scale mail. Suddenly 200 pounds lighter, Dolt spun past Solo's portal and fell through a green portal.

Solo called after him, but the portal winked closed behind him. As she turned to her own avenue of escape, Solo saw Red Vex and Black Jade tumble past her. They were locked in mortal combat and oblivious to the bizarre change of scenery. Griswold's body lay nearby.

The eyes and tentacles of the Boojum surrounded Red Vex and Black Jade. First, they morphed back into their original Hell Spawn forms. Then they morphed again, this time into the two young women who had been made into Black Jade and Red Vex. Even from where she was, Solo could see the shock of recognition cross the faces of the two women. There was no way of knowing what, if anything, passed between the reunited lovers before they too softly and suddenly vanished away.

Solo dove for her own portal.

Epilogue 1: A World Without Fear

The Boojum tried to put things back the way they were supposed to be, but this time, the Strife Bringer had corrupted everything beyond repair. Griswold, Cain, Ogden, Pepin, and Farnham were beyond retrieval. Likewise, Lazarus was gone and Red Vex and Black Jade had had to be destroyed. Most importantly, Diablo was gone. There was nothing left to do but close all portals to that version of Khanduras and leave whatever was left to fend for itself. The Boojum closed the portals forever with a spectacular crash.

* * *

With Tristram gone, the magma caverns that had been underneath it released their contents volcanically. When Solo emerged from the other end of the Horadrim Portal, she had to Teleport down to her last drop of Mana to avoid being buried by a wall of ash and boiling mud. Once safe, she made her way to Westmarch to tell her story.

In the days that followed, the people of Westmarch and Khanduras realized that not a single Zerg creature, not a single glob of creep had survived the purge. The only exception was a handful of Vexlings. Eventually, they worked out a way to reproduce and proceeded to make pests of themselves until their eradication centuries later.

Solo was unable to say what had become of any of her companions. It was noted that the cows of Khanduras gave black milk for three days after the destruction of Tristram. Some took this as a sign that CowLord was dead, but most agreed that it had something to do with the volcanic ash.

* * *

The events of the next months and centuries unfolded in many unexpected ways.

After learning that the Zerg had been defeated, Dumpruk remained in his homeland and lived out what was a quiet life for a Barbarian warrior.

Valeria Desdemona Sapphire Stars-in-the-Heavens-over-Riparia of the House of Halla had made it back to Riparia and was preparing to lead her army to Westmarch when she received word that the Zerg threat had ended. She stayed a few weeks to get her affairs in order and then returned to the Sisters of the Sightless Eye to finish her training. Thus, when Andariel was unleashed underneath the convent, Valeria was there to lead the Wild Angels against her instead of wandering the labyrinth under Tristram. As a result, the Sisters defeated the Maiden of Anguish.

Solo lived comfortably off of her tale for years and eventually became the Master Scribe of Westmarch and, later, New Tristram. As the years passed, she researched Red Vex's tale and took a greater and greater interest in conflict resolution and containing the spread of hatred. She and her followers chose Red Vex as a symbol of the folly that awaited any person or nation who succumbed to Hatred. Solo's efforts over the course of her life prevented at least three wars and left behind a legacy that would last for thousands of years.

* * *

With Diablo gone forever, the tide of the Sin War quickly turned against the forces of Chaos. Humanity allied with the angelic hosts and drove the demons back into their own stygian realms. What followed was a brief and relatively bloodless conflict dubbed the

Virtue War. It ended when humanity, tired of being bossed around by a bunch of literally holier-than-thou angels, collectively told the forces of Order to shove off. For their part, the angels were much happier hunting down and battling their ancient foes than they were trying to force mankind to toe the line.

* * *

Thirty years later, Gerard, the son of Gillian, founded a new kingdom on the rich volcanic soil at the foot of Mt. Tristram. He ruled justly and used his psionic powers wisely. His descendants would see the small kingdom of New Tristram grow into a large country, and eventually into a global power.

* * *

As another result of Diablo's irreversible banishment, no hero ever found it necessary to defeat him and then make a futile attempt to contain Diablo's essence in his or her own body. Since there was no Diablo, there was no one to seek out and release the other two Prime Evils.

Baal and Mephisto went largely forgotten until two thousand years later when construction workers in the desert city of Nova Lut Gholein accidentally opened the Tomb of Baal. The Lord of Destruction had an easy time taking over a city that had long-since forgotten the ways of magic and the days of heroes.

As it turned out, not everyone had forgotten. There were secret members of the Horadrim at high levels of every major government around the globe. They wasted no time in dealing with the Prime Evil. Baal was more than a little surprised at the sudden arrival of over 200 cruise missiles. He had a moment of clarity before his utter annihilation: Humanity no longer needed a Lord of Destruction.

Officials of the Red Vex Center for Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution would have agreed with him. They filed a formal protest over the missile strike.

* * *

The Lord of Hatred fared even less well. Plate tectonics worked against him and, by the time an earthquake finally opened his tomb, humanity had long-since abandoned the planet. In fact, two succeeding species had evolved and ascended to the stars after humanity left. Mephisto endured a frustrating 2.5 million years alone on a dead planet under a bloated red sun. Finally, the dying sun lashed out and wearily consumed the barren planet and that last bit of Hatred that had survived all else.

* * *

"Sir Knight! Sir Knight! Please wake up!" The speaker was a very pretty farm girl in her late teens or early twenties.

Dolt blinked and sat up. He was on a green hillside under a tree overlooking a valley of farmland. The sun hurt his eyes. "Where am I?"

The girl didn't answer his question. "Please, sir! The Orcs are attacking my father's farm! Won't you please help?"

The smell of smoke and the sound of small wooden structures being razed drifted up the hill.

"What's an Orc?" Dolt wanted to know.

The girl looked at him as if he were addle-brained and just pointed mutely down the hill at her burning farm. He saw several figures in leather armor armed with swords and pikes. They had warty green skin and tusks but, other than that, could have been Barbarians from any tribe Dolt had ever encountered.

Dolt stood and smiled.

They had swords and pikes and leather armor. This was more like it. No sorcerers. No demons. No Zerg. Just a chance to finally practice a little good old-fashioned WarCraft.

He cracked his knuckles, picked up his axe and charged down the hill. "DOLT LUUUUUNGREEEEENNNN!!"

Epilogue 2: StarFire

It was another universe, another time. Nearly fifty years ago, the Zerg had fled Terran space. Within a matter of days, they abandoned every single colony they possessed. They took with them every mobile unit in every swarm. They cut their hives and other structures up for food and took as many of those as they could as well. The rest were left to starve. A few Human and Protoss telepaths had tried to find out what was going on and were almost swept up by the all-consuming drive to return home and protect the Overmind.

The Terrans celebrated the retreat of the Zerg for nearly forty-eight hours and then plunged into a bloody civil war. The Protoss quietly backed the faction they thought they could work with and, two years later, the Confederacy fell and the Terran United Federation of Free Worlds rose in its place.

* * *

The starship *Azure Drake* was parked in orbit at the edge of a star system at the fringe of the Terran sector. She was a StarFire-class cruiser on her maiden voyage. She had been outfitted for peaceful scientific exploration and was armed to the teeth for the defense of the sector. Even after a half-century of peace and prosperity, even non-military ships contained sizable arsenals. Although most TUFF Worlders under the age of sixty considered this a waste of money and resources, there were still enough old timers in Congress who remembered the Zerg War and the War for Independence that followed. It was they who insisted on the measures and kept the defense budget high.

First and foremost, Captain Farnham considered himself an explorer, scientist and diplomat. His status as a military man was mostly a means to these ends. Looking out at the burnt and twisted wreckage of the observatory ship, *Rising Sun*, however, Captain Farnham felt uncharacteristically grateful to the right-wing loonies in Congress who had seen to it that his vessel was armed with enough firepower to lay waste to a continent. This might actually turn into a mission where there would be some use for such weapons and training. Right now, though, it was just a salvage and rescue operation. More salvage than rescue since it looked like none of the *Rising Sun's* crew had survived.

The *Azure Drake* had been charting stellar phenomena beyond the boundaries of the Terran sector when they received the Code-Z distress call from the observatory. By treaty, any Terran or Protoss vessel who received such a call was to drop what it was doing and proceed to the source at maximum warp with guns blazing. Even so, it had taken them two days to get there.

There was an explosion on one of the larger pieces of the observatory ship. Farnham looked over at his Chief Engineer.

"Just a failin' fusion generator ventin' plasma," said Commander Griswold.

"I'm getting a message from Lt. Gillian," announced Ensign Wirt from his station at the Communications console. "She's ready to deliver her preliminary report."

"Put her on," said Farnham.

A holographic image of the young pilot appeared in the display dish at the center of the ship's bridge. "Our initial scans were accurate," she reported. "There're no survivors. You may as well order Dr. Pepin to stand down."

Captain Franham contacted sickbay and did so. "Is this Zerg handiwork?" he asked her.

Lt. Gillian nodded. "It's looking that way. There's Scourge score everywhere. Just like in the news disks from my grandmother's days. No trace of pods or creep though. This was strictly a hit-and-run affair."

"When was the last recorded Zerg attack in Terran or Protoss space?" Farnham asked the ship's computer.

The Central Artificial Intelligence Network, version 5000, found the answer within nanoseconds. "Forty-nine years, seven months, six days," replied the CAIN 5000.

"Anything else, Gillian?" asked Farnham.

"I was saving the best for last," she replied. "We found the Black Box. Apparently, Captain Ogden had time to back up all their data before the attack. They'd been scanning some old Zerg worlds for signs of activity."

That was another Congressional dictate. Any observatory could be eligible for funds as long as they agreed to devote a certain amount of telescope time to watching out for the Zerg threat.

"Go ahead and play the executive summary," ordered Farnham. He made a mental note to pass the full version on to Chief Xeno-Biologist Adria. Zergology was one of her hobbies.

"Aye, Captain." Lt. Gillian reached out to push a button and her image vanished. She was replaced by the holographic likeness of the late Captain Ogden.

"We have received data back from Long-Range Probe #14. If this information is accurate, it suggests that there was some sort of Brood War. As you know, all the Zerg Broods were called back from Terran space to battle some threat to the Overmind. As impossible as it sounds, it seems that threat was a second Overmind or a similar entity."

The holographic Ogden consulted his notes. "Apparently the old Overmind and the most of the existing Broods, including Baelrog, Tiamat and Fenris, were all destroyed in the war. The victorious Overmind withdrew to recover and create a new Brood."

Inexplicably, Farnham and everyone else on the bridge felt a chill.

"The new Brood is called Diablo."

FIN