

## Chapter 9

### Conversations in the Catacombs

“Damn near get killed by some Dark Lord,” Brittany muttered to herself. “get stuck in underground tunnels, get sent on a dangerous quest by some subterranean creatures, and what do I get? *More* damn tunnels.”

Her statement was quite correct, for at this moment she was sitting on the stone floor that made up the bottom level of the catacombs. They were hiding here, for lack of a better term, in order to remain safe while their guide Mal’Zyn discussed matters with the other people they had discovered in the ruins of Vari Belis. Actually, Brittany was doing nothing more than waiting, for Mal’Zyn had left a few hours before and had not returned since. The leader of the Nephyrum, Dahn’Rhyll, had also left the catacombs around the same time as his brother-in-law had, and also had not made an appearance for a few hours.

For the last few minutes Lazarus had been at the far end of the catacombs, and was making conversation with the Nephyrum, some of whom were obviously very hostile to his mere presence. That sentiment, however, was far from universal, as a few members of the group were very interested, even if Lazarus was viewed as an oddity. One woman in particular had taken a great liking to the sorcerer, and was aggressively flirting with him.

After a few minutes more Lazarus managed to disentangle himself from the Nephyrum and come back to where Brittany and Dobby were sitting.

“I have discovered several small things of interest.” he reported as he sat down next to their small fire. “They wouldn’t say much about the attack on the city, however. It seems they are either still in shock about what happened, or believe the attackers could return at any moment to finish off everyone they missed the first time.”

“Hopefully that won’t happen.” Brittany replied. “So what were you able to learn?”

“Most of what I picked up concerned itself with rumors and gossip about Mal’Zyn and Dahn’Rhyll.” Lazarus began. “Apparently there has been some bad blood between them in the past. From what I could tell, Mal’Zyn never approved of his sister marrying Dahn’Rhyll, but had to endure it, because he and his sister were close.”

“Then her death must have hit him harder than we all knew.” Brittany remarked, figuring that these past hours their guide had been grieving in private for his lost family member. “So just how bad is this rift between Mal’Zyn and Dahn’Rhyll?”

“I could not really tell.” Lazarus replied. “I am unsure how strong their animosity is now, but in the past it has apparently been extreme. Mal’Zyn allegedly once declared his intention to kill Dahn’Rhyll for a number of abuses, of which the marriage to his sister was only a small part. I heard that they actually fought each other twice before, Dahn’Rhyll winning both times. Supposedly that is why Mal’Zyn began training as a Warmancer Adept, to be able to best Dahn’Rhyll once and for all.”

“So Dahn’Rhyll is the more powerful of the two, then. That’s bad for us.” Brittany noted. She couldn’t help but remember how Dahn’Rhyll wanted them dead, even after Mal’Zyn forbade it. Would their guide be able to prevent Dahn’Rhyll from acting on those intentions, or would he only be able to watch helplessly as his brother-in-law and the Nephyrum slaughtered them all?

“Not necessarily, and that is what is strange about all of this.” Lazarus continued. “Mal’Zyn seems to be more powerful now, at least socially. From what I could tell, the fact that he was becoming a Warmancer elevated his status to a very high position among the rest of the Nephyrum. But that might not mean anything to Dahn’Rhyll if their relationship is still as antagonistic as it was in the past.”

“Well, let’s hope things have calmed down between the two of them.” Brittany replied, not wanting a fight to be started, of which she was sure their group would be the topic.

When the two brothers-in-law returned about a half hour later, Brittany could tell her words were far from correct. Once they had entered the catacombs Mal’Zyn and Dahn’Rhyll separated, staying at separate ends of the tunnels. Brittany could almost see the coldness between them. It was obvious that regardless of the reasons for the two men’s conflict, it was still going strong.

“We searched for a while, but were not able to discover any other survivors.” Mal’Zyn was saying as he sat at their fire. “The city is quite large, however, and many of the homes have a couple of underground levels, like these catacombs.”

Brittany was about to mention that technically all of the city was underground since they were in the tunnels of Chel’Tar, but she thought better of it and let the comment pass.

“Did Dahn’Rhyll explain any more how the attack occurred?” Lazarus asked.

“Not really. My brother isn’t very forthcoming with information in even the best of times. I am actually surprised he told us as much as he has already.”

“Have you explained to him about the quest we were sent on?” Brittany asked, wanting to ensure her survival as quickly as possible.

“I did not get the chance.” Mal’Zyn replied, casting a glance over to where Dahn’Rhyll stood at the far end of the catacombs. “But do not fear for your safety. I shall address the matter momentarily.”

“Great. Maybe we can get some more information about what happened here.” Brittany responded, but their guide had already stood up and walked over to Dahn’Rhyll’s small fire. Brittany, Lazarus, and Dobby had no choice but to follow him, at the risk of being left out of the debate or conversation or whatever Brittany figured was going to happen.

“Dahn’Rhyll,” He began immediately. “as much as this ruin pains me, I am afraid we are unable to tarry here overmuch. We have been sent on a quest by the Elder Council, one that demands the highest priority of us.” Brittany noticed that he did not tell Dahn’Rhyll *what* their quest was. Did he just not trust his brother-in-law, or was their quest supposed to remain secret? Upon some thought, Brittany figured that revealing the truth to the blackouts in Zul’Kanis could theoretically cause widespread panic. Maybe. She resolved to ask Mal’Zyn about the status of their quest in the future, if Dahn’Rhyll allowed them to have one.

“Forgive me, brother, but I find it rather difficult to believe that the Council of Elders would willingly associate with...humans.” Dahn’Rhyll almost spat the last word, intending it to be an insult.

“Times are changing, and the need is a dire one, indeed.” Mal’Zyn replied. “Whether you do not believe it does nothing to change the fact that these humans were given a quest, and I was appointed to be their guide.”

“And their protector as well?” Dahn’Rhyll’s tone made the question sound far more ominous than merely protecting them from Felstalkers and such.

“If the need arises, I shall.” Mal’Zyn replied.

“And pray tell us all where your gathering is off to in such a hurry? I would feel that the destruction of Vari Belis would be far more important than whatever quest you are on. Not only should the Elder Council be alerted to this as soon as possible, but the creatures who attacked the city could still be out in the tunnels. Your safety and very life could be at risk by traveling onward.”

Brittany noticed that Dahn’Rhyll only addressed Mal’Zyn, obviously not really caring whether the rest of their group were murdered or not.

“We are unable to return to Zul’Kanis until we finish our quest, brother.” Mal’Zyn smoothly sidestepped the question of their eventual destination. “But surely one of your number

would be far better qualified to report this tragedy to the Elder Council or perhaps even the other Warmancer Adepts, having experienced it firsthand.”

“That is true,” Dahn’Rhyll admitted. “but I am afraid every one of our small number is needed here to look through the city for survivors. Even as we sit here, citizens could be dying beneath rubble! Perhaps we could lend one of us to make a report to Zul’Kanis, but that could only happen after a few days of work here.”

Brittany wondered just why Dahn’Rhyll wanted them to go back to the capital city so badly. It took her only a few moments to figure out that it wasn’t specifically Zul’Kanis he wanted them to travel to, but any city so long as it hindered his brother-in-law’s quest. Mal’Zyn, however, was determined not to be foiled in his intentions of leaving quickly.

“I am afraid we have no choice.” He said with what almost sounded like real sympathy. “We must travel on our quest. It is unfortunate that there could be great dangers, but perhaps you could aid us by telling us a little more about the creatures that attacked Vari Belis, so we know what to do should we have the misfortune to encounter one.”

Dahn’Rhyll visibly debated with himself of whether or not he should comply with Mal’Zyn’s over-polite request, but he had to appease the members of his group, not all of whom were as antagonistic to them as he was, and so finally relented.

“It will mean your death should you happen upon these things...brother.” he said at last, forcing out the words as if he was speaking against his will. “Nothing I was able to do affected the creatures in any way. Swords, spears, staves, even magick was no use against the dark creatures. I have not seen the corpse of so much as one in the time I have spent searching the city.”

“What do these things look like?” Mal’Zyn asked.

“Like Death.” one of the women in Dahn’Rhyll’s group said quietly before his words cut hers out.

“Different forms. Some had wings, some had spikes, or tentacles, or multiple limbs. All dark, with black scaled armor like skin. Larger than you or I. Other than that I cannot say.” he finished.

“Red eyes.” another member of the group said.

“And nothing was able to harm them?” Mal’Zyn spoke up.

“Harm? I do not know if we hurt the creatures at all. Perhaps we injured a few of them. All I know is that there are thousands of corpses of my neighbors lying in this broken city, and

not one of those creatures.”

“Then hopefully we will not encounter them on our journey.” Mal’Zyn spoke up, contemplating Dahn’Rhyll’s words. “But nothing you say or do will stop me or my companions in this quest.”

“Is that so?” Dahn’Rhyll’s words sounded more sinister than anything he had said in the entire conversation. He abruptly stood up, and Brittany’s group tensed up, thinking he was on the verge of attacking them, no matter what the other Nephyrum might think about it.

“Well, brother, I wish you luck.” Dahn’Rhyll said at last, obviously savoring the fact he could cause them fear. After a moment more of staring at Mal’Zyn, he nodded his head sharply and turned toward the stairway of the catacombs, leading to the ruined city above. The rest of the Nephyrum followed suit at a slower pace, unwilling to leave the catacombs like their appointed master. Brittany in particular noticed that the woman who had been flirting with Lazarus stopped and cast an appraising look in his direction before she ascended after the others.

They sat in silence for a few moments after Dahn’Rhyll and his people left, almost anticipating that they would come back within a minute or two. Finally Brittany could not stand the silence anymore.

“Would it be an understatement to say that Dahn’Rhyll and you aren’t best friends?” she asked, wanting to get Mal’Zyn’s perspective on the situation.

“The two of us have hated each other for a long time.” he replied, shifting himself to a more comfortable position by the fire. “We have had more than a few disagreements in the past, and whatever relation we once held to each other through my sister is now gone. There is no further need to keep up pretenses anymore.”

“Do you think he will attack us?” Brittany asked. Mal’Zyn shook his head slowly.

“No.” he replied after a moment of thought. “His companions were severely weakened by the creatures as well. However, there was something...odd...about his demeanor. He was holding back some information from us, possibly hiding something.”

“Would he deliberately lie to us about the attack?” Lazarus asked.

“I doubt it, with so much physical evidence within the city itself. But I have the feeling that he is far more involved in this matter than he let on. But that does not matter anymore. My only connection to him is dead, and we can safely ignore Dahn’Rhyll and his group.”

“I am sorry about your sister.” Lazarus said.

“Please, do not grieve for the loss. It is not out way. Dal’Kara is gone. I have grieved

myself, and must now put her death behind me. It is not good to dwell on a loss, we must rather focus on life and those still living it.”

“That must be difficult to do.” Brittany remarked.

“I am sure it will, but it is the only thing I can allow myself to do.” Mal’Zyn replied.

An awkward silence followed, everyone attempting to find a response that would get them past this difficult moment.

“So what is our plan now?” Lazarus finally broke the pall of quiet. “Has this destruction changed anything, or are we still going to the capital city of the Karrim?”

“Unless you have encountered any evidence of the Black Dwarf Dragon passing close by, the only thing we can do is to travel onward.” Mal’Zyn said. “I did not see any evidence of that while I was out in the city.”

“I don’t know.” Brittany spoke up. “It just doesn’t seem to be a coincidence that this dragon disappears, and the city is attacked and destroyed while we are searching for it.”

“It is rather odd that these occur so close together.” Lazarus ruminated. “But until we get any more information or evidence on the matter, we will probably have to assume they are separate occurrences.”

“I guess.” she murmured, before changing the topic. “So this capital city of the Karrim, what’s it like? Have you ever been there?”

“I have been on the outskirts of it once, yes.” Mal’Zyn replied. “That was perhaps a year ago. It is extremely dangerous to travel into the Karrim’s territory, and the border was all I could manage at the time without running the risk of being captured and executed.”

“And all of us are going there. Fuckin’ fantastic.” Dobby spoke up, in what might have been his first comment in hours. Brittany was amazed that the elf had been so quiet for the few days they had been in the tunnels. She was sure that once they left the Chel’Tar tunnels, however, Dobby would return to his normal drunken, belligerent self.

“I do know a lot about the Karrim and their cities,” Mal’Zyn continued on as if Dobby had not even spoken. “from what I have heard and learned from other Nephyrum. Do not think we will be completely unprepared. Hopefully I will be able to get us into the middle of the city completely unnoticed.”

“I would prefer that to being killed,” Brittany remarked, at which Mal’Zyn may have responded with a small smile.

“So what is the capital city like, then?” Lazarus spoke up. “I for one would prefer to

know what we are going into.”

“It is very different from Zul’Kanis, or even from Vari Belis.” Mal’Zyn began. “We generally operate like the above world, spreading outward and then upward in large buildings. The Karrim move downward and in, so that their main city resembles an underground amphitheater. The city is made in large concentric circles of land, each outer ring higher than the one inside it. The lowest level in the exact center of the city is where the important government dwellings and such are kept. At the very central building is the power plant, where Trent probably would have been taken. Unlike ours, the Karrim power their cities through electricity that is created by a small amount of energy through massive gemstones. On the top of the power plant is a giant blue diamond carved with over a thousand facets. It is considered to be the heart of the city, as it powers the whole thing.”

His words near the end reminded Brittany of something Dahn’Rhyll had said earlier when they first encountered him.

“Wait.” She interrupted Mal’Zyn. “I’m just wondering, but was there anything like that here in Vari Belis? A while ago Dahn’Rhyll said something about the creatures destroying the heart of the city.”

“Yes.” their guide replied. “There is a large statue in the town center above us. It is said to be created by magick and was what held all the buildings in place, for they wouldn’t stand up on their own.”

“Then it’s gone, isn’t it?” Brittany continued. “I mean, all the buildings and towers have fallen down. Wouldn’t that imply that this statue is gone?”

“It could,” Mal’Zyn said. “or the towers could have been destroyed by the fires and attackers. Why do you mention this?”

“I think that whoever stole the dragon Trent also stole this statue.” she answered. “Probably to get more power for themselves or something. It doesn’t seem to be the Karrim in an attack, so their blue diamond or whatever may be next.”

“But if that is true, who would go to all the trouble of obtaining these power generators?” Lazarus asked. “My suspicions would point to the Dark Lord we encountered earlier, but that would be unfeasible.”

“Why?” Brittany asked. “It would be too much of a coincidence if it wasn’t. And didn’t you say that he was trying some complex rite? He might need these for doing that.”

“The Rite of El’Ran’Kasheen, yes.” Lazarus replied. “But if he was already collecting

artifacts for the rite, that would mean that he is much further along than I had previously calculated. And it would also mean that he could track us down here in the tunnels, as well as having a powerful and apparently indestructible army to attack these cities. But if it was not him, then who else could it be?"

"I have no idea," Brittany admitted. "but this theory makes more sense to me than anything else I've experienced so far."

"It does make sense, but there is no way we will know for sure until we reach the Karrim's city." Mal'Zyn said. "I suggest we get on our way."

