

## Late Night Visit

“Ma’am? Excuse me, ma’am, you can’t just go to the rooms without paying.”

“It’s alright, child. I don’t mean to make trouble, but a guest of yours is in need of me.”

Ikiita awakened from her light sleep in a hurry, snatched up the handmirror she kept in arm’s reach at all times, and double-checked her wig and makeup. There was time only for the tiniest adjustments to the disguise she’d worn to sleep, and to turn on her side, keeping her feet parallel to the bed. It wasn’t the finest inn—the straw bed was covered in sheets washed, but stained, and the latch on the door was so plainly bent out of shape that Ikiita had settled for wedging a chair beneath the handle. A time honored classic of disreputable hostelry, that. She’d had worse accommodations in greater safety and better in lesser though. Besides, she needed to stay well away from Westcrown and Egorian, metropolitan trappings or not until she was more confident her old games could still be played.

No further objections followed the footsteps approaching the blocked door, but neither did the clatter of plate or jangle of chain armor that meant a hasty exit was in order. That small comfort was offset slightly by the sheer number of footsteps. It sounded like no fewer than three and no more than five, but counting precisely was never her concern—knowing when to run, and when it would only make matters worse, was far more important to her. In that moment, her judgment was to remain. She reached out her hand, murmured, and the chair slid enough to unblock the door. Bidding her lights vanish, Ikiita lay back on her pillow and closed her eyes.

The knock came only seconds later. “Madam? Pray forgive the disturbance at this hour, but we must talk, urgently. It is for your sake, far more than ours.”

Ikiita feigned blariness in her voice. “Come back in the morning. Who in all of Golarian disturbs a stranger in her sleep at this gods forsaken hour?” It wasn’t that Ikiita thought they’d leave. No one about business in the dead of the night was doing something trivial, least of all in a backwater like this. No, she had no

hope of being rid of the nuisances. She only wanted them to believe she was off her guard and half asleep. Accepting the next best thing was part and parcel of survival.

“I am afraid it cannot wait, madam,” came the reply, scarcely muffled by the thin door. If she were to guess, Ikiita would venture an elderly woman was on the other side of the door, but she knew as well as anyone just how little faith belonged in the sound of voices.

“Must be the Infernal Majestrix herself, thrice damned...” Ikiita grumbled in Infernal. She thought she made out a faint chuckle on the far side of the door. Almost certainly *not* Chelaxian then. Few here dared find humor in *anything* concerning Abrogail Thrune, and yet despite that, she understood Infernal. In the best case scenario, this was someone harmless, but well prepared. In the worst, on the other side of the door was at least one devil. With a glance at the window shutters to ensure they were unlatched, Ikiita sighed and called out, “It’s open.”

The door swung inward then, and an elderly woman, Taldan looking and attired in robes of a simple cut, but brilliant blue and gold cloth, stepped into the room, followed by a pair of much younger men in similar robes, but with breastplates over them, and scimitars at their hips. *So, that’s the way of it, then*, Ikiita mused resignedly. *Sooner or later, it was bound to happen*. Once all three were through the door, the last of them shut it behind them, and pulled the chair Ikiita had just moved into place for the woman. She sat carefully, sighing in some relief as old joints settled back into a relaxed position. She wouldn’t pose a physical threat, then, but with the two strapping young men standing attentively behind her, she didn’t need to.

“My name is Melia Sandoven. I am a confessor with a temple of Sarenrae,” the sitting woman began.

Rubbing at an eye as if still half asleep, Ikiita frowned. “Few and far between in Cheliox, such temples.”

The woman nodded, unperturbed by the implication of her dishonesty. “Indeed. I traveled here from Andoran. I imagine you know very well why we are here, so please allow me to lead with a reassurance. The gentlemen behind me are here only for my protection as I travel these hostile lands. Your actions have earned the Dawnflower’s attention and concern, but I am here to offer you an opportunity to repent, not mete out any sort of punishment.”

“Well. That’s a fair relief, as you’re yet to tell me what I’ve done. You can imagine I know all you like. I can imagine myself Grand Princess of Taldor. It wouldn’t make me anything but a mad woman.” Ikiita sighed and pulled the covers up over a shoulder from which they’d begun to slip. It was looking as though she’d have to give up the charade shortly, but too quickly would suggest a guilty conscience.

Melia sighed and held out a hand. One of the men behind her produced a scroll case which he placed into Melia’s palm. Ikiita forced her body not to tense. If the woman meant to cast, let her. The consequences would be dire, and Ikiita would be out the window and into the air in an instant. Far more surprising than the scroll itself, however, was what Melia read from it.

“You, Thiry, known also as Niana, known also as Ildora, known also as Elsibi, known also as Betuna, known also as Rhiuna, known also as Sihrta, known also as Cissa, known also as... oh, this *does* go on a while, doesn’t it?” Melia murmured to herself as she she skimmed the long list of aliases. “Ah. Known most prominently, and most consequentially, as Marisiel, are accused of deceit, chicanery, and fraud, in the impersonation of a most holy angel of Sarenrae, over the course of six years, beginning in 4715. Is there anything you wish to confess, my child? You need not burden yourself with lies. The dawn brings new light.”

Now, Ikiita felt the pressure of fatigue, heavy and real. “So this will be the third time, then. Second, depending on how you count.” Ikiita sat up in bed fully and spread her lily-white wings as the sheets fell to her waist. One of the young men gasped, and Ikiita wore her exasperation plainly on her face. “If you know that many of my names, lying to you would be a farce. So, Confessor Sandoven, where shall we begin?”

“Please, call me Melia,” she replied, “and let us begin where any civil conversation does: with tea.” While Ikiita stared in disbelief, one of the men accompanying Melia reached into a sack at his belt, pulling out a corked jug, a kettle, and a pouch so fragrant she could smell the leaves from feet away.

“A bag of holding, for tea supplies, when seeking a sinner’s confession?” Ikiita hadn’t expected the litany of her aliases, but being offered tea in the middle of the night as part of the process of extracting her confession was the first true surprise of the night.

“Of course.” Melia sounded surprised by the question. “What better way to put you at ease? Confessing one’s sins is difficult. I know. So enjoy the tea, and begin when you’re ready, where you think you ought.”

Ikiita forewent the illusions and turned to sit on the edge of the bed, exposing her taloned feet as Melia heated the kettle of water with a simple spell. It was going to be a long night.

## Learning Bias

“The Chelaxian bastards hate us. If you’re itarii—strix, you’d call us—you’re either a mindless monster to be put down or a winged devil, depending on who you talk to. It’s right there in their name for our home: Devil’s Perch. We keep to ourselves mostly; calling us “insular” would be generous. That’s with outsiders though. We treat each other as kin, bond tighter than most humans ever will, and gods help you if you kill one of us and we find you. We have one real “city,” of a mere five hundred itarii. We can’t afford losses, and the pain of losing one of our kin? Unbearable. Among humans, I’ve seen soldiers mourn lost comrades, mothers mourn children, brothers lose siblings. There are some of you who know what real kinship is, but most of you? You heal. You grieve, and you move on. Some of us envy that about you.

“So, humans here hate us, we just want to be left alone in our aeries, and

things mostly took care of themselves. And then someone found silver in our mountains. Suddenly we're trying to chase trespassers from our homes and families, and being shot at or worse for it. Bad blood gets worse, and then we hear news from itaari visiting from Ravounel: there's a rebellion. It's a real chance to put a stop to a Hellbound dynasty, or at least cause them enough problems that they quit worrying about plucking silver from our damned homes, and try *trading* for it. I'd just become an adult, and got in my head that I would protect my kin by taking the fight to Cheliax myself, but before I could stop my mother's tears, we hear of another rebellion, the 'Glorious Reclamation.' Like a fool, I assumed they'd take anyone willing to fight. It didn't go that way."

The young man with the scroll case frowned. "You were asked about your sins, not the Chela—"

"Please, Jurl, let her approach it in her own way," Melia gently admonished.

"Yes, Confessor. My apologies madam, please, continue."

Ikiita raised an eyebrow in surprise. Not at the man's manners, really, but that the apology seemed genuine. "I'm starting at the beginning. If you want a motive, you need that, right?"

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Ikiita had had a rough go of it from the beginning. Just how much she hadn't known about Cheliax, about humans, about everything, really, was thrown in her face daily as she struggled to make her way from Devil's Perch east and north to Isgar, where the new rebellion had formed. It was a journey of hundreds of miles, undertaken by a woman of only fourteen years, never before out of Devil's Perch. She'd had the sense to cover her wings in a blanket she called a cloak and to keep her black eyes downcast, hiding away the most obvious of her inhuman attributes, but her feet were more difficult. Attempting to steal a floor length dress from a line had gone poorly, forcing her to run, and leaving her to resort to staying out of sight as best she could. It turned out that "as best she could," was not particularly good at all, and Ikiita ran from place to place, staying off of roads

when possible, and often hotly pursued when not. Had she trained her wings better, she could've avoided the frustration, hunger, and ignominy, but only the very best of her kind could truly fly. And so, with great effort, she inched her way across a hostile nation, finding food one day and none the next two, peaceful sleep two nights only to be awakened by shouting the next.

At last, nearly three weeks of hiking later, Ikiita stumbled upon something she'd not previously seen: a halfling, on his own, with a donkey pulled cart of wares behind him. Ikiita's stomach growled, and she hoped desperately that the little man would see her as another victim of Chelaxian cruelty. She followed him, waiting for him to stop for the night and, just outside the light of his campfire, debated with herself whether to approach and plead, or attack. Ultimately, the choice was made for her when the halfling called out, "You may as well come out, now. You're a terrible sneak." Sighing heavily, Ikiita trudged the last few feet through the underbrush into the clearing and firelight.

"Well now," said the halfling, rising from his fire and dusting his hands off as he set down a poker, "I wouldn't have guessed one of you bird folk was following me if you'd given me a dozen tries. And bedraggled to Hell and back, too. Name's Jolo. I'll warn you, if you mean to rob me, I don't like your odds as you are."

"Please," Ikiita pled, "if you can spare any food, even just two or three bites, I beg you!"

The halfling rose with a sigh, the shortsword on his far hip coming into view along with a knife that glittered in his palm for an instant before vanishing back up his sleeve. He brushed an arm across his forehead, pushing bangs aside, and turned to face her. "Hard country to be reduced to begging in, miss. Can't say I don't sympathize, the way my folk are treated, but if I gave what I earn to everyone House Thrune treats unfairly, I'd be in your shoes inside of a week." He frowned as he looked at Ikiita's feet. "Or I would be if you had shoes."

Ikiita hung her head, hands forming fists at her sides as she blinked away tears of fury and frustration. "Now, miss, before you go and do somethin' we'll both regret, I said I couldn't give you what's mine. I never said you couldn't earn it. I

hear your people make great storytellers, and I've never heard a strix story. So, I feed you, you tell me some of your kind's tales, and in the mornin', we part ways on good terms. How's that sound?"

The starving songbird could've kissed him. "Yes! Any story I know, but please, food!"

Unable to wait even for a simple supper to be ready, Ikiita ate the halfling out of his jerky and hardtack while he cooked, telling one story after another with her mouth stuffed full. The next morning, as they said their goodbyes, the halfling pulled a simple dress from his cart and handed it to her. "It was a miscut. Much too long for most of the humans about, and I haven't the skill to alter it. Was hopin' to have a seamstress in the next town hem it properly, but, well... you need those feet hidden, don't you? Your ears are a problem too, but... not much to be done about that. You said you were after the rebels, yeah? There's a small batch camped about a day farther east. Knight-errant and a sergeant, handful of squires. They'll know where you need to go at least, but I warn you. A Chelaxian Iomedean is still Chelaxian. They're like to spit on you if they figure out what you are."

Ikiita frowned as she headed into the brush to pull on the dress. "So how am I supposed to fight this fight? And where do my wings go?"

"Ah, shite," the halfling replied. "I swear it didn't occur to me you'd need it fixed. Well, take it anyway, mayhap you'll find someone who can do the job. As for how you fight? My advice is not to. Get yourself on the far side of the Mindspin Mountains; I hear some of your kind live out that way. Chelax is a lost cause. If you won't take good advice, then I pray you find some Reclaimers from outside the country. A good Andoran will look at you funny until he gets used to you, but he'll not doubt you just for not being his own shape."

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"As you probably guess, I didn't take that advice." Ikiita accepted the hot tea handed to her by Melia and blew on it a moment.

“No, I imagined not. Please, try it.” Melia sipped her own cup. “I promise you, it’s only tea.”

“And if you wanted me caught, one of your men would be in front of the window,” Ikiita replied. “I have a sensitive tongue, that’s all.”

Melia looked at Ikiita with naked pity. “Has your life involved such desperation that you readily leap from windows, child?”

Ikiita laughed dryly and lifted a wing. “It was more troublesome early on. Now it’s no bother at all. In fact, the very first time I managed to get my feet from the ground was with the knight-errant I just mentioned.”

“So he took you in after all?” asked the young man with the bag.

“Perhaps I should have said from.”

## **Oracular Awakening**

As the sun sank beneath the horizon, Ikiita eyed the farmhouse on the plains cautiously. If Jolo’s warning was accurate, approaching them would be foolish. She had been lucky the night before, paying only in a few hours of storytelling for a full belly, but the stakes here were higher: she’d either gain the means to punish Cheliox, or lose her life. She brushed a drop of sweat from her brow and stepped forward. Odds were decent she’d starve before she made it back home, too. A slim chance was better than none. The rickety stone walls and thatched roof of the old farmhouse spoke poorly of its builders, and if there were crops here once, Ikiita saw little sign. Recalling her abject failure in sneaking up on Jolo, Ikiita tried the opposite and called out on approach when she saw a young, dark haired man in a tabard step from behind the house.

“Hello there! I was sent this way by a halfling this morning! He said you folks were the ones I’ve been looking for!”



Without responding to her, the man turned and spoke with someone hidden by the farmhouse walls, and Ikiita continued to walk. After a few more steps, she could make out the encircled cross of Cheliox on the tabard, but it was combined with the sword and sunburst that symbolized Iomedae. Jolo's warning came to mind: "A Chelaxian Iomedean is still Chelaxian." She'd been seen now, though. In for a pint, in for a pound. Ikiita put one foot in front of the other, more nervous than she had been a moment before. When she was close enough to speak without shouting, she opened her mouth to try again, but was cut off.

"That's close enough. Get that ridiculous blanket off your shoulders, then keep your hands where I can see them." The man's dark hair was perfectly common in Cheliox. Aside from the combination of symbols on his tabard, he was no different from any of the human men Ikiita had fled over the last several weeks. Well, that and the rather large sword he drew from his back.

"M-must I?" Ikiita stammered. She was prepared to join the Glorious Reclamation, to fight Chelaxian injustice, and most certainly to reveal her wings to her allies, once she had them. At sword point, however, she was more than a little afraid to be known for what she was.

"You must. Pitch black eyes, talons where your feet should be, those ears... what are you hiding beneath that blanket?" The man was calm, but utterly unyielding. Resigned, Ikiita undid the knot below her chin, and the blanket fell away, revealing her white, feathered wings. The swordsman's eyes narrowed. "What are you?"

"I'm an i-itarii. I've heard you kotaara call us strix." Ikiita winced internally. Staring down a sword that felt as long as she was tall, she had reverted to her own tongue. If he didn't recognize her species, whether she called herself itarii or strix made little difference, but using her own word for human set her apart in one more way. Given how the man sized her up, at least one way too many.

"And just what, pray tell, is a 'strix?' Some black-eyed, black hearted fiend? A

lesser erinys perhaps?” His sword drifted, not out of readiness, but toward it.

“What? No! No! We’re *people*, we live west of Egorian and the Barrowood in the mountains!”

“Oy! Rorko, get out here!” A moment later, another dark haired man in the same tabard, sporting an unkempt beard joined the first and looked inspected Ikiita. He had no sword, and where one ought to have been hung a pouch instead.

“I don’t like the look of it. It ain’t right,” was his conclusion.

“Agreed. Get her tied. When the knight-inheritor returns, we’ll ask him what to do with her.” The bearded man, Rorko, stepped back toward the farmhouse, and Ikiita hesitantly took a step backwards. “Move again and I’ll cut those wings off.”

Ikiita stayed.

Hours later, closer to sunrise than sunset, Ikiita was startled from her half-sleep by the sound of a horse and shouted greetings. The sack that had been placed over her head and the stone walls, flimsy or not, were enough to muffle the hushed conversation, but a moment later, she heard the door open and could easily imagine Rorko’s pointed finger as he said, “It’s there. See? Wings, talons, and if you take this off,” the bag was yanked from her head carelessly, pulling hair, “tell me those aren’t the soulless eyes of a devil!”

Behind a newcomer in a white chausable that covered plate, if the pauldrons and gauntlets were any judge, was the man she’d first called out to. “She calls herself a... what was it? Atari?”

“Itarii,” Ikiita fearfully offered. “A strix.”

Backlit by bright moonlight, Ikiita could see nothing of the speaker’s face, but

his tone was anything but reassuring. “Get her out in the moonlight. Let’s have a proper look.” Ikiita was hoisted from the floor and dragged out by Rorko, then tossed unceremoniously to the ground again, narrowly twisting in time to avoid landing on her wings. “Not like that, squire. On her feet. And untie her.”

Though Rorko’s reluctance was plain, he did as he was told, and a moment later, Ikiita gingerly spread her wings, wincing at the aches of having been tied so long. “This is all a misunderstanding! I came here to fight Cheliox!”

Surprise and suspicion registered on the knight’s face. “Fight? I don’t know what you are. Strix have dark wings. So you’ve lied to us. You had no weapon. You’re clearly untrained. What could you possibly do in battle?”

“I’m telling you, I’m a strix! White wings are rare, and more common among strix on the shoreline, but they happen!”

The knight sighed. “You’re not enough threat to kill, but you’re of no use either. Begone and stay gone, whether you are a strix or not.”

In frustration, Ikiita took one step forward, gesticulating as she opened her mouth to speak, only to jump as a sling stone whizzed past her head. “You heard the knight-inheritor!” Another stone. The clattering pouch at Rorko’s hip was ammunition. He reached in for another, and Ikiita turned to run. “I still say you’re a devil of some sort!”

A sling stone grazed her hand, and in desperation, Ikiita spread her wings, flapping for all she was worth. Flight training took years; strix were no common birds, and she had never bothered. Fairly few strix ever managed to do more than glide, and she’d seen no point in pursuing what she would never need. Now though, when she so desperately needed it, Ikiita struggled herself into the air. One foot. Three. Ten, then twenty, and her fear turned to hope as she climbed farther still. Laughter came from behind her, and a serious admonishment not against killing Ikiita, but in taking joy in doing so. Another stone flew past, narrowly missing her head, and Ikiita struggled to climb higher. Part of her knew

she had no business in the air, and the higher she went, the worse it would be when her wings gave out.

They didn't need to. One more stone was loosed, and clipped Ikiita in the back of the head. Her vision flashed, and she rolled, helplessly, to face the sky. In that moment, the instant of freefall where gravity forgets itself, time seemed to stop. Detached, Ikiita saw the sky with new eyes. The brilliant moon, the shining stars, the pitch black of the great expanse beyond Golarion, and the lines that connected or divided it all. The constellations were... wrong? No, not wrong. Incomplete. Falsely separated? No, that was wrong too; constellations were whatever they were said to be, but there was more, so much more. Lines from constellation to constellation. Lines binding sections of darkness where nothing lay... so why bind it? There was more, more than she knew. More than anyone knew, she was certain. In that moment, as she reached a hand to the sky, clutching at the lines between stars, as if they could stop her fall, she saw them for what they were: a massive, all-encompassing web, as if spun by the grandest spider in creation. And, like a web, they could trap or support, damn or save. She reached out to be saved, and the cosmos reached back.

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Melia winced. "Poor child. The biases of Cheliox run deep, but to think they taint the Iomedean Church so deeply here."

"This is a land that sees no conflict in a concept like the Godclaw, ma'am. One need not be a hellknight to suffer such twisted views." Jurl said from behind her.

"Indeed. But you have been at this for years now, madam. Surely you could have forgiven this and returned home. As the knight said, you were no threat."

Ikiita drained her cup and returned it to Melia. "I wasn't. But the fall didn't hurt me as it should have. The sling stone certainly did. But not the ground." Ikiita rose and walked to the window, opening the shutters and displaying the night sky. "What I saw out there as I fell changed everything." She reached into her bed clothes and removed small pins and clips, and the fabric floated all

around her. Reaching up, she carefully undid the plain brown wig she'd worn to bed, and unpinned the fiery red hair beneath, leaving it to wreath her head, floating as if drawn to the sky. Reaching into her bag on the floor, she pulled out a small dagger and before anyone could object, thrust it into her arm. When she removed it, she was unharmed.

Smiling beatifically as the witnesses gasped, Ikiita spread her arms and wings. "And so, I became an 'angel.'"

## Learning Deceit

Ikiita took a measure of satisfaction from the stupefied expressions on the young men's faces, and the wince Melia gave at her performance. There were more than only trivialities unknown to them, and that meant a great deal, both in the way of shaping her words in the moment, and her options in the future. She closed the shutters and returned the dagger to its place, then returned to her seat on the straw mattress.

Melia's wince had turned to a slight frown, and her brow furrowed. "What we know of the 'angel of Sarenrae' Marisiel turns up slightly farther down the line in the Glorious Reclamation's tale. Would you care for another cup of tea? A biscuit, perhaps?"

Ikiita chuckled and nodded. "Both if you don't mind." She looked past Melia to her tea-bearer, and mused that a clergy with such a title might not be so tiresome. "You can stop staring at my arm. Your gaze is more likely to pierce it than the dagger at this rate."

As Melia prepared another cup of tea and her embarrassed guard fished in the bag of holding for the biscuits, Ikiita addressed the confessor's remark. "It's true that I didn't just sprout a flaming scimitar and begin offering aid to the wounded. My goal was never sacrilege itself, and the magic I learned when I fell, and much of it later, has been better suited to heal than harm. Shame, that." For the first time, Melia's glance showed irritation and disapproval, though she quickly

smoothed her expression back into calmness. Ikiita let out a single, dry laugh. “Sorry. I suppose a priestess of Sarenrae doesn’t like to hear, ‘Damn, I’ve learned healing magic when I wanted to kill Chelaxian tyrants.’ Well, pleasant or not, that was how I felt. That lesson was how I learned to wield second best as if it were destiny, though, so if it helps, I’ve learned to be quite fond of healing. After all, who do people trust more than their refuge in hard times?”

Melia sighed as she handed Ikiita the cup back. “So we come to the deception at last. Mind the tea, it needs to steep yet.”

Ikiita shook her head, then thought better of whatever she’d been going to say. “I suppose we can, actually. You probably don’t care terribly much about how I practiced folding my wings just so, making what passersby believe to be a cloak, the hours of practice with wigs and makeup, learning to pull my ears flat to my head—I tell you, nothing hurts worse than the cord binding them behind my head being pulled.” Ikiita shot Jurl a look. “No, that’s not a lie, just hyperbole. Walking in long dresses without a talon catching was a chore, and you can’t imagine how much I worried my eyes would give me away. Ugh, if you believe nothing else I say, believe that I nearly wept for joy the first time I could hide my race behind an illusion instead. At least my curse gives me something like whites.”

Jurl cocked his head. “And yet you sleep in a wig, with your night clothes pinned in place.”

“Well of course,” Ikiita explained. “What if I hadn’t heard you coming and had a moment to ready an illusion? Disguises don’t care if I’m ready or not.”

Jurl took a half step backwards, startled. “You knew we were coming?”

Melia smiled and shook her head. “We weren’t especially quiet with the fellow downstairs, Jurl.”

“In any case, it was weeks of practice and starvation all over again until at

last I was ready to put my skills to work. I'd given up on reaching the Reclamation in Citadel Dinyar. To tell the truth, I'd given up on them entirely. I managed to press east to Senara on the Whisper River, make some money, lie my way onto a boat headed back south, and I got off where you probably imagined I would begin—Longacre.”

## Longacre

“You sure you want off here, Thiry? Longacre ain't exactly had anything goin' for it fer years. I'm just droppin' some cargo on the docks and headin' back downriver to Remesia. You'd do better there fer sure. More work, shoreline y'can sail from for the Golden Road. They say it's all desert, an' somehow Thuvia's rich as it gets. Tell you what, I ever got the coin, I'd go. Can't do worse than what Chelias turned to. Well. Maybe up in Ustalav.” The river sailor shuddered. “You ever hear of that place?”

Ikiita let him ramble. He'd been decent company the whole way down the river, even if he had been chewed out by the boat's captain a time or two for slacking off, and she'd learned a great deal about Chelias and the world beyond that she would never have had a chance to learn in Devil's Perch. She was certain it was half wrong and the other half at least partly misremembered, but the surest way to learn the truth wasn't to ask—it was to spout nonsense so absurd the truth took it personally and found its way to you. Ignorance would bait a thousand corrections when questions would go ignored. Eyes downcast as ever, the tall, slightly scrawny young woman brushed a long black bang from her nose. “I'm certain, really. I don't know why, but this is where I need to start over. I'm sure of it.” “Thiry” didn't know, but Ikiita was certain. While she'd practiced feigning humanity around Senara, the same rumor had fallen into her lap over and over: However much Longacre's archbaron was loyal to House Thrune, the smallfolk were not. Ikiita imagined the disloyalty was exaggerated, swarming as Senara was with Hellspawn, but it was a place to start.

Ikiita carefully stepped from the ship, downcast eyes scanning the area around the dock for stone or wood where her talons would leave no mark as she stepped.

Halfway down the plank, a helping hand was extended to her by an older, unbelievably shifty looking man, whose thin mustache, bushy sideburns, and chin patch beard somehow added to the automatic distrust Ikiita felt for him. Forcing herself to appear grateful, Ikiita smiled and took the extended hand, allowing herself to be led out of the way of men unloading the cargo behind her.

“My, my, it’s not often such a lovely parcel makes its way to my docks,” the man fairly crooned, “And may I say, your cloak is remarkable! “I’m Ingoe Zoags, dockmaster for Longacre. And whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

Ikiita’s stomach turned at the fawning display, but she kept her voice high and soft, her smile in place and her hand in his. “Th-thiry, sir. Thiry Olis.” It was a pair of names she’d taken from two separate women in Senara, Olis for no particular reason, but Thiry because it had sounded close enough to an itarii name to feel comfortable. “Formerly of Senara.”

Ingoe winced sympathetically. “You must have had it rough in that Hellish city, dear! Well, don’t you worry. Here in Longacre we keep better bounds. You won’t deal with any of those filthy tieflings in our fair town.” Ikiita was afraid her smile would slip if he had to listen to this pig one more moment. “Just follow that path, and you’ll be in town proper, but if you ever need anything, don’t you forget Ingoe, alright? Especially if you find you need something the Gields don’t stock. For the right price, I can find you almost anything you need.”

Ikiita concentrated on her jaw muscles, willing them slack. “Thank you, sir; that’s extremely generous. I’ll be sure to come to you first if things prove difficult here.”

Ingoe all but rubbed his hands together greedily. “You do that, dear, you do that!”

With a curtsy and a final smile, Ikiita headed down the path to Longacre, stepping on only the hardest looking dirt.



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Ikiita made her way through town, glancing this way and that, eyes down beneath long bangs, wringing her hands as she walked. Her “cloak” got its fair share of looks, but no one stopped her as she walked. On the other hand, by the time anyone had taken pity on the “poor lost young woman,” she’d already spotted the Last Stand tavern and its surprisingly cutesy sign: The L and T were formed with green fletched arrows, rather than ordinary lettering. Stepping from the wooden porch and onto the stone flooring of the establishment, Ikiita was greeted with the usual racket she’d learned to tolerate in Senara and a scent she couldn’t identify nearly caused her to drool on the spot. Glancing around from the doorway, she spotted an empty table and made a beeline straight for it, a weathered looking barmaid with shoulder length brown hair, calloused hands, and a lightly stained smock trotted to meet her there, towel in hand and a smile on her face.

“Hey, welcome to the Last Stand! Don’t think I’ve seen you around before! I’d have remembered that cloak for sure!” The woman’s cheer seemed genuine, and Ikiita allowed herself to relax. Most humans only wanted to get through their day and wouldn’t pry, she reminded herself. Wouldn’t lift a finger to help anyone who didn’t look like them, either, but that was another matter.

“Ah, it, it’s new. But I am new in town. So far the only person I’ve met was the dockmaster. Mister Zoags? He seemed... nice.” Ikiita played with her fingers nervously, not looking up. She didn’t need to read the barmaid’s face; the woman had no interest in being subtle.

“Oh, don’t you start on *him*. You listen to me—Longacre’s not a bad little town, don’t you let that rat ruin your impression of us. He’ll swipe shipments if he thinks he can get away with it and resell them! He’ll rat out his own mother if he thinks he can make a copper. You just stay far, far away from him.” In spite of herself, Ikiita cracked a small smile. “Ah, see, you can smile when you want. Really, don’t let him keep a frown on your face. Just forget him and have some chili.”

Ikiita raised her head a bit and looked up at the barmaid through a curtain of

black hair. “So... is it the chili or forgetting Zoags that’s supposed to make me smile?”

“You just try both and find out.” The maid grinned and trotted off behind the bar, returning with a bowl of red, steaming soup the likes of which Ikiita had never seen before. “Eat up!”

Ikiita did just that, earning further laughter, this time somewhat at her expense, as the spices Devil’s Perch had no access to burned her tongue. And yet, it was delicious. While she ate, the barmaid wandered the floor filling orders but always returning to the “new girl,” until a commotion outside drew everyone’s attention. Peering through the door by which she’d entered, she saw a large man with a pot under one arm demand a group leave, their sneering, arrogant refusal, and then curses and threats when he splashed one of them in the face with his pot full of chili. Jeers and laughter erupted among the patrons as the men on the porch retreated, only to fall to whispers and a pall as the man with the pot stomped back inside, slammed it on the bar, and stalked into the back.

“Aaah, that’s no good. That’s Bolgart, the boss. I’d better go see what’s wrong; you sit tight there and enjoy your meal.” The barmaid rushed off to the kitchen in a hurry, leaving Ikiita to finish the bowl. She scarcely had before the barmaid was back again, a fretful expression on her face. “Hey. Do you have anyplace to stay? I’ve got a feeling things are going to get awkward in town, especially for strangers.”

Ikiita cursed silently. She had a few days worth of funds at best. She needed to make money somehow; vagrancy would see her only dress ruined, and convincing the seamstress in Senara that open backed dresses suitable for wings were fashionable in Egorian had stretched credulity so close to its breaking point Ikiita had been sure she’d see through it. “I was told I would have enough to stay at the inn, and within a week, two at most, he would come join me.”

“He?” The barmaid winced and put a comforting hand on Ikiita’s. “Miss... you’ve been had. Longacre’s got no inn. There’s here, and there’s the Arch and Lark, and neither’s got rooms to let.” Ikiita’s lip quivered. “I’m sorry, miss. I’ll

put you up a night or three, don't you worry.”

“Thank you,” Ikiita choked out.

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Melia cocked her head. “So you were shown great kindness, and on your first day in Longacre. History records dark events there, but did the maid's kindness not show you the error of hating humans?”

Ikiita smiled faintly and nibbled her biscuit. “You would think that, wouldn't you? To be honest, yes, I began to think well of Betuna before the Reclamation was quashed in Longacre. It was,” Ikiita paused, searching for the right word. “Heartbreaking is too strong, disappointing too weak. Upsetting has the wrong ‘feel’ to it. Something in the middle of those three. Taldean has some serious limitations. In any case, my opinion of humans became more complex thanks to her; I'll give you that. May I never see her again.”

Melia's disappointment was plain. “I see. She sided with loyalists then?”

Ikiita shook her head. “No. She revealed her Chelaxian indifference. That, though, came a week or two later. First, things had to go Hell nice and slow. The fuss outside the inn? Archbaron Fex's decrees, posted to stifle anyone getting ideas about the Glorious Reclamation. A local leader had sent the chaplain of Iomedae's church in Longacre a letter, which in her infinite wisdom, she saw fit to call the whole town together to read.” Ikiita's sarcasm was plain. “She didn't deserve to die, but she was surely too stupid to live. Warned plainly that the Reclamation had its eyes on Longacre, Fex banned people coming in or out without papers, groups of more than twelve or so, set a curfew... not *quite* martial law, but close enough to rile the town and disrupt business. Taverns in particular.”

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Ikiita's nights were spent in a spare room of Betuna's, always careful to show herself only fully dressed. Extreme modesty played into the innocence and

gullibility Betuna had come to expect of her, and before long, “I’ll put you up” had become “I’ll keep you safe,” and “a day or three” had become “as long as you need.” She was even a dab hand with needle and thread, and when Ikiita “accidentally” left her dress where it would be found while she bathed, was willing to adjust the few spares Ikiita could afford from the general store. Had the archbaron’s decree not outlawed gatherings and forced The Last Stand to limit time, the barmaid might’ve kept her close even at work, where the men of Longacre would deal with her, if they dared hassle “Thiry.” Instead, Ikiita was left to spend her days floating about town, ear to the ground, picking up one rumor after another, most about some so-called “Angel Knight” would lead a rebellion.

The mood of the people varied, depending as much on who you talked to as who they spoke with—what one said to one person didn’t always match what they told the next. Ikiita knew what she wanted, though, and quietly, always only ever telling people what “she had heard,” she worked the levers of public opinion. The rumors were true. The rumors were false, but only about the Angel Knight, the Reclamation would truly come. A contingent of Hellknights sent to find the knight had been crushed. The Longacre Armory’s weapons weren’t old and dusty. The armory would be easy to seize when the time came. Archbaron Fex’s prowess was overstated. True or not, direct or not, Ikiita worked the mood of the people to believe that with a little help, they could take back their town from tyrants. And if, in the end they couldn’t? These humans were no better than the ones trying to take Devil’s Perch. One way or another, fewer of them was for the best. Betuna, though—Ikiita resolved to find her a way out.

Days passed, and tensions rose in Longacre, not only due to Ikiita’s meddling, but also the work of the group who’d nailed Fex’s edict to the tavern porch. The sheriff was relieved of office, and those same ruffians took her place, joined by the former sheriff’s niece of all people, siding with Fex and her personal gain over family. Ikiita gave them the widest possible berth, or tried, until at last they returned to The Last Stand and counted more than the twelve patrons allowed. The crowd was ordered to disperse, and Ikiita winced—the bard in the corner had just been singing an ode to the Angel Knight, and the ginned up locals were not feeling patriotic. Before it descended into a brawl, and before Ikiita could slip

away, Bolgart stormed up to them in a rage, bellowing about Fex's tyranny and how he wouldn't bend to lapdogs of a Hellbound bastard. A mug was thrown, striking one of the brutish enforcers, and then steel was drawn.

Ikiita had always fled dust ups when they happened around her, but this time a cruel looking woman stood in the door blocking her exit, an equally cruel looking curved machete in her hand. When the blades were bared and Bolgart had grabbed the warhammer from behind the bar, Betuna and the other barmaid ran in to take their boss' side. Even with the howling mob against them, the fight was brief. Blood cowed most, and those who remained were outmaneuvered. Fex's lapdogs had bite after all. Ikiita spent the brawl under her table until suddenly she heard Betuna's scream and poked her head out to see her host on the floor, hand pressed to a deep cut in her side. Moments later, Bolgart was subdued and hauled away, bleeding and chained. No longer blocked, patrons fled the tavern, and Ikiita crawled on her hands and knees to Betuna's side.

"Oh... Thiry? I—I'm pretty sure I won't make it to the church. It's pretty bad, huh?" Ikiita could see the fear in Betuna's eyes as she struggled to speak. One lung was surely torn open, and Betuna coughed a wet, horrid cough before closing her eyes. "Hey. Hold my hand? Please?"

"Promise me you won't tell anyone," Ikiita replied. Laying a hand on Betuna's wound, Ikiita focused. Where in that great web had it been? Stars flashed in her eyes as she searched the cosmos for power she'd long since mastered, but never needed in a panic before.

"Te-ll? Wh?" Betuna barely managed. There! Right where it had always been! The divine power to heal. The instant Ikiita remembered, power flowed, and Betuna gasped. Ikiita sank to the floor, relieved.

"I'm healed? I'm healed!" Betuna cried, only to have Ikiita pounce on her, covering the barmaid's mouth with both hands.

"Shhh!" Ikiita hissed. "I'll get in trouble!"

Betuna nodded her understanding, and Ikiita let go of her face. “You can tell people you got sliced, but it looked worse than it was, and you fainted in shock. Just act like your side hurts like mad for a while.”

Betuna looked dubious. “The chaplain, Tileavia Allamar, will want to tend me.”

Ikiita scowled. “Damn. I’ll... think of something.”

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“What did you tell her?” the tea-bearer asked, wide-eyed.

Ikiita grinned smugly. “Oh? Are the holy representatives of Sarenrae finding the tale exciting now that there’s a little bloodshed?”

“I—ah, no, well, yes, but that’s not it! Wait! No! No, we’re just taking your confession! You can’t find redemption without confession!”

Melia shook with laughter in her chair. “Nenek, child, you mustn’t lie too.” The tea-bearer blushed brilliantly. “It’s a tragic story of deceit and manipulation, but compassion just made an appearance. There is no shame in being interested.”

Ikiita stretched her wings. “It’s rare for me to get to unfold them when I’m not playing Marisiel. Anyway. It’s simple. I told her that I was an agent of the Reclamation, sent ahead, and that revealing me as anything but dead common would endanger everything for which true Iomedeans strove.”

Melia sighed. “Yes, I imagine that would do it. But weren’t you worried the information might be dragged from her?”

Ikiita’s lips pressed together. “Yes, I was, but when perfect isn’t there, you make do with the next best thing. It turned out that it was a very reasonable fear, and one I had to deal with head on.”

# The Plan

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Mornings in Longacre would actually have been pleasant enough affairs if Ikiita could simply be rid of the incessant reminders that Chelaxian law and custom applied. The air was crisp and pleasant, Betuna was friendlier than ever, and up until she left for The Last Stand, Ikiita could forget that Bolgart was rotting in stocks outside the town jail. Past that point, though, the days descended into a toxic mixture of killing time, watching her back, and fomenting rebellion. When she'd chosen Longacre, an extended stay under despotic control was not part of the plan, and abiding the rules was increasingly difficult.

Late one night, as Betuna slept, Ikiita heard a shuffling outside the door, and a page slipped underneath. Yanking it open, she caught the glimpse of a halfling, female Ikiita guessed, fleeing into the shadows. Ikiita closed the door quietly and picked up the page that had been left. A hand drawn image of a woman in armor adorned with angel wings graced the sheet, her helmet designed to mimic an anglic face, or so Ikiita guessed. The artwork was rough at best. What was clear, though, were the words, "Will you come when she calls?" Ikiita smiled and let the page fall into the embers of Betuna's hearth. As glad as she was to see revolution brewing, she had no interest in being hanged for sedition before it did.

The next morning, Longacre was in a tizzy with gossip and increasingly open resentment of Fex. The townsfolk abided Bolgart's arrest as he *had* broken the law, but it only brought the injustice of the archbaron's decree into sharper relief. Not all of the gossip was welcome, however. While doing Betuna's shopping at Gield's General Store, Ikiita overheard that the fifth sword knight's sons meant to rescue Bolgart! Ikiita's brain spun for a moment before placing the title, and then her blood ran cold. Tileavia Allamar, the woman who, if backed into a corner, might well declare Ikiita an agent of the Glorious Reclamation! Forcing herself not to rush, Ikiita finished the shopping and hurried back to Betuna's, pausing just a heartbeat when she recognized another of the halfling's fliers nailed to a post. It was a heartbeat too long, and a strong hand grabbed Ikiita's arm, spinning her face to face with a smug looking brute in a sash—one of the enforcers who'd broken up the patrons in The Last Stand and dragged off its

proprietor.

“Oi, this your doing?” he snarled menacingly, his eyes flicking to the paper hung from a fence behind her.

“N-no, sir! I swear it, I’ve only been out shopping!” Ikiita trembled. As much as she hated to give this pig what he wanted, her survival depended on him feeling satisfied with as little harm done as possible. Betuna’s side had showed exactly how little concern these men had about causing harm, given an excuse.

“Give me that!” he barked and snatched Ikiita’s sachel from her hand. “Jarred vegetables, flour, taters... hmph.” He roughly shoved the bag back into Ikiita’s hands and she staggered, striking her head painlessly against the post to which the flier was nailed. Nonetheless, she yelped and raised a hand to her head as the goon smirked. “Tear that down, tear it up, and get outta here.” Ikiita did as she was told, honestly glad for a reason to scurry without arousing suspicion.

In Betuna’s house, Ikiita fumed. The sword knight’s children could not be caught. It would mean the end of her, she was certain. How to stop them, though, without exposing herself further? Rocking back and forth on the floor, Ikiita came up with a plan she absolutely hated. For the first time, she would be forced to truly stick her neck out.

As quickly as she could, she made her way to Longacre’s docks and noted the pile of packages still waiting to be processed or stolen. It was exactly what she’d hoped to find. Ikiita composed herself, walked to the building as if ever so nervous, and knocked softly on the door of notorious rat bastard Ingoe Zoags. Opening it cautiously, the human weasel smiled as he spotted Ikiita shuffling in place outside his door.

“Come in, come in, sweetheart! What can old Ingoe do for you today?” Zoags was as disgusting as ever, and Ikiita wondered in the back of her mind if the plan was worth this.



“W-well,” she timidly began, “You mentioned you can find things for people. So I was wondering, what about magic lanterns? Betuna’s been ever so kind taking care of me, but I use up her candles and her lamp oil. If she didn’t need to buy those...”

Ingoe smiled. “Ah, miss, you’re a saint. So few people think of others these days, even when benefited by them! I’ll tell you what. It’s going to take a bit for me to find them. Why not come back tomorrow evening? We could share a meal, get to know each other.”

The power within Ikiita welled up, and she forced it back down. *Stick to the plan. Three birds with one stone, and this bastard is one.* “I... think I’d like that.”

“Wonderful, delightful! I look forward to it, Teri!” As Ikiita excused herself, she mentally cursed the man who so shamelessly hit on her without troubling himself to remember her name.

Moving well out of sight of the house and road, Ikiita knelt, and opened herself to all possibilities while focusing on her course of action. In her mind’s eye, stars raced by on their field of black, hurtling past until she halted in a bright, beautiful nebula. She smiled. The augury was weal. Ikiita was confident Fex’s thugs wouldn’t spot her a second time, and that if they did, it would work in her favor. So far, so good.

She returned to the general store to purchase a pair of crates of the sort one might place valuables into for shipment, excusing herself to the nosy proprietors by claiming Betuna had asked her to keep her things tidier if she was going to live there until the edicts expired. Gossiping about the unrest in town, Ikiita added a pair of locks to the order—one couldn’t be too careful these days. Rushing back, she began a race against time, gesticulating and chanting over the boxes as she searched the night sky in her mind for two points exactly alike. It ought to have been impossible, and yet in an infinite cosmos, all things must exist. She found it, the spell was cast, and the crates were linked. Stopping herself short as she moved for the door, Ikiita knelt and performed a second augury. Weal again. It was time to risk her neck to save it. She snatched up her boxes, tucked her secret

pouch under her wings, and was out the door for the docks once more.

At the docks, a fair bit of the cargo had been removed, but Ikiita saw enough remaining. Moving from the road once more, she slipped off her dress and got back into the clothes she'd worn when she began her journey, clothes cut for a strix, and tight enough not to billow. A nearby rock was dropped into one crate for weight and locked in. Proper flight still eluded Ikiita, but the augury had said she would manage, and whatever spider wove that web of stars had never yet led her astray. Hurriedly, she drew a hand mirror and cosmetics from her pouch and set to making herself seem as gaunt and frightening as possible. Carefully removing her wig, Ikiita set it down and as the sun set over the Whisper River, she abandoned caution and rushed toward the docks, crate in hand. Dousing her hair in the river at the last second to force it to hang limply, Ikiita pulled herself onto the dock, and kicked over the packages, cursing loudly in a harsh, raspy voice.

It took only seconds for Ingoe to burst from the door face twisted with fury and sap in hand. He rushed her, striking her face to no effect as she flapped noisily and made a show of trying to steal the very crate she'd brought. Shrieking awfully, her face was a mask of blacks and reds hideous in the fading dusk light. After another pair of blows, one of which she actually felt, if barely, she dropped the crate on Ingoe's foot to distract him, and fled. He chased a few steps, then turned back, cursing vehemently, to secure the crates and tend his foot. Ikiita fled, never looking back, until she reached her hiding spot and dress. Magic quickly peeled the monstrous disguise from her face and she rushed to get back into her clothes. The next leg of her plan was her most unsure by far: she had to spot a halfling she'd only ever seen from behind.

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Ikiita sighed. "That was the first time I ever wished my wings were black, like most itaari. White feathers shine in the slightest torchlight, and when I learned to fold my wings just so," Ikiita shifted her wings, settling them closer to her back into what appeared to be an elegant cloak, "I quit carrying anything to cover them. A feathered cloak is more noteworthy than I would like, but less strange than a feathered cloak under an ordinary one, if it's pulled away."

Melia nodded. “Trying to hide them indefinitely seems... if you’ll pardon me, like a fool’s game.”

Ikiita laughed. “We learn more from mistakes than successes.” Her tone softened some, and she sighed. “Let’s just say I’ve learned a great deal over the last six years. Anyway, yes, I was spotted, and led Fex’s lackeys on a wild goose chase all over town. It was actually that chase that found me the halfling—she skittered off into the dark near the general goods store, and I kept running the way I was going. I have never in my life wished more for an invisibility spell. It felt like I was running for hours, all the worse for carrying that crate, though it couldn’t possibly have been that. Eventually, between getting out of their torchlight and creating a distraction or two, I lost them, and managed to double back to the general store.”

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Waiting in the dark, winded, Ikiita cursed herself for not taking the time for one last augury, but there she was, locked out of the general store with no way in, seen by Fex’s goons, and unable to execute the last part of her plan. She dreaded going back to Betuna’s place and the trouble it could bring the closest thing to a friend she had outside Devil’s Perch, but what were her options? If she didn’t, it was still common knowledge who housed the girl with the white feathered cloak. Betuna would be bait at best, scapegoated at worst. The only hope she had was to make it work somehow, and so she waited, looked to the sky, and the web of lights that had become part of her, and for the first time in her life, Ikiita prayed. To anyone who could hear, she prayed for a chance to make her scheme work. And when she finished, crouched in the dark and desperate, the shop’s door opened and out stepped a small woman, scores of flyers in her arms.

Ikiita didn’t even have time to think before she rushed forward, grabbing the halfling’s arm, shushing her frantically as pages scattered. “Quiet! They’re already after you!” Ikiita lied. “Look, I’m on your side. Quick, give your papers to me.”

The halfling looked at Ikiita mistrustfully. “How do I know? How can I trust

you?”

Ikiita took a deep breath and lowered her voice. “Whisper. If I wanted you in trouble, I’d just report you in the morning. Plus, I’m out after curfew too. Look, I have a box over there. It’s magicked. We put the pages in, close the lid, and they’re gone. It’s that easy.”

The halfling remained dubious, but nodded. “Alright. I’ve seen you in town, haven’t I? The new girl?”

Ikiita nodded, and released the halfling, who rubbed her arm. “Yes. The Angel Knight sent me to watch Longacre for her.”

Suddenly excited, the halfling scooped up pages she’d dropped and asked, “Your cloak then, that looks like angel wings! Was it a gift?”

“Shh!” Ikiita wanted to shake the bright eyed halfling. Even in the starlight, Ikiita could tell the woman was well out of her youth, yet here she was, acting like a child. “It’s a sign to those who know to watch, but listen, the archbaron’s men saw you tonight. The Angel Knight would be proud of your work, but you can’t risk yourself again. The right time will come. Until then, wait!”

“Yes! Thank you! Oh, here,” the halfling handed the rest of the pages to Ikiita who tapped them to the lid of the box, straightening edges, opened the lid, and dropped them in.

“Ten minutes. Once that’s done, you’ll be safe. Just keep your head down, and your eyes open. Alright?” Ikiita feared her heart would pound out of her chest faster than that.

Nodding vigorously, the halfling replied, “Yes ma’am!”

Ikiita smiled. “What’s your name?”

“Caswella Runder, ma’am.”

“Well, Caswella, I’m sure Iomedae will bless you for your bravery, but for now, the battle needs discretion. So we never saw each other tonight. Right?” Ikiita loomed over the halfling. Neither her words nor expression were menacing, but Caswella seemed to shiver just a bit anyway. *Humans have done you wrong, too, haven’t they?* Ikiita mused silently.

“R-right ma’am. And thank you again!” Already, Caswella’s enthusiasm had returned. She was a resilient one at least.

With a crisp nod, Ikiita was gone into the night, but once out of sight performed the augury she ought to have earlier. All the pieces were in place. She couldn’t change plans, not now that she’d been seen. But she wanted, at least, to know things would be alright. The patterns of stars danced before her eyes again, but when the shifting ended, the field of light around her was red. Ikiita’s jaw set. Weal and woe. Worried for Betuna, Ikiita hurried for the jail, staying behind buildings as best she could. The crate she carried, she abandoned in trees south of the market along the way, and trudged her way past the closed market stalls toward her fate. It wasn’t until she spied Bolgart in the stocks that she remembered that the entire caper was about luring Fex’s men away before the chaplain’s sons arrived! Ikiita cursed herself bitterly. She couldn’t afford to forget her goals just because part of the plan had gone sideways; that would get her killed. And yet, this time, it was alright. Bolgart remained in the stocks; the would-be revolutionaries hadn’t arrived.

Ikiita reminded herself not to grit her teeth, and to cry out as pitifully as she could if they lay hands on her. Not for help she knew wouldn’t come, but for the thugs’ satisfaction. She’d seen their idea of lawful arrest; the best way to avoid being hurt was to convince them she was. *There’s no turning back*, she reminded herself as she raised her hand to knock loudly on the jail door. An answer was some time coming, but at last she heard cursing from the far side of the door and it whipped open, putting her face to face with the man who’d been doused with Bolgart’s chili not so long ago.

“What in Hell? It’s you!” Without warning, Ikiita was cuffed across the face and flew backwards, staggering to the ground. “Oi, grab ‘er!” Before she could blink, Ikiita was pinned, a knee on her back, and she didn’t need to feign agony—wings were not meant for that sort of abuse. “Listen to ‘er scream. I’ll give ya somethin’ to scream about!” The heel of a boot stamped Ikiita’s fingers, and scream she did; the tears on her cheeks quite real.

“Easy, Jed,” came a voice from above her. “She’s kept out of trouble until tonight, so either she had a very, very good reason for breaking curfew, or a very, very bad one.” The speaker squatted in front of Ikiita, his cold expression providing no comfort. “Either way, I want to hear it while she can still do more than blubber.” He grabbed her chin and angled it up enough to hurt her neck, and Ikiita squeezed her eyes shut. “So fearful. Well then, what is it? What would *possibly* possess you to lead us on a chase and then turn up at our door?”

“Mister Zoags!” Ikiita cried out. “I went to see him about importing a magic lantern, and—” Ikiita screeched as the boot stamped her fingers again.

“To the point, please. It’s late, and Jed has to be one of the least patient men I have ever met.” The thin sliver of Ikiita’s mind not preoccupied with her ruse or the pain she was in captured this man’s dispassionate delivery. It was unlike anything she had ever seen. It was an addition to her repertoire of personalities.

“The flyers. He had some at his dock, in a chest! The Angel Knight thi—” Ikiita gasped as she was punched in the back of the head and her forehead struck the jail’s stairs.

“Jed, I’m as bothered by this ‘Angel Knight’ rubbish as you, but that’s a bit much, don’t you think?” So the more civil one wasn’t as completely brutal. Ikiita felt a glimmer of relief.

“Why’d she run if she was gonna tell us about Zoags? An’ what happened to the box she had when she took off?”

Not that Ikiita saw it with her eyes squeezed shut, but the man holding her chin raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You do make good points, Jed. Go ahead and give her other hand a good stomp.”

Ikiita squeezed her eyes even more tightly shut and whimpered as she braced for the pain of her other hand breaking. She screamed as Jed laughed, trembling in agony on the ground, but her wits held. “I was scared! Four of you, all with swords! The box was some of the papers! I stole them to prove it to you, but when the chasing started,” Ikiita paused, wracked by sobs as honest as her words were false, “I thought I was better off staying away, and I threw it in the river!”

The hand left her chin and Ikiita blinked open her tear-flooded eyes just in time to be roughly slapped. “So you committed theft and destruction of evidence of a conspiracy against the crown. Were there more of these flyers left?”

“Another box! There was another box just like the one I took!”

“Get her on her feet, Jed. We’re going for a walk.”

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Ikiita’s head hung and her hands shook as Melia held them in her own. “These are the wages of deceit, child. Hardship unending. Redeem yourself tonight, and set a new path.”

Ikiita laughed bitterly, and her voice trembled at the memory, but she allowed the old woman to hold her hands. “If that was the ‘wages of lies,’ Confessor, then what horrible lie did Lencia Visserene tell to earn her fate? No.” Ikiita took back her hands, and her voice regained its strength. “No. Suffering isn’t payment for lies. Not in Cheliax. It’s the cost of fighting back, whether you do it with lies or swords.”

Melia sighed, but had the experience not to argue Ikiita’s assertion. Behind her, Jurl frowned. “You said your augury was weal and woe. You spoke only of woe.”

Ikiita's smile held no joy. "What an augury calls 'weal' is relative. I was hauled off to the docks, to point them to the right crate, and I did just that. Zoags was completely baffled as he was dragged off to join Bolgart in the pillory, and shouted the whole way that he'd never seen the flyers before, that I was a liar and a witch. He was half right, wasn't he, and yet they didn't believe him. The sword knight's boys must've swept in while we were gone, because Bolgart certainly wasn't there. I took his place. Two days, terrified some jeering Thrune sympathizer would try to steal my 'cloak' in the pillory and find me out. None did. When they heard I'd turned in Zoags, if anything the townsfolk liked me that much better and the archbaron that much worse. Zoags was livid of course, when someone would bring me a few sips of water and his came with pepper in it. I couldn't heal myself without being found out, but I wasn't found out. Grandmother knows I should've been. They didn't even bother to search me, bawling mess that I was. That's all weal, isn't it?"

Jurl seemed pained and nodded. "I suppose it would have to be called that."

"Betuna even visited, when the archbaron's men were off making other trouble. Turns out the two not at jail had decided to drag her out of the pub the next day to humiliate her, rather than trouble her in the night, and with me in the pillory, it wasn't worth their trouble." Ikiita sighed. "Auguries only see half an hour ahead. Everything past Zoags being dragged to jail with me wasn't 'weal,' it was luck. Or maybe my reward for stoking the idea of rebellion in town. Maybe even divine. Who knows?"

Nenek cleared his throat. "You just said 'grandmother knows.' Grandmother?"

Ikiita's smile was thin, but regained a little of its warmth. "We'll get there. There's a fair bit to cover in Longacre and beyond, first. You see, the sword knight, chaplain, whatever you want to call her, had run off with her boys and Bolgart in the night, and this whole mess had pushed the archbaron a little too far. He decided that people weren't rebelling because they were afraid; they were rebelling because they weren't afraid *enough*. He ordered a public execution, and left the who and the how to his dogs. I'm here, so you know how that went. The



only other person handy was Zoags, and the lady I sometimes saw with the archbaron's men picked him. Gruesome enough to quiet the town down, but as many enemies as he'd made she figured no one would lift a finger. I don't suppose I could ask for more tea, could I? I try not to think about the stomping."

Melia nodded. "Nenek?"

Nodding, the young man pulled a second jug from the bag and set to work filling the kettle.

"You realize, Thiry," Melia resumed, "that a man perished because of your lies."

Ikiita shook her head. "A man perished because he'd made enemies of an entire town for years, swindling and harassing them, until no one would speak for him. Because of my lies, an actually innocent woman who only wanted freedom from Chelaxian tyranny survived."

"And an Iomedean sword knight's children," Jurl added.

Ikiita sighed. "No. No, they did not."

## Moving On

\* \* \* \* \*

Betuna had taken Ikiita back in when she was released from the stocks. "The whole town's on your side, you know," she said. "You tried to turn in their so-called seditionist, and got beat half to death for your troubles. Still, who'd have thought *he'd* be on the Reclamation's side? Always figured he was only out for himself."

Ikiita sighed as she bathed behind an actual cloak hung to 'hide her shame,'

from Betuna. “Don’t count on every Glorious Reclaimer being in it for Iomedae and nothing else,” she said. “You told me yourself he’d rat out his mother for a copper.”

“That I did, and I stand by it. How are your hands?” Betuna knew well that Ikiita had healed herself first thing upon returning to her house and that it was the aches of being pilloried that troubled her more, but having seen the swelling, bruising, and missing nails, it was Ikiita’s hands on which she fixated.

“Fine, the same as the last two times you asked. The bandages are for show.” Ikiita carefully lifted a wing to wash her back while Betuna was busy cleaning. She’d been in Longacre nearly three weeks now, but sharing a house with a human was no less nerve wracking than it had been on the first day. Unrest in town was coming to a head, and Fex’s hirelings were more trouble than ever. Apparently, once Tileavia and her children had disappeared, the Church of Iomedae had been searched despite the worshippers’ objections, and something big had been discovered. What, not even the best rumormongers in town could decide and since Ikiita’s stint in stocks, they’d been much less hesitant to share with her, when she wasn’t at Betuna’s pretending to mend. If the Gields didn’t know, no one did.

Rising and drying herself off, Ikiita sighed at her feet, the one thing she’d found nothing to do about. Betuna, on the other side of the cloak, misunderstood. “Sorry, Thiry. Can’t help it! Even after you healed my side, it’s hard to imagine! You heal at least as well as Tileavia ever did. If things settle down here, maybe you could take that up, stick around a while. It’s been nice havin’ someone to talk to at home.”

“We’ll see. Keep your head down today, Betuna. I’ve got a bad feeling.”

“No wonder. While you’ve been cooped up in here, Sheriff Staelish got killed by Fex’s new boys and her own niece, the Ash House burned down a second time, and Valn disappeared after he said he’d found proof the murders at the tannery were the doin’ of Fex’s louts. Longacre’s going to Hell in a handbasket! All the more reason to have you here, I say. Oh, right, the tannery business was before

you got here, wasn't it? Betunia thought a moment. "Yeah. Yeah, it was. Well, it wasn't long before that letter from the Angel Knight." Betuna sighed. "You keep safe too, Thiry."

Ikiita nodded and slipped back into her dress. "I'll do that. This seems like a good 'Thiry's afraid to come out' day."

Betuna agreed. "After the beating they gave you, no one'll blame you for holing up in here a month, though I doubt you could take that. I'll bring you some lunch. You just hang tight." Ikiita nodded and stayed put. The inside of Betuna's house was dull, but safe, and healed or not, her hands ached every time she remembered the night outside the Longacre jail.

When Betuna returned at midday with a pot from The Last Stand, her brow was furrowed. "Looks like your feeling was right, Thiry. All five of the troublemakers just rode into the forest like bats out of Hell, and not toward the archbaron's manor. They're up to somethin'." Ikiita ate in silence, barely tasting the stew she'd been brought. Her mind was on the view out the window, and when it would change. Hours passed, and even from inside the house, Ikiita could tell that the mood in town was off. Everyone felt it, it seemed, as they hurried about business they couldn't avoid, and the infrequency of passersby told her that whatever the townsfolk could avoid, they were.

Well into the afternoon, a commotion came from the direction of the Church of Iomedae, and one of Fex's personal guard strode by, clanging a bell. "All and sundry are hereby ordered by the Archbaron Darellus Fex to assemble in the church square immediately! No exceptions will be made! Failure to appear will be punishable by public flogging!"

Ikiita cursed and quickly redid the bandages on her hands. Whatever the news was, it boded poorly for the revolution, she was sure. Hands bound in gauze, Ikiita scurried between houses to the widest, most readily visible common areas on her way to the church. After days of building pity for her by avoiding being seen in public, she needed the whole world to see her as compliant with the order. She had no intention of earning a flogging. As she approached the square, the

size of the crowd was startling, easily the most people she had ever seen in one place, and more were filing toward the church with each passing moment. Rising above the heads of the crowd, she saw thirteen poles. Standing half a head above many of the townsfolk as she did, Ikiita was treated to the view earlier than most at her distance, and squeezed shut her eyes. This was no public execution, but a display of remains. From the poles hung one body each, most unfamiliar to her. Nine humans, among them the Tileavia Allamar, the chaplain; the bard who'd sung of the Angel Knight the day Bolgart was taken and Bolgart himself. The two young men among them were likely the chaplain's sons. There was a changeling, her mismatched green and red eyes still open and staring sightlessly. A halfling woman Ikiita didn't know. A creature with hair of leaves and skin like birch bark that Ikiita guessed by reputation to be a dryad. Hung higher and centered among them all was an armor clad woman, the full face of her helm modeled after an angelic visage. More striking though were the twin arcs mounted on the back of her breastplate, set with eagle feathers in mimicry of an angel's wings.

Murmurs of horror spread through the gathering, with hushed whispers proclaiming the obvious: the Angel Knight was dead. The woman who'd blocked the door of The Last Stand, the dead sheriff's niece, strode through the crowd. Anyone she stepped near was only too eager to make way. When she stood in front of them all, she raised her voice. "You see before you what happens to anyone who thinks they've some gods given right to overthrow our rulers. These are the Angel Knight's conspirators, and their bodies will rot here in the sun! Should we find another among you, don't think you won't join them! Our Archbishop Darellus Fex, in his mercy, granted Longacre time to come to its senses, and it did not! It was deceived by an Iomedean filthier than anyone Longacre has ever known! Look upon the face of your 'savior,' Longacre!"

The woman reached up with her machete to push the stylized helm from its wearer's face, and disparate cries, gasps, shrieks of horror, and even the sound of retching filled the square. Behind the mask was a horrifying visage, bereft of lips and nose, the skin of her cheeks absent where it had once been cut away to form a nightmarish rictus. Ikiita's knees gave out, yet she couldn't look away. Not one cut was fresh.

“The Iomedean heroine was nothing but a beggar!” the shouting woman mocked. “A denatsate! The lowest, filthiest, self-mutilated refuse of Egorian! This is the face of Lencia Visserene, your Angel Knight!”

Ikiita trembled, equally from horror and outrage. *What have they done to you? What monster could allow their own kind to fall so low? What monster could have no compassion for it? How can humans be like this?*

Ikiita squeezed her eyes shut and felt frustrated tears leak through. Her mind scanned the cosmos for a spell that would put this right, for a spell that would burn away the monster in front of her. They were there, and they were out of her reach. Ikiita punched the cobblestones in frustration, but only then did the real horror present itself.

“Disgusting. To think anyone in this town had faith in *that*.”

“What could possibly be ‘glorious’ in a rebellion led by a beggar?”

“Can’t the capital keep its trash to itself?”

Repulsed, Ikiita forced herself back her feet, forwent the hateful glares the heartless around her deserved, and hurried back to Betuna’s house.

Ikiita was sure Betuna had been at the assembly. There was no chance the most popular establishment in town hadn’t been visited. She hadn’t returned home following it though, and no one had pounded on the door to collect her, so Ikiita could only assume she had returned to work. And so, from afternoon to well past sundown Ikiita brooded alone, waiting for Betuna to come back, for someone to talk to about the horror of the day. She adjusted the pins that held her dress in place. She sorted the powders and creams of her disguise kit. She tried focusing on the cosmos, but no revelation came. At last, afraid she would lose her mind if she couldn’t speak to someone soon, Ikiita prayed, once more to whomever heard. There was no miracle this time. Betuna certainly didn’t suddenly throw open the door to share in Ikiita’s outrage and despair. And yet, somehow, Ikiita felt supported, her spiritual freefall arrested by gossamer strands.

When at last the door did open, Betuna looked more run down than Ikiita had ever seen her, and she quickly took the leftover stew from the barmaid to hang it over the coals. “Rough crowd?”

Betuna sighed and shook her head. “Would’ve been less depressing if it were. Hardly anyone in tonight, and no one who was in was in a talkin’ mood. Everyone knew what was on everyone else’s mind, and no one wanted to touch it. It’s a right drain, on top of... well, the reason itself.”

Ikiita nodded. “No more talk of the Glorious Reclamation, then?”

Betuna scoffed. “Not a word. We’re all just tryin’ to forget lettin’ a faceless beggar twist us all up. Disgusting.”

“*We.*” “*Forget.*” “*Disgusting.*” Ikiita reeled. “Wh-what do you mean?”

Betuna looked at her like she’d asked the stupidest question imaginable. “What do I mean? Thiry, you hear stories of Egorian’s faceless beggars, but you hope never to see one. Longacre has enough problems without filth like that in its streets.”

Ikiita felt her teeth grind as the faith and trust she’d built in Betuna shattered. “How can you say that? She’s a person! She died trying to get you all out from under Thrune’s thumb! At least have some pity for someone so desperate they did... that!”

Betuna sighed sharply and got out bowls for their supper. “And who asked her to? Beggar just showin’ up in armor, pushin’ us to ‘rise up!’ If she knew anything about risin’ up, she’d still have her face!”

Ikiita strode to the back of the house and began stuffing things into her sachel without a word. “Thiry? What’re you up to? Supper’s on. Honestly, what’s got you so riled?”

No response came but the buckle of Ikiita's satchel clattering a bit as she drew it shut and pushed past Betuna toward the door. Betuna's hand shot out and snagged Ikiita by the arm. "What's gotten into you? The curfew's still on! You wanna get beaten again?"

Ikiita's head whipped around to face her host. "Let go of me. You make me sick!" Shocked and hurt, Betuna released her grip, and Ikiita stepped out the door.

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The mood in the dingy inn was somber as Ikiita drained the last of her cup, and the silence felt unbreakable. At last, as the only one not surprised, Ikiita spoke. "I never saw her again."

"And yet, you took her name as your own, Thiry." Melia's voice was gentle, almost instructional. "You missed her."

Ikiita nodded. "I never said I didn't. I only said I hope never to see her again."

Melia sighed and shook her head, disappointed. "You would have had nowhere to go from Longacre. The first major success of the Glorious Reclamation in Cheliax proper was Kantaria, much too far northwest for you to reach before Cheliax took it back." Was this when you began impersonating an angel?"

Ikiita shook her head. "Not quite, but close. The only other place in Cheliax I had come to know was Senara, up the river I'd come down in the first place. So when I left Betuna, I made for the docks, hoping to find a raft and pole or something I could use to work my way north without leaving tracks." Ikiita shook her head. "The Whisper River is far, far too deep for that. What I did find was Zoag's place, burned and smashed. I don't know if it happened before his execution or after, but I really wasn't the only one with a grudge. With no one watching me, I could use magical light I hadn't dared in town, and picked through what was left for anything useful. There wasn't a lot; I imagine everyone in town had the same idea. Most of Longacre can't use magic, though. Detect Magic and

a little digging through ash and smashed crates found me a hat.” Ikiita spread her wings and flopped backward onto the bed. “I was so grateful for a hat of disguise I knelt down and prayed on the spot. I didn’t even need anything this time. After the halfling, and feeling better before leaving Betuna, I got the idea someone was listening, and with an actual, magical illusion of my own without even asking, I started to think someone might be watching, too.

“The hat didn’t help me up the river though, and by the time I made it back to Senara, it’d fallen to the Glorious Reclamation. It’s unbelievable to me that humans who take Hell as a lesson for government and worship an archdevil mistreat Hellspawn, but one way or another, the tieflings weren’t too upset. Granted, I was starving again, but this time I had some coin. I’d also had the entire hike up the river to think of Lencia Visserene. How the image had inspired, where she had gone wrong, what I could do that she couldn’t, and what she could do that I couldn’t. I gained the power to imitate an angel a couple of months earlier, but it was this trip that gave me the idea, and it was in Senara that I began my ‘Marisiel, Angel of Sarenrae’ act.” Ikiita smirked. “Of course, first I had to learn about Sarenrae. Longacre had taught me about the price of carelessness.”