

Valleth and the Witchblade

Chapter One

Battle at the Bridge

They could feel the cold northern winds coming off the creek's trail. The breeze didn't have the bite of winter. Its force, however, pulled the leaves off the autumn trees, causing a foliage rain of reds and yellows. In the thousands they glided down, gently plopping into the wet mud at the creek's shore – there had been a hard summer rain prior and the wash off left the creek a natural mess of late. There was one, somewhat dry path made of rough gravel stones that ran parallel to the creek, a road touched by human design from long ago and now reclaimed by nature. As the sun began its slow descent under the trees boney branches, the shadow of two companions casted a long singular dark spot that rose and fell with the tree trunks, time-and-time again.

“Gods! Valleth, you're getting fat,” said the tall man. He was Chelaxian, fair of skin, black haired, mid-lander who was raised in some port-city or ship on the Inner Sea. He could have been a merchant or a noble, perhaps, but his appearance was so unkempt for such prestigious classes. His mangy hair was greasy and combed back from many sleepless nights on rocks and dirt. His beard, salted with age and stress, was full and bristled off his gaunt face. Purple bags were under his squinted eyes. Though through his entire shabby image, his mouth still held a smile after his latest jest. “Next time, I get the extra rabbit leg.”

His arms shifted to regain his grip upon his quarterstaff. Upon the length of wood, riding piggy-back on him was a woman, a Moon elf, fully cloaked with her cowl pulled low to her brow. Her eyes were closed, her hands crossed around his collar. She had brought her cloak up to cover her arms and the cape wrapped around her friend's shoulders, to shield them both from the coming chill.

“Warwick,” She mumbled into his robe's collar, “You have three seconds to rephrase that.” Already her arms began to tighten around his neck from their restless slumber.

“I mean you are heavy. Heavier!” He repeated when her grip sent the blood rushing to his head, “Heavier than when you were a kid. *Jeez.*” As her grip loosened, Warwick sucked the moisture that had collected on his mustache (there was nothing he could do about the water on his chin beard).

When I was a kid. Valleth thought to herself. *Have we been together for that long? How many years has it been now?* Eight years. *Oh Gods.* She had been travelling with Warwick for

eight bloody years. That time felt so brief now, yet she realized that that “brief time” had been all of her teenage years. It seemed she would be spending the rest of her adult years with this vicarious man too. She imagined what that relationship would entail. What had it entailed? Her memories came like sequential blurs: there was hunting for food, foresting, and finding shelter. There were good laughs by the campfire, a shoulder to lean on, trying to stay dry or warm. There was running – there was lots of running in the early days. And fighting, there was a lot of fighting, too. Fighting to get to the high ground, fighting to get food, fighting to get away from the hungry predators. Fighting to get away from men, the *other* kind of hungry predator. She even had to fight off sleep some nights, else she be dragged into the dark by some night creature. Howls in the dark, screaming back in defiance. Killing would always follow. There was plenty of killing – she didn’t like to kill but it was a part of the life she was forced to live. Valleth was a survivor – a tribeless moon elf that had lost herself in the wilderness when she was fourteen years old. When her real parents had been murdered it was Warwick and nature that became their surrogates. He and the wild had raised her into something rough, something harsh, and brutal – a likeness of their image.

Warwick grunted, “I mean how heavy do moon elves usually get?”

“Quit your griping. I carry you all the time.” said Valleth.

“When I’m a sword.” He added, “You carry me when I am a sword, love. A nine pound sword.” He grunted again, “That’s a big difference in weight distribution.”

“I still carry you.” She smiled.

Honestly, Valleth had missed Warwick’s banter. Above all other things, the slick-back Chelaxian was a survivalist first and a jokester second. The latter part of the man was fun to be around, true, but the former was quite aggravating. Before he had met Valleth, Warwick had caused himself the great misfortune of being trapped inside a magical sword, the Witchblade, with his spirit sent spiraling down to the Abyssal Plane. Down in that chaotic domain, where the demonic denizens sought supremacy by eating the weak, Warwick was helpless. It was no place for a human spirit, which demons loved to torment the most. So he did what little he could during those timeless, forty years in that inferno: He ran and hid. And when he was found he ran and hid again. Again and again and again, until one fateful night back on the material plane of Golarion, Valleth took hold of the cursed Witchblade, binding her soul to Warwick. And she pulled his human spirit back out of the Abyss. Even though Warwick was saved from its fiery bowels, the experience had scarred him for life.

In the beginning, when the two companions were deep in the north of Shudderwoods, Warwick did not speak or spoke little. He was too alert to speak, too paranoid. He told Valleth that speaking caused distractions and predators liked to hunt distracted prey. The Moon elf agreed with his logic but logic couldn’t stop the terrible pangs of loneliness she felt in her heart during those early years. When they were entrenched in some tree copse or cave he simply sat as sentry in his human form while Valleth slept. During the day, Warwick transformed into the

demonic longsword, and she would carry him on her back. It took two years of this before Warwick regained some of his playful humor.

“Can you carry me now?” Warwick asked.

“No, Wick... I’m tired.” Valleth brushed back a thick lock of dark blue hair back behind her ear. For the last week the flood rains had been coming down, early for that time in autumn. And for that solid week, she and him could do nothing but bunker down. Then the rains cleared and the cold front blew in, sapping the life out of everything. To make up the lost miles, Valleth had raced non-stop down the southern hills and slopes for two days, skirting the edge of the Shudderwoods, until she reached the first man-made road. Warwick carried her from there. She tried drifting off to sleep to the sound of rushing water from the pregnant creek.

“What about now? Can you carry me now?” Warwick’s pale lips curled into a smile underneath his black beard.

“No, Wick. Please, let me sleep.” She buried her face into his damp black hair near his neck. She tried hard not to listen to his leather boots stomping harder and harder upon the small stones. His feet sloped slower and slower.

“How ‘bout now? Can you carry me now?”

“*Ugh!* By the gods, fine! I’ll carry you, but only for the last half of the trip.” Every year, Valleth and Warwick escaped the deathly winters by heading south to dwell in one of the smaller cities that dotted the lands of Ustalav. The journey was always a gambit though, mainly due to Warwick’s nature. He was the Witchblade, a dark weapon of unimaginable destruction that granted its wielder a powerful advantage in any battle. Every would-be hero sought to exterminate him and every greedy rogue wanted to wield him. Both parties were a bane for Valleth. After all, she was soulbound to Warwick. It was an unbreakable bond. In order for Witchblade to be wielded by another, one would have to kill her first. Likewise, if he was destroyed, her soul would likely be lost, and she would wander the world a husk – emotionless, motivationless, a life devoid of meaning within an enrapturing apathy. The young moon elf did not want to die and neither did she want her soul to vanish. She had accepted this fate long ago. Valleth and Warwick’s paths were entwined – until death.

“How many more miles to Chastel?” Valleth spoke up.

“Give or take forty miles.” Warwick replied.

“I’ll carry you the last twenty, okay? Now, please, let me rest.”

“*Yayeee.*” Warwick quietly cheered, walking at a normal pace once again.

Valleth fell back into the quiet dark of rest she rarely knew. She enjoyed it though. She closed her eyes as the smooth trickle of water played like drowned violin cords in the background of her mind. Soon, her dreams brought her back to better days. She felt young again, surrounded by the warm familiar voices of her childhood. Her mother’s singing. Her father

playing the flute. She smelled roasting herbs and venison. She saw shadows of her tribesmen dancing gaily around a fire pit at night with the harvest moon towering over all of them.

Life was good back then.

The young Valleth heard a female's shrill cry echo off of the trees. The shadows halted, standing as erect as the tree trunks about them. Two-by-two the tribesmen's shadow fell. Dozens of red eyes speckled against the darkness. An older elf was shouting commands. The forest was screaming. Her father and others ran to the weapon wagon. Valleth's world became small and confusing. She felt her mother's arms wrap around her, the press of her soft chest against her cheek as her mother protected her head. Running. Sweat drenched, fear-filled running. Women and children raced toward a ravine. Suddenly, Valleth and her mother were falling down a slope. The salt of sweat and tears burned her eyes. Somehow, she was running then, on shaky knees, running into the nothingness. The growls of primal beasts trailed her. Course branches and sticks raked her cheeks and forearms. Through the rays of a falling sun, she saw a stick and mortar hut. She feverishly ran for the door. So did the snarls behind her. Clawing pains on her back. Smell of blood. Her whimpering voice. The glint of steel. She reached out to grab it. A demonic orange eye gazed back at her. An unholy burn snaking its way up her right arm...

She did not know how long she had napped. She merely heard the sound of a gruff voice grinding into her ears and a bright sunset prying her eyes open.

"Don't you hush me, old man!" the gruff voice yelled again, "I don't care if she's sleepin'. I'm Gang-Green Nash! And this here is our – my bridge! If you wanna pass, you gotta pay the toll." He was a half-orc. Valleth could hear it.

"I'm not old." Warwick scoffed, "I'm thirty-eight. That's not old."

"What's the green-skin barking about?" Valleth peered over her ride's shoulder. She saw the black figure of a beastly, tall, muscular human-like figure outlined before the sunset. Against the tree columns on either side of him, it looked as if the sun was a golden arc above him. His skullcap was smooth, so either he was bald or the half-orc wore a leathercap – one he most likely took from his last victim. The six and a half foot brute shouldered a halberd with a shaft that was half the usual length. *That was stupid, she thought, he's wielding a polearm like an axe. He lost his advantage of reach.*

"Suck-ass Nash, here," Warwick told Valleth, "wants us to pay five gold each to cross his bridge." He let the moon elf scan the surrounding. The two companions stood on the east side of the cobblestone bridge covered with red and yellow leaves – dead things in the damp. Warwick whispered, "What'd'e'ya say, Val? Should we kill him? I'm kind of hungry." The Witchblade in Warwick yearned for spilt blood. It needed it. The sword absorbed fresh blood like a plant absorbs the sunlight. Warwick licked his thin lips.

"Nah. Keep walking, Wick." She whispered back, "I don't wanna fight anyone today."

“Awww. Okay.” Warwick walked casually across the round stones, closer and closer to Gang-Green Nash. “Today’s your lucky day, Nash. We don’t wanna start any fights at-the-moment.”

Nash grinned in eagerness, thinking that this pacified, pale man was about to hand over his gold. Nash extended his free hand, an open palm ready for offerings. That’s when the green orc-man noticed the orange orbs that were Warwick’s eyes. Nash had never seen such nefarious eyes on a Chelaxian. They were unnerving. They glared at his green hand, then at him. Nash froze. Then, without missing a step, Warwick walked right past the half-orc. Warwick continued to walk off the bridge and down the road, the ditches meeting his sides, before Nash snapped back at him.

“Hey! You sad sack of crap, you said you weren’t lookin’ for any trouble!”

Warwick shrugged, “You’re right. We don’t want any trouble.”

“Then you’re s’pose to pay the toll.”

“We don’t wanna pay the toll.”

“That’s not how this works.”

“Well, too bad. It’s working.” The two companions continued down the gravel road.

“Okay, now you two are in trouble.” Nash followed them, gripping his halberd with both hands, twisting until his green knuckles turned red.

“No,” Valleth said sternly and honestly, “you are the one in trouble. Not us. We earned our gold, fair and square, and we don’t want to fight you but we are not paying your highwayman tax, either. I am giving you this one chance to rethink your to move. So leave us be, or else.”

“Ya snarky halflin’!” The half-orc growled.

Either he is half-blind, Valleth thought, or half-brained

Gang-Green Nash clanged his half-shaft halberd against the wall of the cobblestone bridge – *clang-clang-clang!* Valleth took note of that signal. So did Warwick. A rough looking highwayman with a chainmail shirt and spear rose from the ditch to stand before the two companions. Warwick halted as the highwayman cut off his path. Valleth’s pointy ear twitched as she heard a bowstring grow taut, somewhere in the trees to her left. They both heard Gang-Green Nash’s iron boots marching up behind them. Valleth tapped her finger three times against Warwick’s collar bone. He returned the signal with three taps to her buttocks.

“Last chance. Don’t play stupid.” Threatened highwayman known as Bert. Bert disliked being a front man, but today he felt more confident than usual, wearing his stolen chainmail shirt and sporting his thick, red winter-beard that shot out in every direction. Not-to-mention his opponent, Warwick, merely wore a black robe that wasn’t even buttoned up. Bert could see the Chelaxian’s gaunt, slender abdomen. A perfect target.

“Seriously? Your last words are going to be ‘don’t play stupid’?” Warwick humored, “Why not something more tawdry like, ‘You’re only making things worse for yourself’ or how about, ‘we can do this the easy way or –’”

Bert’s spearhead plunged into Warwick’s gut. The initial impact shook companion a step back. Valleth jostled in his grip. The impaled man looked down. A glob of dark red blood spilled from his exposed abdomen and travelled down the spear’s shaft. Warwick tossed a wicked orange glare at the highwayman. And through barred teeth he growled,

“*Ooooh!* And *that* was your last mistake.”

Before highway Bert could pull his spear free, Warwick grabbed it. In a *poof* of black smoke, the two companions disappeared, so did the tip of the spear. Some force pushed the end of spear shaft down to the rocks and mud. In an instant, Valleth whipped the smoke away with her cloak, which she had pulled off with her free hand. In her main hand was the Witchblade – the most menacing metal chunk of longsword with a cleaver’s edge – pinning the highwayman’s spear to the ground. In her blade’s cross guard, right in its center, was a large demonic eye. Rough Bert stumbled back as that nefarious orange eye gazed longingly at him. Valleth stretched out the kinks in her shoulders. *Pop, pop!* The young wild stalker also did this to raise her cloak up high to hide her figure to the unseen archer in the trees. She wore a clawed and scratched breastplate with patch-worked leather pants, all brown and gray and faded metal. Gang-Green Nash had stopped in dread when he saw the honed, round muscles on the moon elf’s sleeveless arms. Glowing orange runes snaked up Valleth’s right arm until they disappeared under her shirt strap and the clumps of long blue hair. The moon elf breathed deep to shake the sleepiness from her insides. She felt the leather on the inside of her breastplate press tight against her chest. She readied her stance, boots sliding apart, knees bent.

“Okay.” She opened her deep brown eyes speckled with silver flecks, “Before we start, does anybody have any food on them?”

“W-what?” Nash stuttered, confused.

She reiterated with much patience, “If you have any food on you, please put it on the side of the road. I haven’t eaten a good meal in two days and nothing is more disparaging than to find a good piece of mutton splattered in blood. It’s a damn waste and I’m hungry.”

Nash pondered for a second but his mouth spoke first, “But mutton tastes good bloody.”

Valleth laughed out loud, “Wow! I can’t believe you follow this trash,” she looked to highway Bert, “I mean if your leader’s this dumb, I can only imagine how low on the ladder you are.”

“Freakin’ bitch!” Highway Bert brought his spear up and thrust it at her face.

She batted the spear tip away with her cloak. She turned around and charged. The wild stalker was a blur of blue and gray, her unkempt hair flying with the cloak in her hand. She wanted to do away with her largest opponent, the half-orc. Nash startled into action, raising his

halberd to swing at the moon elf speeding towards him. He swung. She side-stepped. She brought the Witchblade over to deflect the halberd's shaft. She absorbed the rest of the blow with her shoulder and forearm as she vaulted forward, closing the gap.

Nash had lost his reach.

The half-orc didn't register Valleth's leap, nor did he see her deft backhand that sent her blade slashing at him. He did feel a thin-lined, sharp pain shock shoot across his neck. And then his chest getting cooled by something wet. The strength left his chest and arms and legs. His face felt tight, head spinning. Then the darkness crept over the edges of his vision. He didn't feel himself hitting the wet ground, but he did hit the ground, front first, with a *plop*.

Valleth landed low behind Nash, who gurgled as he clasped his bleeding neck. It was a good thing she bent low, too. An arrow whizzed through the top of her matted hair before it shattered against the cobblestone wall of the bridge. From her peripheral she had spotted the arrow's trajectory coming from a tree with a batch of yellow leaves still left on its largest branch. Reversing her stance, she spun hard and used that centrifugal force to throw the Witchblade at the concealed archer. In a whirling frenzy, the blade broke through the branches and leaves. The archer had been reloading, however, he was smart enough to not take his eyes off the young moon elf. As soon as the spinning piece of death-metal left her hand, the archer ducked. With a peace-deafening *crack!* The Witchblade plunged deep into the tree's trunk, missing the archer by two heads.

In the mad rush, the archer had lost his footing. He leaned too far from his standing branch. A *poof* of black smoke surrounded him. The archer fell. He flung his bow away, howling as he frantically pawed through the misty dark for a branch. His hand clasped something firm. Something firmly clasped him back. The archer stopped falling. He felt relief come as woozy limbs and a film of sweat caking his wrinkled brow. That reprieve was short lived. The black smoke faded and the archer locked his wide eyes with two orange disks. Warwick was standing over him. It was his forearm that the archer had grabbed onto. He grabbed back, grinning. Warwick's other forearm was still in the form of a cleaver blade, the sharp edge buried in the tree's trunk, which was good for him because he used that to root his stance.

The archer futilely tugged his grappled arm back, "Lemme go!"

"Yeah sure, okay," Warwick mused, "but first, let me return the favor for that arrow you shot."

In panic, the archer drew his short sword. Warwick puked over him. A spray of bright green bile blasted forth, splashing upon the archer's face. Within seconds, the archer's skin began to boil and melt with a *hiss*. His eyelids peeled back. The acid burned the white of his eyes red. He screamed with the power of one million nerves that were slowly dying. He continued to scream as Warwick released him.

Valleth had hoped the sight of highway Bert's dying leader would have deterred him, however, the loss of her lethal weapon had made her a tempting target. He tossed a foray of thrusts with his spear at her, being smart to keep his advantage of distance. She parried each of these attacks with her cloak again and again and again. When he paused for a breath she lunged in, tightly wrapping the gray fabric around the spearhead. They were caught in a tug-o-war with the spear. The screaming archer crashed into the ditch next to them. Valleth threw a forceful lowkick into Bert's stomach. He staggered. She had almost pulled the spear free from his hands when the ground began to tremble. She had thought this was due to the archer's crash, yet the trembling lingered. Strange, it was growing heavier, louder.

"Val! Behind you!" Warwick shouted from above.

Under the cobblestone bridge, Shaggy Face had been waiting patiently for his master's signal. He took that position from morning until dusk. Although, Shaggy Face was simple as he was docile. When there were no small things for him to chase or Gang-Green Nash did not signal with his *clang-clang-clang*, Shaggy Face was idle under the bridge: watching the water's edge or chewing on driftwood or staring at some large colorful fish swimming downstream. This day, however, he fell asleep, tucking his snout into his folds of his arms. He did not hear the *clang-clang-clang*. He awoke to the archer's scream. The archer usually fell out of the tree with a scream when today's work was done, Shaggy Face knew. Now awake and excited, Shaggy Face collected his club and hustled up the incline to join his comrades. He couldn't wait to finish the hare stew from this morning. He couldn't wait to play fetch with that newfangled bone & bell toy master Nash had for him made three days ago.

Shaggy Face's heart sunk the moment he saw his master Nash face down in the mud. So still was his limp body. His master's blood weaved in-between the sharp small rocks and soaked the yellow leaf's red. Shaggy wanted to nozzle him, whimper by his belated master's side, and show him his sorrow. The poor pet wanted to grieve. Then he saw the blue haired elf wrestling with Bert man's spear. Shaggy put two and two together. His sadness exploded into anger. The hate made his jowls curl as he charged the small she-elf.

Valleth had just enough time to see the wooden club come swinging in. She leapt along with weapon's projected path. The club slammed into the back of her breastplate, tossing her in an uncontrolled tumble into the ditch. She rolled right on top of the dying archer, moaning his last moans. The moon elf snatched the short sword from his weak grasp and turned to meet the new challenger. His tall doggish form trampled down the ditch's descent. Saliva dripped from his growling maw as he smacked the club against the stones.

"Aw crap!" Valleth shouted, "A gnoll! Wick, they have a gnoll!"

"I thought you counted three?" Her companion remarked high above.

"I did count three. You counted three, didn't you?"

"Nah, I didn't count. I just poked your butt three times."

“*Ugh!* Just get down here and give me,” she made an uncanny dodge backwards as the gnoll’s club slammed into the mud, crushing the archer’s chest. She planted her back into the tree trunk and readied her short sword. Highwayman Bert was able to pull the cloak off his spear and he joined his furry friend in the ditch brawl, “Give me some cover!” She shouted.

Warwick’s blade arm had returned to normal. With magic, he had conjured his quarterstaff and a much smaller stick, a smokestick, from within his black robe. As he jumped down to join Valleth, he ignited the smokestick and tossed it down into the middle the melee. All four were shrouded by the thick, opaque smoke.

“You take the gnoll.” Warwick’s voice said within the gray smoke.

“No! I don’t wanna fight the gnoll!” Valleth’s voice protested.

“Well, too bad!”

Warwick emerged from the fog first, bull-rushing the highwayman back up the ditch and onto the road. Their wooden shafts pressed hard against each other. The slight incline caused rough Bert to stumble over himself. Warwick seized the opportunity, bludgeoning the man’s temple with the back end of his staff. Back in the fading fog, the gnoll grunted, swinging at where he thought the little she-elf was. His club *thwacked* against the tree trunk. Valleth had used the tree to leap high. She had hoped to vault over the gnoll, to get to the high ground back on the road. Instead, she landed on top of something made of greasy fur and thick hide. Spastic and worried about the all-too-near toothy maw, Valleth wrapped her legs around the gnoll’s neck while her free arm did the same around its snout. She squeezed tighter and pulled back. Shaggy Face’s head reeled back too as its maw clamped shut. The dog beast staggered out of the fog and back up to the road, using its free hand to regain balance.

“You’re a dick, Wick!” Valleth shouted as she brought the sword’s pommel down again and again on the gnoll’s nose. The beast yelped and bucked.

Meanwhile, highwayman Bert had regained his footing. That didn’t stop Warwick from delivering a barrage of mocking blows from both ends of his quarterstaff. Left leg *crack*, right shoulder *thunk*, left temple *thack!* All the rough man could do was dip, duck, and deflect. Warwick relented. The robber thought him exhausted. He charged forward. So did Warwick. The pale Chelaxian deflected their weapons to the side, then he puked acid on the ruffian’s chainmail shirt. His enemy heard the sizzling burn, felt a smoldering pain on his forearm. Then his spear shaft dissolved and broke apart in his hand. Bert did not yield, not after such a disadvantage. He grappled the insidious man’s slender neck and weapon arm, tearing a few black beard hairs in the process. Bert flexed his muscles.

“Say something witty now, ya bastard!” Bert boasted.

“Don’t play stupid,” Warwick wheezed. His free arm transformed back into a blade and he drove it deep into the highwayman’s sundered metal-rings, right above the ruffian’s belly button. Warwick’s favorite expression painted the man’s face: a mix of surprise, fear, and utter-

disbelief. “Don’t play stupid, ya bastard,” Warwick laughed as he drove his blade arm again into the helpless man’s stomach. The highwayman’s eye pleaded for mercy, a horrible twisting squint of pain and bewilderment. “Those were your last words!” Warwick laughed manically as the rugged man fell to his knees. Warwick feverously stabbed into the dying man’s eyes. “‘Don’t play stupid!’ Those were your last words!” he laughed and the metal in his sword arm absorbed the man’s life blood like a sponge. Tiny streams of red ran up and into the metal.

Valleth was not having as much of a jolly time as Warwick. While three-quarters of her body grappled the gnoll’s head, all she could do was pummel the beast’s face with the short sword; she had no reach to deliver a proper strike. Worse still, the monster dog had regained his footing on the road and was using his free hand to pull at her. After every second strike, she had to attack the beast’s hand to keep it away from her legs. The club whacked against her side from time to time, jarring both her and the gnoll’s head. Her left arm was bruised and throbbed painfully. She heard Warwick’s maniacal laughter. It distracted her for a moment. A moment was all Shaggy Face needed. The dogged beast violently shook its whole body. The small elf fell into a dizzy. Something rough like sandpaper, the gnoll’s paw hand, grabbed her weapon arm and pulled. Pain shot through her arm and shoulder. If she held onto the gnoll’s neck, he would have pulled her arm clear off her person. She had to let go.

The moon elf was agile enough to roll as she hit the stones, however she wasn’t quick enough to evade the gnoll’s back hand. She guarded hard to block the club’s force with the short sword as the wooden chunk smashed into her. Both her and the sword were flung into the air. The young woman plopped front first onto the road. The short sword continued to fly into the ditch.

Valleth didn’t feel the slam of jagged rocks or wet mud against her face. She didn’t feel the sting in her shoulder from the gash where the short sword’s blade sliced into her. Lying there, all she felt was anger – a primordial hatred of the principles of predator and prey. The strong devour the weak. Big beast eats little beast. How this freakish dog man towered over her now. She raged against that natural order of things. Her fingers clawed through the mud in-between the stones.

“Okay! You wanna get brutal!” She jumped up with a wild glare, “I’ll show you brutal! Let’s go! Let’s go, you overgrown furball!” She repeated, empty-handed, as she charged with reckless abandon at the gnoll. Each foot step kicked specks of mud and yellow leaves into the air.

Warwick heard his companion’s impromptu warcry too. He released the dead highwayman and disappeared in a *poof* of black smoke.

The gnoll’s eyes were swollen from the moon elf’s assault, his nose bleeding, yet he saw her small figure wind-sprinting directly at him, unarmed. The beast took a few steps back and lifted its club high over its head, ready to put every ounce of force behind his strike. The raging she-elf ran faster, screaming a high-pitched warcry. Right before the gnoll swung, she leapt at

him, closing the distance. The Witchblade magically appeared in her hand. She thrust hard. There was no escape.

Her demonic sword plunged cross guard deep into the doggish beast's chest. The moon elf and the Witchblade and beast tumbled to the cobble stone road. Valleth continued to roll, landing next to Gang-Green Nash's corpse. She exhaled in victory. The gnoll whimpered on the stone ground, kicking his legs like a frightened infant, whimpering. With its last bit of strength, the Shaggy Face tried to pull the cleaver sword from its chest. In a *poof* of black smoke, Warwick stood on top of the gnoll. The pale man's leg was still in the form of a metal blade. It buried deep into the creature's lung. In the furry creature eyes, all it saw was a tall silhouette against the setting sun.

"Gnolls..." Warwick grumbled, "I hate gnolls. Their blood taste like rancid buckweed. Oh well." He twisted his blade-leg left and right inside the beast's lung, "Beggars can't be choosers." He watched the life fade from the gnoll's eyes. Its life blood absorbed into the metal of the Chelaxian's leg. The previous wound on his abdomen rapidly healed from a red slit to a pink and flaky scar. The man grinned as his supernatural bloodlust was sated.

"Son-of-an-orc-whore!" Valleth yelled. Warwick looked up to notice his companion. She wagged a piece of dried meat in the air, "Suck-ass Nash here had deer jerky on him. I love deer jerky! And now it's covered in his blood! *Argh!* Can't I have at least one good meal that's not covered in blood?" Without thinking, she tried wiping the wet blood off her prized meat. Her hands were filthy. Where there was once blood was now muddy blood. She growled and slumped over from the minor defeat.

"Well," Warwick joined her, his leg returned to its human form. He snatched the deer jerky from her grasp, "Like I said. Beggars can't be choosers." He laughed as he scarfed the dried meat down, licking the flesh blood off its surface. "*Yuck!* Gods that was terrible. Hey Val, do I have mud in my teeth?"

Valleth looked at her fate-locked friend with disgust – she wanted to throw caution to the wind and eat the meat herself – another open protest to the natural order of things. Though she knew she couldn't. Eating bloody, dirty meat would make her sick. She was left to realize once again the unfairness of their relationship: Warwick was her Witchblade; he survived off the blood of the fallen. She spilled the blood. He was a survivalist. She was a survivor. He could adapt so long as she adapted in turn. He loved death dealing, watching all living things fall into the nothingness. She watched everything around her, good and evil, fall. Watched it become nothing. She silently cursed her never-ending struggle of dominance between her and her soul-bonded blade, between herself and the large wild world that surrounded her. A struggle that she could never win, merely stave off. Sooner or later she would succumb to it, whether that meant sickness or slaughter or starvation or insanity, it didn't matter. Her last day could come tomorrow or next month or eight decades from then. Is time relative when the event is inevitable? No, the pale rider would come for her. She felt weak. Her head lowered.

With the heat of battle gone, her rage subsiding, the cold winds began to bite her exposed arms. Her shoulder wound began to hurt. The red and yellow leaves fell once more. She wrapped her arms around herself. Her own blood ran down her fingers.

“Gods, I wish I could have one good meal...” Valleth muttered.

Warwick looked at his blue haired maiden. He was no monster – monstrous, yes, however he was not without an empathetic heart. He was Valleth’s monstrosity. The young moon elf and he were soulbound. It was his only connection to this physical plane. She was his only friend. His fondness for her was as unconditional as much as conditioned. He felt her helplessness tighten his chest. His hands began to tremble from her despair. He was human again. He saw her pain in her watery eyes. He did not like to see her cry.

“Hey, cheer up, Val.” Warwick pulled a potion that cured light wounds from his robe, “You’re becoming one helluva fighter. I mean a real badass. Seriously, that was pure gold how you threw me at the archer. I thought you were going to get pelted for sure. But nope...” He dabbed a bit of the potion’s red solution on her shoulder wound before pressing the bottle to her lips. She drank longingly, “You found a way. You always find a way. I want you to know, you’re the best wielder I have ever had.”

Valleth let the rejuvenating potion stir within belly. The brew removed the hurt but not the hunger. She felt the gash on her shoulder coagulate, “Yeah, well that’s not saying much since you’ve only had two wielders, counting me.”

“Still, you’re the best I’ve ever had. And the only wielder I want.” Warwick knelt and wrapped his arm around her good shoulder. She felt the last rays of the sunset warm her face, Warwick’s gentle hug, his forehead resting against hers. She closed her eyes and basked in the moment, smiling. “... for the record though, you have to carry me all the way to Chastel now. I’m dog tired.”

“As you wish, love. I’ll carry you wherever we need to go.” He lifted her to her feet. She locked her fingers into his.

The two companions looted the four corpses. Warwick kept the leather skullcap of Nash. Valleth kept the bow, arrows, and the short sword. Warwick picked up his wielder’s cloak off the road and handed it to her. The gray cloth was torn and muddy. It was her cloak though. With a weary, steeled conviction, she donned it.

Once again the young moon elf was being carried on the back her Chelaxian friend. She began to relax as they travelled down the road once more. Before she drifted back to sleep, she murmured, “How much longer until we reach Chastel?”

“Thirty-six miles.” Warwick replied.

Valleth didn’t need to groan after hearing that. Her stomach groaned loudly for her.

“By-the-way,” Warwick added, “How did you know I would teleport to your hand when you charged the gnoll?”

“I notice you come to my aid whenever I am in danger.” She chuckled, “so, I put myself in danger, to make you come to my aid faster.”

“Wait... So you deliberately put yourself danger? That’s insane! Where did you learn something like that?”

Valleth pulled her cowl low over her brow, “I learned it from you, my love.”