

## The Threadbinders – Chapter 2

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### Chapter 2

Frontier academies were mostly feeder schools. They weren't temporary enclaves, but they weren't built to look impressive. Arkady was convinced that the structures weren't designed to last as long as anything his people would've built. The workmanship was definitely that of human hands. No dwarf would've thrown something up with so little attention paid to the foundations, and there wasn't anywhere near enough ornamentation for elvish construction. It also just wasn't busy enough for the gnomes to have built it.

The main building was twice the size of the rest of the structures around the enclave, and it was clearly also twice as old as the rest of the structures. Once they walked inside, Arkady noted that the internal was something that had obviously been converted into the school. He suspected it was originally a human hospital or trading post, and the inside of it had mostly been gutted and retrofitted.

“So tell us about your confusing supplicant,” Yasha said to Weesha. She'd met the gnome a few times over the years, but didn't know the Threadbinder as well as her husband did. “Did she present as anything unusual on first appearance?”

“Not at all,” the gnome said to them. Weesha was tiny, but had a rather gruff way about her, and both Yasha and Arkady had a load of respect for her. Her outfit was that of a Threadbinder, but it was much more loose fitting than Arkady's. The gnome had never seen the point of armor, but the gnomish people weren't warlike in nature. “Typical human woman, in her mid twenties. She's from the southern forests, but she's been part of a traveling caravan of entertainers for most of her life.”

“An actor then?” Arkady said.

“Not a profession you approve of, old man?” Weesha chuckled.

The dwarf stopped, crossing his arms over his chest. “Do you think so little of me, Weesha? The dramatic arts are a fine and noble profession. My late brother was an actor, before the Abari Wars, and I think very highly of them.”

Weesha sighed, rubbing her eyes, as she stopped to look back at him. “My apologies, Master Arkady. I was merely attempting to joke, and I had no wish to offend.”

“Aye. Aye, I see. Mayhap I took it more deeply than I should've done,” the dwarf said. “Anyway, you did not answer my question.”

“Mmm. No, not an actor. An acrobat. She tumbles and walks ropes and swings from trapezes and the like. She also throws blades, spits fire, bends her body into unusual positions. Apparently there is coin to be made from such things, but it's a thing where the novelty of it is important, so her family was a caravan, and they dare not remain in any one location for too long.”

“The humans do so love a good show,” Yasha said with a smile, her hand resting on her husband's shoulder. “Why did she suddenly decide to seek the services of a threadbinder?”

“The girl had been saving for some time, and when she saw the threadbinder flag flying above the enclave as her troupe passed, she decided to inquire as to my rates.” The gnome lead them into her office, a rather well decorated room with a grandiose window before a desk, a small stepladder leading up to the chair so the gnome could scale it, the chair hiked as high as possible. “I was having afternoon tea when one of our spotters saw your griffon on approach. It shouldn't have cooled too much, if either of you would care for some.”

“I would love some,” Yasha said, taking up the teapot to pour herself a coup. “My husband will decline, as he doesn't care for tea.”

“It tastes as though it is dirty bath water,” Arkady replied. “How long ago was it that her caravan passed? I don't recall seeing it from the skies.”

“Just over a week ago.”

“Walk me through what happened.”

The gnome sighed, picking up her mug, taking a sip from it. “The ritual itself was unremarkable, but the girl availed herself well, not even flinching when it came to paying her way, either in the giving or the taking. In fact, she was skilled enough at the giving that I almost felt bad charging her for the fee, and I decided to give her some of the aryou back, and that was before I began looking at her threads.”

The dwarf hopped up into one of the other chairs in the room, this one clearly designed with dwarves and gnomes in mind, as there were small steps on the front of it leading up to the perch. “Seeing multiple threads coming from a core has been known to happen before, but usually when you study the bases, it isn't overly difficult to separate the one true from the rest of the options. You know all this, though, Weesha, and you certainly don't need me to remind you.”

“That's just it, Arkady,” the gnome said, frustration in her tone of voice. “This girl doesn't have *one* true cord; she's got *four*. And they aren't identical, which caused me further consternation. One of the cords is thick, like heavy rope. One of the cords is thin, like finely spun silk. One of the cords is braided, like it's two woven lines together. And the last of the cords looks like a long scarf more than a cord. Each is remarkably different than the others, but they all seem to be made of proper golden dreamstuff, the sort of color one would expect from a true connection.”

“Have you sent word to the academy?” Yasha asked the gnome.

“Oh aye,” she replied. “But it will be weeks before the messenger has returned, and Arkady's practically a grandmaster Threadbinder anyway, so I decided since you were here, another opinion wouldn't go awry. So what do you think, old man?”

None of the three of them had any of the telltale markings they should for their age, one of the benefits of being binders. Mages were paid in vitae, and the rituals helped keep the mages from aging, so while Arkady appeared to be a dwarf of three or four hundred years, he was actually nearing a thousand. His wife Yasha, looking similar to elves in their first or second hundred years, was closer to her seventh. And Weesha only looked to be a gnome approaching two hundred, but was nearly double that. As long as there was a need for their services, and they didn't manage to get themselves killed, they would live very, very long lives indeed.

“Well, not having examined the girl myself,” the dwarf said, leaning back in his chair, “I would say you have a few options before you. The first, as unlikely as it may seem, is that the girl does, in fact, have four people she would be an ideal match with. Grandmaster Emisin did regale me with a tale once of that, during my education.”

“Emisin had passed before I got there,” Weesha said. “So I am unfamiliar with that story.”

Arkady reached into his satchel and pulled out his pipe and his pouch of fireweed. “Mmm. Shame about what happened to him. As I recall, he told the classroom that sometimes those with great lives, spectacular lives, could get multiple threads, and that if a binder ever came across that, a prudent threadbinder should most likely refund the coin given, add coin in addition for failing the contract, tell the supplicant that their future was uncertain and to run off quickly in the other direction as quickly as one's feet would carry them.”

“The tales I've heard of Emisin did not make him sound like he would be one to run from a challenge.”

Arkady's bushy eyebrows bounced in amusement. “That he would not. He was not what one would call prudent and he did not take his own advice, and continued the tale to the classroom. What he told us was that he united the applicant, an elvish woman, with an elvish man he found at the end of one of the threads, and then informed the woman that she had another thread they could follow. The woman and her newly found man agreed, and Emisin began to lead them along the other thread.” He pushed a thumbful of fireweed into his pipe before tucking the pouch of herb away, perhaps enjoying the suspense he'd left lingering the air while he did.

“And what was at the other end of the second thread?” Weesha finally asked.

“Nobody really knows,” Arkady said with a chuckle. “They were following the cord up and

across the Gintany Mountains, and just as they were halfway up to the pass, the cord was snapped and disappeared.” He found a strikestick in his pouch, dragged it across the top of the gnome's desk and it burst into tiny flame, which he lowered down to light the fireweed. “Emisin's theory, or so he claimed to us, was that there might have been a second just as ideal candidate on the other end of that cord, but that he suspected they had died before they could be reached. On the other side of the Gitany, the nations of Kupte and Niang were warring over who had the rights to fish in the large sea both countries partially bordered. There was no way to be certain, as the cord had simply disappeared in a flash. One moment, Emisin could see it, the next it was dissolving on the wind.”

“What did he tell the supplicant?”

“Only that the other thread had vanished, and that perhaps he had been mistaken. He gave them back a quarter of the aryou they'd paid, and returned them to whence he'd brought them from, and tried to give it no further thought.”

“I don't understand why this wouldn't be in the modern lesson plans then, if this is a possibility we should all be on the lookout for,” Weesha said. “I envy you, Threatbinder. Your only engagement with hearts is to stop them.”

“It's not always as easy as it seems,” Yasha said with a soft smile.

“It's not in the modern lesson plans because it's extremely uncommon, and Emisin's theory about what it meant is still somewhat disputed.”

“What *else* could it mean?”

Arkady inhaled a deep draw from his pipe before blowing a couple of smoke rings into the air. “Each of the Grandmasters and Grandmistresses had a theory, but what the majority of them finally decided they liked the most was that both of the woman's options had been valid and strong, but that when she'd been introduced to one, the other dissolved on its own, no longer needed. Grandmistress Tesaira said the woman's path was such that she could have taken either cord and been truly happy, but that the two cords were in opposition to each other, so by Emisin leading her along one, he had dissolved the other.”

The gnome's brow furrowed in annoyance. “Except that goes against the core of the threadbinder tenets. True emotional connection cannot be dissolved by anything less than death, so while I can understand Emisin's theory, I cannot reconcile that with what the elders seemed to think.”

“Mmm,” Arkady agreed, taking another puff from his pipe. “I'm inclined to agree with you and Emisin. But I have threadbound a few hundred souls together over the centuries, and never the once have I seen more than a single thread coming from an applicant.”

“So you're saying I made an error,” the gnome said, her tone started to grow cross.

“Easy there, friend,” the dwarf chuckled, raising one of his powerful hands. “I am saying no such thing. You said that the applicant was human, and you should know well by now that our services are not often requested by the race of man. While they have no trouble enlisting the aid of the threatbinders, we threadbinders are looked upon by most of them with a sense of distrust and paranoia. Therefore we don't have as much practice in looking at their threads. Why, in three hundred and some years of threadbinding, I've only had as many human supplicants as I do fingers on my hands, and I imagine you've had even less.”

Weesha frowned. “Aye, this girl is my first human. But I do not understand why their threads would be any different.”

Arkady's pipe continued to billow and run over with smoke as he nodded. “Aye, I thought the same thing the first time I met with a human supplicant, but there are something about the humans that you cannot forget, Weesha.”

“And that is?”

“Their lives are but flickering embers compared to the raging bonfires of our own. Not including binders, how old do your people typically live until?”

“Gnomes are considered in their twilight at around three hundred and fifty.”

"Elves are in their at around six hundred," Yasha offered.

"Aye, and a dwarf at the end of his pint might crest seven hundred if he was lucky," Arkady said, gesturing around with his pipe. "But an elder human? They are a mere seventy or eighty years. It is almost unheard of for a human to reach even a simply one hundred years."

"How can they endure being so short lived?" Weesha asked incredulously.

"They simply pack all their living into the shorter span, so they do everything harder, faster and with more vigor than any of our peoples do, because they do not have the time to gain wisdom from the errors of their friends and family, only through their own desperate mistakes." The dwarf brought back the pipe to his lips, letting it rest there a moment. "So that is one possibility, that there is something different and unusual about the humans that allows them to form more than one bond, although since the woman in Emisin's story was an elf, it's also possible that it isn't something that's unique to humans, only perhaps slightly more common."

"What are the other options?" Weesha asked him, finishing off her cup of tea.

"It's also possible that your supplicant hasn't settled into who she is yet, and therefore doesn't know what she wants out of a partner, because she's human," he said. "The humans who have come to me over the years have done so when they are somewhat older, as if they felt like they were going to exhaust all other options before settling on giving a threadbinder a try. Most of my human clients have basically been coincidences, springing as an afterthought after my wife has given her services to one of their little squabbles."

"I asked the girl if she knew what she wanted out of a partner before I agreed to take her on as a client, and her answer intrigued me, if not annoyed me just a little."

"What did she say to you?" Yasha asked her.

"She wanted a partner who wouldn't judge her for her past and was willing to give her a future."

"Seems like a reasonable answer," his elven wife said.

"Aye," Weesha said. "I agree, although you must admit, it is a touch more vague than we are used to hearing. No specifics about what the partner looked like, how they might act, where they might come from. It's almost as though the girl was attempting to dodge my query."

"Mmm," Arkady pipped, taking another puff off his pipe. "I've stopped asking. I've found over the centuries that part of the reason supplicants haven't found their true love is because they're often lying to *themselves* about what it is they want from a partner. They tell themselves a story about what it is they think they want from someone, and inevitably, the person I introduce them to isn't at all like that, and yet, they're extremely happy and go on to live highly fulfilled lives. You know what that tells me?"

"That people enjoy lying to you?" Weesha teased.

"That people can't admit to themselves what it is they truly want. Oh, they *think* they know exactly what it is they're seeking, but the person we are most accustomed to lying to is ourselves, and it takes a rather daring fool to look inward and accept whatever he sees there as right and fine."

"Fine," the gnome relented. "Perhaps the humans are less adapt at lying to themselves. Any other possibilities I hadn't considered?"

"A couple, although I must confess, they would be extremely unorthodox, but I suppose they are still fringe possibilities that should at least be mildly entertained, if only briefly." The fireweed in his pipe was nearly burnt up, and so he took a final draw from it, knowing he would get the last good lungful of smoke from it.

"Pray tell, Arkady."

"Both of these seem wildly unlikely, but they are things I suppose you must at least consider. First, the pocket city of Gom Weydan is aligned this winter, and the gates are open now and will remain so until some time after spring has bloomed. Gom Weydan is only accessible for about half a year every three decades or so, and there is a chance one of your errant threads leads through those gates. It wouldn't be visible at any other time, so that could just be utter coincidence."

“Gods help the girl if she would be paired with someone from Gom Weydan,” Weesha said, laughing in amusement. “If even a tenth of what I've heard about that place is true, it might shatter the human's tiny little mind.”

“Rich for a gnome to be calling a human's mind little,” Yasha said, her voice sounding thoroughly unamused.

“You know what I meant, woman,” Weesha said. “What's the other wildly unlikely thing I should be considering but am not?”

“She could also be paired with some of Parkeen's handiwork.”

The gnome looked at him with an expression that seemed as though it were at the dead center between laughing and being agape with fear. “You must be joking.”

Arkady raised one of his hands, as if he also considered the idea extremely implausible. “When Yasha and I were last in Byanmaz, the entire city was aflutter with reports that Parkeen had raised some fifty souls from the dead and restored them to full life. The necromancer claimed he was trying to undo a wrong he'd caused when he was a threatbinder, but no one knew what to make of it. Some of those had been dead nearly a century.”

“I'm a little surprised the elder binders haven't seen fit to snuff out Parkeen's life, once he renounced his position as a threatbinder.”

Yasha shrugged a little. “The elders don't agree. Once a threatbinder, always a threatbinder, and one of the fundamental rules of the threatbinder philosophy is that no threatbinder shall ever harm another. Besides, Parkeen is the only necromancer alive. The art was considered long lost centuries ago, and he somehow transitioned from being a threatbinder to being a necromancer. The elders certainly don't want him to go away until it's been determined how he did that and how they might replicate his success in the matter..”

“I'm not old enough to remember the last generation of necromancers,” Weesha said. “Did either of you ever meet one before the Inquisition took them from us?”

Yasha reached over and grabbed her husband's hand, giving it a tender squeeze, knowing this was likely to be a very touchy subject for him, one prone to bringing back long buried memories, but she felt it was important he not run from them, and wanted to provide him as much support as she could for him.

“Aye,” Arkady said, drawing in a deep breath. He could feel the large scar in his side throbbing as the memories began to bubble up from the dark recesses he tried to keep them tucked away in. “Aye, I did. Velktara, she was one of the last five necromancers to be taken by the Inquisition. She...” He stopped and Yasha squeezed his hand even more firmly, reminding him that this was all in the far distant past, and had only as much power over him as he allowed it to. “She brought me back to life, after I was killed in the Abari Wars, alongside my brother.”

He could see the gnome's face fall to ash, and he knew at that point, he would need to give her more of the story.

“Rakon, my brother, was an actor and I was stage crafter for his theater. Rakon was always so good in the spotlight. The forgettown of Lingham saw enough commerce come and go through the gates that the theater always had an influx of new patrons coming and going, and as long as Rakon and his team had a new show up every season, there was always work to be had and customers to come paying. Lingham was high up enough in the mountains that it seemed unlikely that the wars would come to our front door, but war offers no sanctuary, and eventually the Selban armies were knocking upon our gates and we were forced to defend ourselves, and the Gormansson brothers were not one to run from fights unless given no other option. The town was overrun and Rakon's theater was destroyed, but we managed to use an escape tunnel to get us back safely into dwarven territory. Rakon and I decided to enlist, because everything we'd ever known or owned had been lost when Lingham fell.”

“Arkady,” Weesha said, horror on her face. “I did not know.”

“Both Rakon and I were at the Battle of the Celestial Dawn, the final battle of the Abari Wars,

and while the dwarves were victorious over the trolls that day, the cost of life was insanely high, and both myself and Rakon were killed,” he sighed, trying not to replay those memories in his head, but finding himself unable to escape the memory of tasting copper in his mouth when he awoke. “What I hadn't known is that my brother had taken out an insurance policy on us, using the great battle axes and fine breastplates our father had made for us when we came of age as collateral, the only mementos we had left of our family. Velktara had taken some convincing, but as I said, when my brother had the spotlight on him, he could convince anyone of anything.”

“How long had you been fighting?”

“Oh, I imagine it was close to fifty years between the fall of Lingham and the Battle of the Celestial Dawn, but I lost count somewhere in the middle of it. Rakon had been a passable soldier, but I had taken quite well to it. The insurance was that if both of us were killed, Velktara would resurrect the one of us whose wounds were the most easily mitigated.” His fingers squeezed tight on his wife's hand, and she placed her other hand against the back of his neck. “I had been stabbed in the side by a troll spear that had dug in beneath the breastplate. Poor Rakon, his body had been crushed far beyond repair. So, two days after the battle, I awoke on the field, blood still in my mouth, the stench of death and rotting flesh all around me, and the soft eyes of Velktara looking down at me. She had taken my brother's breastplate and battle axe as payment, but told me that I should keep my own, as a reminder of the family, and the price my brother had willingly given to keep one of us alive.”

“Ye gods. And how did you go from that to threadbinding?”

He smiled wearily, his hand relaxing a little on his wife's as the images and sense memories of the battlefield receded back into the shadows of his memories. “After my time in war, I wanted to get as far away from that as possible. I traveled back to Lingham, determined to see if anything we'd left behind could be salvaged, but the trolls had gutted our former home of everything they could carry as part of their war efforts. The theater, the building anyway, was still there, but the amount of work it would take to repair and restore it, well, I didn't have the heart, what with Rakon gone. So I sold it to a couple of reclaimists and decided I needed a new path to follow. I traveled the lands for a while, offering my skills as a mercenary and warrior, until I met Emisin on one of his pilgrimages, and he invited me to come and be a student at the school. He said that only a man who had truly seen his cup overflow with hate could live a life so full of love. I didn't have a knack for it, not at first anyway. Hells, I think I had to work three times as hard to learn three quarters as much as any other student there, but eventually, I started to show great promise, and Emisin seemed quite proud in his ability to spot raw talent. Of course, there was the distraction when Yasha arrived.”

The gnome grinned a little. “Aye, now that story I *have* heard a little of, but the chance to hear it straight from the source? Would you do me the honor, m'lady?”

Yasha tittered a little with amusement. “It truly is not the remarkable story everyone seems to expect that it will be. I was King Karaja Summervale's third of six children, and second daughter, so it was clear to me that my eldest brother would eventually be king, and that my older sister and I were likely to be bartered away in arranged marriages to help bolster the alliances my father had spent lifetimes building and reinforcing. But as I came of age, I began to become increasingly paranoid of the life that would have given me. It seemed most likely my father was going to try and pawn me off to the eldest son of King Waterford, and while the king was a nice man, his son was a prat and toxic in more ways than I wanted to count. But I had grown up hearing tales of the Threadbinders, of how they would connect one soul to another and that the love of two bound threads was greater than any other could ever know.”

“That is what we promise and try to deliver, my lady,” Weesha said.

“My father did not like to admit it, but when he had been a prince, he had also enlisted the aide of a threadbinder to find the perfect mate for him. That had brought him to my mother. He only told me the tale once, but my mother had told it to me many a time before her passing. So when I was of age, I dispatched my handmaid to see if the threadbinder who connected my mother and father still lived, and

I was pleased to find that Valyria had, in fact, survived and thrived in the intervening years, and so she was brought to meet with me. I had never been with another woman before, but I assumed that since I knew what sort of things brought me pleasure, using them to bring another woman to pleasure would not be such a stretch, and I found that generally to be true. The price was paid and she brought me to Byanmaz, where Arkady was in his third year of six studying to be a threadbinder.”

“They still talk of the day the Royal Guard of Summervale swarmed upon the school, thinking you had been kidnapped for ransom,” Weesha giggled. “As powerful as your family is, m'lady, I do not think they could've taken on the entire enclave of threadbinders.”

“Mmm,” Yasha said with a smirk. “And my father was inclined to agree with you. Mayhap I should have told my father of my decision, but I suspected that if I had, he might have tried to dissuade me from my course of action, and I found that rather hypocritical of him.”

“Was her family finally accepting of you, Master Arkady?”

The dwarf shook his head. “Nay, I'm afraid they did everything shy of disown my beloved when it found she was threadbound to a dwarven war veteran. Her eldest brother now sits on the throne of Summervale.”

“More like is dying on it,” Yasha sniffed. “Being that both Arkady and I are binders, we have far outlived both my father and will easily outlive my brother also. I know that my nephew, Prince Brastelon, will likely welcome us with open arms once my brother has passed, a time I suspect is coming shortly.”

“I've often thought your brother simply despised the fact that he could not pursue his true love as you had,” Arkady said. “But you told me the alliance between the houses of Summervale and Midnighthollow was desperately needed, which was why your brother married Elania.”

“They were not a good match but they survived each other as best they could,” Yasha said. “But my nephew is waiting for his father to die before he enlists a threadbinder's services.”

“Certainly not mine,” the dwarf said in amusement.

“Obviously not,” Yasha agreed. “But he will find a good threadbinder when his time has come.”

“So tell me more of the girl, what you know of her that might have lead her into bearing such a condition as to sport four cords of true love.”

The gnome shifted in her seat a little. “Her name is Sophia Burngrave. Her parents passed some six years ago, and she has been traveling with the troupe since she was born, so she knows no other life, truly. But she said when her parents passed, so did her love of the circus, and so she began trying to plan her exit from their employ. She told me she began trying to acquire the currency needed to employ a threadbinder, taking on extra work in order to gather the funds she would need. I was not the first threadbinder she encountered, but the first one she encountered struck her as... too unfocused for her to trust.”

Yasha shook her head, her golden hair falling before her eyes for a moment. “Let me guess. Almas.”

“Almas indeed,” Weesha sighed. “She's still as much a drunkard as ever, and because of that, Sophia waited. When she was passing by our enclave, she came to interview me, inquire about my rates, and when we agreed upon something that was accessible, she returned to the caravan, gathered up what few belongings she wanted to bring with her, made her her goodbyes and came back to the enclave as the caravan continued on by. Since the ritual provided such... unusual results, I wasn't sure what to do with her, so we have been letting her stay here, since what she paid for hasn't been delivered yet.”

“How much vitae did you ask from her, considering how short the human life span is?” the dwarf asked the gnome.

“Only a month's worth, and even that I feel was too much, as I have been unable to deliver upon what I promised.” Weesha let out another deep breath. “I'm at wit's end, Arkady. I haven't the foggiest what to do with her. I'd feel better if you checked my results.”

He shrugged a little, tucking his pipe away. "I mean, I could do such a thing, and simply set the vitae asked at the absolute minimum."

"What *is* the minimum amount of time a threadbinder can accept, my love?" Yasha asked him.

"A solitary day's worth. As I'm sure you recall, I've only ever asked the humans for months, never years. They do not have as much time to spare as our races do." The dwarf stroked his beard a moment. "Aye, I suppose I could do you this favor, Weesha, and have you in my ledger as owing me something in kind somewhere down the line. Typically I prefer to wait a few weeks between rituals, but the details of this particular person have intrigued me, and so I will accept."

"Let's go introduce her to you and we can see what comes of it."

The gnome hopped down from her chair and started heading towards the door of her office. Arkady and Yasha moved from their chairs and headed to follow. The apprentice threadbinders had gathered around and scurried away as Weesha opened the door again, all trying their best to look innocent, although it was clear they had all been listening in.

Weesha paid them no mind as they headed out of the main building and over towards one of the side structures. "In addition to entertaining the students, Sophia's also been doing chores around enclave. Cleaning, cooking, whatever she can to offset her cost in food and lodging."

They headed into a smaller building, one where it seemed the space was mostly open. Yasha recognized it as a combat training space. Both thread and threatbinders were trained in basic combat, and they used open areas such as these for training.

In the center of the area, Sophia was practicing some knife juggling. She was, as described, a human woman in her early twenties, dressed in burgundy slacks with a crimson band of cloth around her mid section, covering what seemed like a generous, if proportionate, bosom. Her skin was tan, like a sun baked tree bark. Her eyes, although distant, were clearly a brilliant shade of blue, like cold winter sapphires. Her hair, which hung just past her chin, was mostly jet black like carved obsidian, but had stripes of shimmering red like ribbons of ruby. She was taller than Arkady and shorter than Yasha, with a nimbleness and an agility that Yasha found herself somewhat envious of.

She was also heartbreakingly beautiful.

Yasha turned to look at her husband, as if to try and explain her feelings to him, only to see the look on the gnome's face just beyond his. "Gods. Arkady, Yasha... the entwined cord... it leads to the two of *you*..."