



THE EIGHT WINDS INTO THE WEST

D Y L A N W E B B

THE
EIGHT WINDS
INTO THE WEST

BY DYLAN WEBB



One Printers Way
Altona, MB R0G0B0,
Canada

www.friesenpress.com

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First Edition — 2021

Editing by Lynsey Griswold

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ISBN

978-1-03-911378-7 (Hardcover)

978-1-03-911377-0 (Paperback)

978-1-03-911379-4 (eBook)

1. Fiction, Fantasy

Distributed to the trade by The Ingram Book Company

*For Pam,
She was a constant advocate for my education
and a loving godmother*

*“I’m not a good person. I’m not even a nice person.
I’m just trying to be good enough.”*



PROLOGUE



A black veil was draped over a sky dotted with pin holes, allowing starlight to rain down on the silent ocean below. The still and frigid air hung in glistening moonlight. A small fleet of ships quietly drifted over the water—ships that had sought out death and met her embrace. Now they returned with a lighter load. This fleet had seen a fearsome battle with bloodied and blackened scars as proof. At the bow of the leading warship, the *Dinistr Fawr*, one figure approached another, standing outlined against the light of the moon and stars.

“My Emperor, you mustn’t stand out here in this chill. You led us into a grand vict—”

“Grand?!” a shrill voice spat out, interrupting the approaching figure. The standing figure turned towards the shrinking steward, the moonlight revealing abject scorn written upon the emperor’s face.

“We come back empty-handed, and you call it *grand?*” the emperor continued.

The steward stepped back as the emperor towered over him, but the steward needed to check on him after all the rage that had been unleashed earlier, all the carnage. He needed to know if what he had seen earlier could possibly resurface.

He tried again. “Their cries and shrieks echoed across the water. Everyone will know what happened. Your dominion over this land cannot be challenged after such a displ—”

“Quiet,” the emperor said bluntly, interrupting the steward once again and holding up a bony finger, pointing the man’s gaze in a westerly direction. The steward stepped to one side to see what the emperor had spied. Up ahead was a small fishing boat, an iridescent figure standing at the bow. The emperor’s violet eyes were wide at the sight.

On the lone fishing boat, a figure wearing immaculate silver and jewel-encrusted armour stepped forward. The shining figure drew a large, gleaming claymore sword, and as it was unsheathed, a loud, deep chime rang out over the calm water, causing a ripple to emanate from the small ship. The sword beamed an unnaturally intense white light, from which the emperor shielded his face. His dry grey skin cracked as he winced at it. Lowering his arm, a panicked expression spread across his face.

“All soldiers! Battle stations!” the emperor cried, his eyes not leaving the shining target.

“Your grace?” the steward said, frowning. “It’s a fishing ship with a lantern.”

The emperor turned towards the steward with rage the man had feared would return.

“GO! NOW!” the emperor roared before snapping his gaze back to the lone ship.

Concerned, the steward hastily scuttled below deck.

“All hands, on deck! All hands, on deck!” the steward bellowed as he rushed to the ship’s wheel. He uncovered a bell and began sounding it loudly, the harsh ring piercing the once-still night. Within a few moments, the fleet started to come to life.

With unblinking eyes, the emperor watched as the armoured figure, standing right on the edge of the small fishing vessel, pointed the tip of the claymore toward the warships before plunging it downwards, as though to stab the deep blue below. The water on either side of the fishing boat launched up with an unnatural force as two large waves rose from the depths. The same chime from earlier rang again but sharpened as the water ascended into two gigantic waves. The chime’s pitch rose until the sound was so high that it could no longer be heard, and at that point, when silence dominated, monstrous twin tidal waves surged towards the ships. Soldiers, donning red plate armour, encrusted with crimson sand,

spilled onto the decks, but were met with a crushing blow as the waves tossed ships violently aside, thrusting the soldiers beneath the water. As the waves approached the *Dinistr Fawr*, the emperor threw his arms up like a guard, purple light emanating from his hands, and the cascading wave split, sparing only the *Dinistr Fawr*. Sea water still managed to coat the deck lightly, and the now-soaked steward looked up to see the emperor planted firmly in place.

Surrounded by silent keels, the emperor snarled and scoffed, baring his jagged teeth at the armoured figure across the waves.

“He ... he USED IT! Their KEY! Not only did they USE their key, but it worked!” The emperor began to shake in anger. He clenched his fist; his nails punctured his skin, causing blood to burst through and collect in his palm.

“This all could have been avoided!” The emperor yelled, throwing his voice over the swell, his arms outstretched. “But now you muster all you’re worth to stop me!? You better hope that key returned to the vault you seized it from!” His chest expanded and collapsed rapidly as his breathing became more intense. “No matter! I’ll either rip it from your bloated corpse, or your family’s!” For a moment, the emperor let his blood boil. The steward hurried below deck, fearing what was to happen.

With his arms outstretched, the emperor flattened his bloody palms. He then flourished his hands in a circular pattern around him, causing ghostly purple sparks to burst into existence and float in the air. He collected the purple light within his hands, and then threw them upwards. Clouds quickly and unnaturally gathered, and a violent storm erupted above him, rain drenching the emperor and the deck he stood upon. A crooked smile appeared on his face; this storm gave him control over the waters he sailed upon. He launched his hands forward, as if to grab the small ship off in the distance and pull it towards him. The emperor’s ship began to thrust forward, the emperor looming over the bow, breathing heavily as it briskly approached the lone ship.

The armoured figure sheathed its sword, and launched itself, just as the *Dinistr Fawr* was about to obliterate the diminutive fishing ship, landing gracefully on the bow of the *Dinistr Fawr*, right in front of the emperor.

The small fishing ship shattered into wooden splinters strewn among the waves nearby.

"A nice new set of clothes you seem to have acquired, *Your Majesty*," the emperor said, stepping back and bowing mockingly. As he lifted his head, he revealed his sinister grin. "You wish to fight as equals? Give me the key, and we shall see what I am deemed worthy of." He extended his hand and bony fingers outwards; blood had soaked into the creases of his hand.

"You know why you were denied!" roared a mighty voice from beneath the helmet. "Your intent was sinister, and yet you *still* went to Dizstrum and were rightfully denied *their* key as well!"

"I doubt they even had one in the first place, the way they fled," the emperor barked. "If they truly possessed one of the keys, they wouldn't have died like cowards."

"Their screams could be heard across the land! You have cemented your place as a cruel and villainous worm! You are worthy of NOTHING!" The voice rang out from the shining helmet, echoing with the rain that was ringing against the shining armour.

"This isn't you, Kor! This isn't the Kor *I* know." The armoured figure shook his head. "Something has you. I don't know what, but ... Kor, I did not use Alitiar's key lightly."

"You know nothing of me," the emperor said, his voice seeming layered with another that was not his own.

"You really slaughtered them, didn't you?" said the armoured figure, stepping back a pace. "You are not the man we thought you were, the one we trusted, the one we thought could help settle these disputes that split our lands. The one we ... the one *I* loved." The figure shook his head in disbelief, his helmet heavy as with a great burden.

"You've brought this on yourself, old friend," he continued. "You made me don this armour, and you can't be allowed back into our halls. Ever. As the heir to the throne of Alitiar, I relieve you, Kor-Thiliath, of your duties."

"Relief is found only through death," the emperor grumbled.

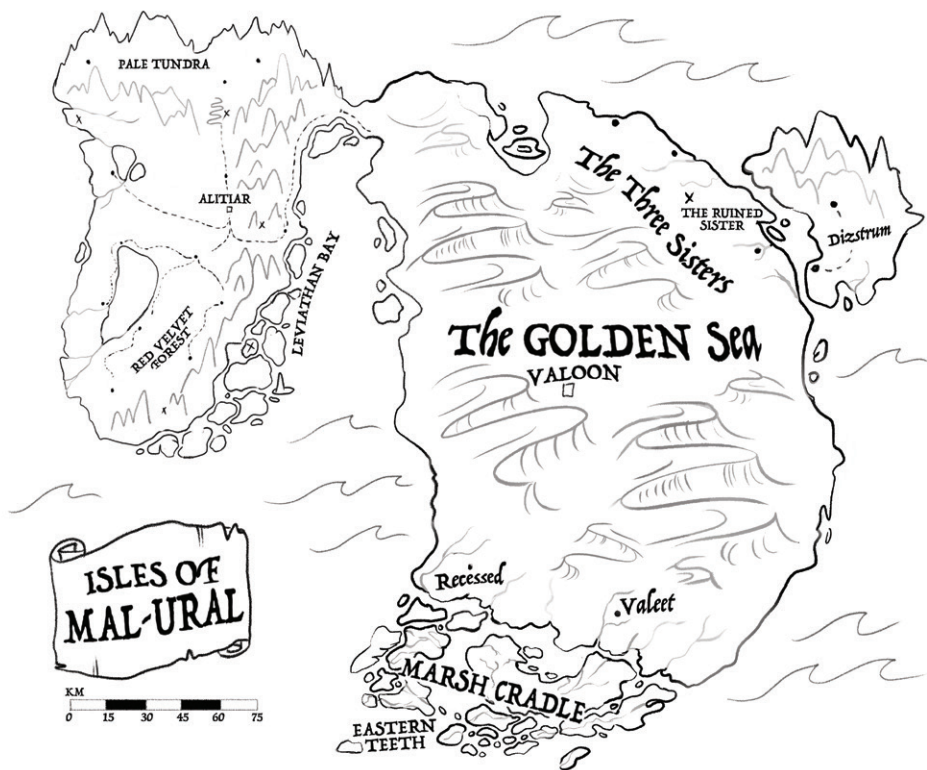
"So, you remember that part of our oath after all. I will remember you as you were when you took it, and not as the beast you have become." As the armoured figure said this, he drew the giant blade once more, the chiming of it rattling the water-soaked air.

The emperor pushed his open hands downward, and spectral rapiers materialized, casting a purple glow. The two figures sprang towards each other as the enchanted storm raged above them. Rain battered the deck as the champions engaged in fevered battle. The armoured figure dealt precise cuts through the air, creating mist as he carved the blade through the water, only narrowly missing the emperor. The emperor nimbly dodged and slashed ferociously, swinging wildly. With each blow dealt, sparks flew and the sound of metal on metal resonated over the ocean. The armoured figure allowed the emperor to gain the upper hand briefly, knowing his armour was impenetrable to those spectral blades. The emperor side-stepped a swing, believing he had an opportunity to strike under his opponent's arm. The armoured figure, with seemingly improbable speed considering his thick and heavy armour, swung upward and sliced off the emperor's left arm. The emperor fell back, clutching his shoulder. A thud could be heard as his dismembered limb found the deck nearby.

"Come on, fool, finish me off then," he said, blood gushing down his dark cloak. "You've clearly toyed with me as long as you deem necessary." He squeezed the fleshy stump at his shoulder, letting out a quiet groan as thick blood oozed through his fingers.

"You came here just for me," the emperor chuckled, humorously. "That armour, that weapon.... It's all for me?"

The armoured figure lifted the claymore high, light still brimming from every surface. As he brought it down, the emperor sprang forward, shrieking, his eyes wild and teeth bare. Both were engulfed in a blinding light, and the ship where they once stood erupted and shattered. The conjured storm subsided, debris settled, and reflected stars returned to swim atop the soft waves of the ocean. Chunks of the ships lay scattered, lifeless. Peaceful it may have seemed, but peace was not to follow.





CHAPTER 1



AS THEY APPROACH

Whatever their reason, whatever their cause, all who begin “the pilgrimage” on our island nation of Ma-Ural are given the chance to find and enter Mysrik, the hidden city of the immortals. For a century, the city of Mysrik has welcomed these seekers. All may have the chance to enter, but not all will achieve that goal. Regardless, the people of Ma-Ural accept all newcomers in the same way, and many find their way into our society, leaving the desire for immortality behind them.

Regardless of the outcome, the pilgrimage changes all who walk it.

On the history of Ma-Ural

By Archmage Ivar



“...And the two ah them haven’t been seen since! That was three years ago! Gareth, the brief king of Alitiar, and the *ex*-high priest who named himself emperor, were sent ... ta oblivion!” A stout dwarf barkeep entertained an unarmed paladin, who was sitting at the bar of the ship’s tavern in her under armour.

“Nah, see, I don’t believe it,” the paladin said as she just finished a gulp of ale from her flagon before hunching back down and laying her arms on the bar. She had to hunch over; she was far too tall to comfortably sit upright

on the stool. Her blonde hair was tied loosely in a low-hanging ponytail, which rested on her back, her lightly pointed ears proudly showing.

“Be true as me beard be long, lass,” the dwarf said, brushing a wild and untamed beard with his fingers. He acknowledged another patron at the bar, pouring some frothy beer and happily sliding it over to the man, who snatched it quickly.

“Were you there?” the paladin asked the dwarf sarcastically as his sight returned to her.

“Ah, well ... no, but I do trust the fisherman an’ survivin’ soldiers tha’ saw it all happen.”

“Of course, all known for being particularly *truthful* with their tales. What was the one about the leviathan again?” the paladin jested.

“Hey, nah! Don’t joke about tha’! The leviathan story is definitely real,” he said with a wink. “Believe it or not, lass, the two ’aven’t been seen since, and that was several years ago now. The high priest attacked the island of Dizstrum, and the fleet just vanished. The throne passed on ta Prince Kain and Princess Maria, who now rule together, and no one is certain of Gareth’s fate,” the grizzled barkeep explained. “Coincidence?”

The paladin’s face remained unchanged. The barkeep shrugged.

“Ah ... anyway, I reck’n the story sounds much better. Place ’asn’t been the same since though ... more turmoil between the west and east than ever, but that’s why yer ’ere, right, Paladin? Going to deal with this mess for us, yeah?” The barkeep gave her a toothy grin as he washed up a few glasses. The paladin smiled, saluting him with her flagon.

The large ship rocked slightly as a waitress returned behind the bar. She maintained balance as the ship settled back. The barkeep stepped down from his stool behind the bar and plodded over to aid her with the emptied flagons.

“Did ye get good tips from the lad in the corner, lass?” the barkeep asked the waitress.

She brandished several gold pieces from her apron pocket.

“All from him! Scoring big from those going on the pilgrimage this trip!” she said excitedly. The paladin, curious to whom they referred, turned to scout the tavern. Her eyes spied a shadowy figure in a dark green cloak, slumped in the corner. Purple hands lightly grasped a flagon of ale. On top

of the figure's head, erupting out of thick black hair, were a pair of horns, curling round to his back and resembling an aged goat. He had a thin black beard, and a blank, emotionless expression was painted on a pockmarked face. The sight of him sent a shiver up her spine.

I've never seen a demon-kin before, only heard about them, the paladin thought. *Such monstrous features. A true shame how often they get shunned ... with words like 'demon-spawn' or 'hell-born' following them.*

"Excuse me, barkeep," the paladin beckoned.

"Aye, lass, ye want another?" He stood back up on his stool behind the bar. The paladin slumped down to meet him at eye level.

"Ah, well yes, but I couldn't help overhearing. What did she mean when she said that man is going on a pilgrimage?" The dwarf's eyes looked her up and down quickly. He took the empty flagon from her.

"Ye definitely not aware about where ya going, are ya?" he asked, pouring her another drink, the froth just skimming the top of the flagon. He was about to give it back but then pulled it just out of her reach. "Lass...?"

"Elaria," she answered. The barkeep nodded and happily handed the flagon to her before he continued.

"Going 'on the pilgrimage' means he be seeking entrance to the city of *Mysrik*. We see lot of mages like that lad coming from the mainland ta take the pilgrimage. Probably 'alf the travellers on the ship be goin' on it. And since they don't mean ta return, they don't need their coin, so good tips for us, eh lass?" The barkeep gestured to the waitress, who gave a warm smile before leaving the bar to go for another round of the dozen tables that filled the ship's onboard tavern.

"See, there be a bunch of magic users there—wizards, sorcerers, druids, you name it. They be from different backgrounds, creeds, or teachings, and they live in solitude out to the northeast in a secluded city called *Mysrik*. To join this little club, though, you 'ave ta prove ya be worthy."

"How do you *prove* that?" Elaria questioned, pushing a thin strand of her light-yellow hair back behind her pointed ear with her long fingers.

"They say ya 'ave to *wander* the wilderness, and if the people of *Mysrik* deem ya worthy, they contact you, somehow, and then you're shown the way. 'Alf of them walk into the forests and never return; the rest are either

found dead or come back madder than before. Many give up and are now residents of these fine islands.”

“Sounds awful. Why would any mage want to join a ‘club’ with such uncertainty?”

“Ah! Well, membership ta this club does grant ya immortality, and all sins of ya past life revoked. At least, so long as ya never leave the city. That be why no one be sure on the particulars of joinin’ or where the city actually be.” The barkeep shrugged, putting a few clean glasses away behind the counter.

Elaria turned to look at the horned figure again, her azure eyes finding him once more. “So, you think he is going to try to get in? Just wander the wilderness until he gets contacted?”

“Well, they can accept anyone, no matter what ya may ’ave done before. As long as ya survive, I guess. And it be a dangerous wilderness out on these isles—lots of fey and shadow crossings.” The barkeep put down the last flagon he was cleaning and leaned in close, lifting himself up onto the bar to reach her ear. “Someone like ’im though? Lookin’ the way he does? I got a good sense of people, see, and I reckon he’s done some shady stuff. And I mean *really* shady stuff. No one from the mainland can find ya in Mysrik. Great way to escape. Purple-skinned, maybe, but there be blood on those hands.” The barkeep returned to his clean flagons as another patron approached.

Meanwhile, outside on the deck, a lone bard stood overlooking the ocean as the ferry skipped across the waves. The ferry acted as a transport ship, taking ore and goods to and from the mainland and transporting passengers seeking to enter the lands of Ma-Ural. Its trips were infrequent, so it was tightly packed when it did set sail. The ship was several decks high, massive compared to most, housing many communal cabins and a large cargo hold. Various smaller ships escorted the vessel to protect such a valuable prize from over-ambitious pirates.

A soft sea breeze danced over the taffrail, the salty air filling the bard’s thin nostrils as he inhaled the surroundings. The ferry had been traveling northwest since its departure three days earlier, and now a large land mass erupted from the horizon line. The bard had barely moved, holding the

taffrail and taking in the ocean view wide-eyed, his chestnut brown curly hair dancing softly with the breeze. He had stayed on the starboard side and watched as this new land approached. The landmass passing to the east began as a series of shallow reefs and small islands and then became an endless sea of sand dunes that the ferry sailed around. As the bard set his brown eyes north; forests coated the area before a series of jagged mountains caged the region further north. The soft wind danced with his ragged clothes as the ferry approached their destination: the small port town of Cospid. With one hand, he grabbed his lute strap and tightened the buckle, securing the instrument tightly to his person. The bard wandered port side, passing by several sailors tending to their duties on deck. Most passengers were below on the lower decks, preparing for departure.

To the west, mountain ranges topped with snow lined the coast to greet him, shielding the western land from prying eyes. The mountains were tall, thin, and numerous; they looked like razor blades ready to slice open the unwary. Gazing at these titans, his eyes caught a structure among them: a slender grey tower about half the height of the mountains in the range. The bard's attention gravitated to the tower, and as he focused on it, squinting a little, he felt a force pass through him, as if he were transparent to everything but the wind itself. All other sounds around him faded, replaced by a light hum, and for just a moment, he went numb. Then, as suddenly as the feeling came over him, he snapped back to reality. He took another look to the mountains, hoping to prove he wasn't seeing things, but the tower was gone.

Has it just drifted out of sight? he thought.

Clutching the rail, he shuffled left, trying to get another glimpse of the tower, but he saw nothing, just the rocky faces of snow-capped mountainous pillars. Sailors around him were still going about their business, readying the ferry for arrival as large crates were hoisted high above. The bard looked around in disbelief.

Did no one else see that tower? Perhaps too much salty air is corroding my brain...

His eyes searched the deck for anyone sharing his confusion, but instead he heard a commotion.

"Let go of me, you tripe!" a young female gnome, halfway into her

second decade, shouted, struggling against the manacles around her wrists. Several large sailors were walking with her, holding her under the arms. One sailor brought his knee up violently, contacting one of her large round ears, which poked out of straw-like amber hair. This made her stumble a little. She hissed at the sailor, scornfully looking at him from the top corner of her large round eyes. The leading sailor was clutching his nose; blood coated his hand and dripped down his arm.

“A small gnome like that shouldn’t need such a brawny group to hold her back,” the bard mumbled. Interest piqued; he watched the scene continue.

“She broke my bloody nose!” the injured sailor yelled through a blood-soaked rag.

“Go wash it off then!” the gnome said, flailing her legs up in the air wildly. “I can help by throwing you in the big drink myself!” She was held just high enough that her feet were only skimming the deck, with the sailors struggling to hold her.

“You’re lucky we don’t throw *you* over with the sewage! Now, we are going to find you another escort.” The leading sailor marched towards the ship’s tavern, and they all followed him in. The bard watched, intrigued by these events, and wanting to take his mind off whatever tower he may have seen. Thinking he may have had enough fresh air for the moment, he looked to follow the individuals as they headed into the ship’s on-board tavern. Skipping across the deck, hand firmly grasping his lute strap, he briefly turned back towards the mountain faces, which stared back at him. He hoped to spy that tower once more, but seeing nothing, he eagerly wandered inside. Perhaps a quick drink before they docked would ease his thoughts.

The sailors burst in with the gnome shackled between them. Chatter amongst the patrons was silenced, and all eyes turned to the figures at the door.

Lowering the blood-soaked rag, the leading solider announced, “We require someone to escort this gnome to Alitiar.”

Turning from her stool, Elaria’s eyes explored the faces within the tavern. They had all begun looking away, refusing to help. They were all here for their own reasons, whether that was an escape from a life they didn’t want or going on that pilgrimage as a way to absolve themselves of

guilt. Many of the people on this ferry appeared to be only interested in those at their own table.

"I'll take her," Elaria said softly, raising her hand.

Some people were still ignoring what was going on, and mindless chatter started back up. The sailors didn't notice Elaria right away, looking at each other with little hope that someone was actually going to go out of their way for the gnome.

"I will take her," she repeated, now standing up.

Heads now turned to Elaria, now standing upright and easily towering over the other patrons. Casting looks of disgust, shame, and interest, many colours were painted across the faces of the patrons. The sailors shrugged at each other and walked over to her with the gnome, who dragged her feet.

"She needs to be escorted to Alitiar. She assaulted several sailors, knocking them unconscious. We can't trust her to get there alone," the bloodied sailor explained, muffled by the rag he held to his nose.

"Why is it your concern that she gets to Alitiar? Why not pass her off to the city guards when we dock?" she questioned.

"We have word that the city guards are preoccupied, but there's also this." One of the other sailors passed Elaria an envelope. Elaria briefly investigated it, seeing it coated in golden foil, the crimson wax seal broken. She opened it and read.

To whom this may concern,

Our youngest daughter, Hilda Oostmullen, is to spend time in Alitiar in order to learn the qualities necessary to one day rule the Plains of Stonehill. She is to return only when the Kai'sions have deemed her worthy of this role.

The royal family of Alitiar, the Kai'sions, has been notified, and they await her arrival.

May this letter be proof of her heritage and status,

Signed, Prince Xalser of Thunderrock

"She's royalty?" Elaria said with disbelief as she lowered the letter.

‘Royalty?’ the bard mumbled as he eavesdropped from the other side of the bar. He had heard of gnomes from Thunderrock. They were well versed in magic, and known for their greed—or at least they were from what he had heard. He had performed outside tournaments where they were participating and heard of their great successes, always hearing of their elegance and skill with their magic. He loved to listen; he always found the best lyrics for his songs when he just listened. The Thunderrock gnomes always arrived wearing garments encrusted with gems that sparkled in every colour. This gnome, Hilda, didn’t fit this description. She looked hardy, stocky, and tough. Perhaps her family were removing her from the public eye, since a prestigious family wouldn’t want their image tarnished by a rebellious child. Maybe these women would have need of a bard’s talents. He might not know these lands, but perhaps he could supply them with something in return for their company on his travels. Perhaps his music? He had impeccable talent but had yet to find the right stage.

“Yea, the seal and crest prove it. We used our on-board wizard, who verified its authenticity. This was signed almost five days ago. If she doesn’t arrive in Alitiar soon—”

“You’ll have a bunch of pissed nobles to deal with,” the gnome said with a smirk.

“If she was last seen boarding the ferry but doesn’t make it to her destination, it’ll be our heads. The gnomes of Thunderrock are ruthless. So, can you take her? I am sure you’d be rewarded greatly for the task,” one sailor said.

“Why doesn’t she have an escort already?” Elaria asked.

“He took a swim,” the gnome said bluntly.

“How lovely. Yes, I will take her,” Elaria nodded. “I’m a paladin, and I am heading that way myself, so it won’t be out of my way.” The sailors looked at each other and nodded, shoving the gnome toward her. She came up to Elaria’s waist when they were standing side-by-side.

“A paladin? Perfect, that’s that solved.” They tossed over a small key. “Room number?” the leading sailor asked.

“It’s 1077, sir,” Elaria answered. The sailor wrote this down on a small note pad, before turning away.

Elaria crouched down to the gnome’s level. “So, Hilda, is it? We shoul—”

“It’s Hoots,” the gnome interjected.

“Pardon?” Elaria asked.

“Call me Hoots. *Hilda* is so ... bleurgh. Formal,” Hoots said, gagging at her own name.

“I believe we are arriving soon,” Elaria said. “I was catching one last drink before getting my gear from my cabin. Do you have much we need to retrieve?” She threw back the last drops of her ale.

Hoots shook her head with a smile, but then it hit her: She didn’t have much at all, just a small and mostly empty rucksack in her quarters.

“Lost most of it with your previous escort?” Elaria asked. Hoots nodded, less enthusiastically, her head lowering slightly. Elaria put her flagon down and signalled for the barkeep before placing down a gold piece next to it.

“A royal escort. How about that, eh?” Elaria jested, sensing Hoot’s discomfort and trying to lighten the mood. “Not even on land yet and already gaining some responsibilities.”

Hoots’ head hung low; she didn’t respond. Whatever reason she’d had for assaulting the sailors, or getting rid of her previous escort, didn’t matter to Elaria. This was exactly why she had come to this land. She wasn’t escaping. She wasn’t leaving behind anything. She wasn’t trying to run away. She was finding a reason to stay. She figured that the troubled gnome, Hoots, could be that reason. Or at least one reason.

“First off, a royal shouldn’t be in chains.” She unlocked the manacles and placed them next to her flagon. Hoots looked up in surprise. The bard began to inch towards the two, nervously avoiding eye contact.

“Good thing you only clobbered your escort recently. I wouldn’t have wanted to stick around to see if you were going to throw me off the ship as well,” Elaria said, straightening up.

Hoots gave a soft chuckle as her expression transformed into one of confusion. “Why?”

Elaria looked down and whispered, “Because I can’t swim.”

Hoots went onto the tips of her toes and softly said, “Neither did he.”

Elaria laughed nervously with Hoots, and they started to walk off together. The bard, about to approach, caught a glimpse of Elaria’s face as she turned. There was a birthmark on the left side—a large brown mark strewn across her cheek and up toward her pointed left ear. The bard

turned and backed away from them. He had only seen that shape—that birthmark—once before, in his earliest memory.

“Wait, so you may have actually killed a guy?” Elaria asked, just as they left the vicinity.

The bard heard laughter and turned back to see the two conversing and walking out of the tavern. He would have to find a reason to travel with them, a good one, because *now* he was motivated.

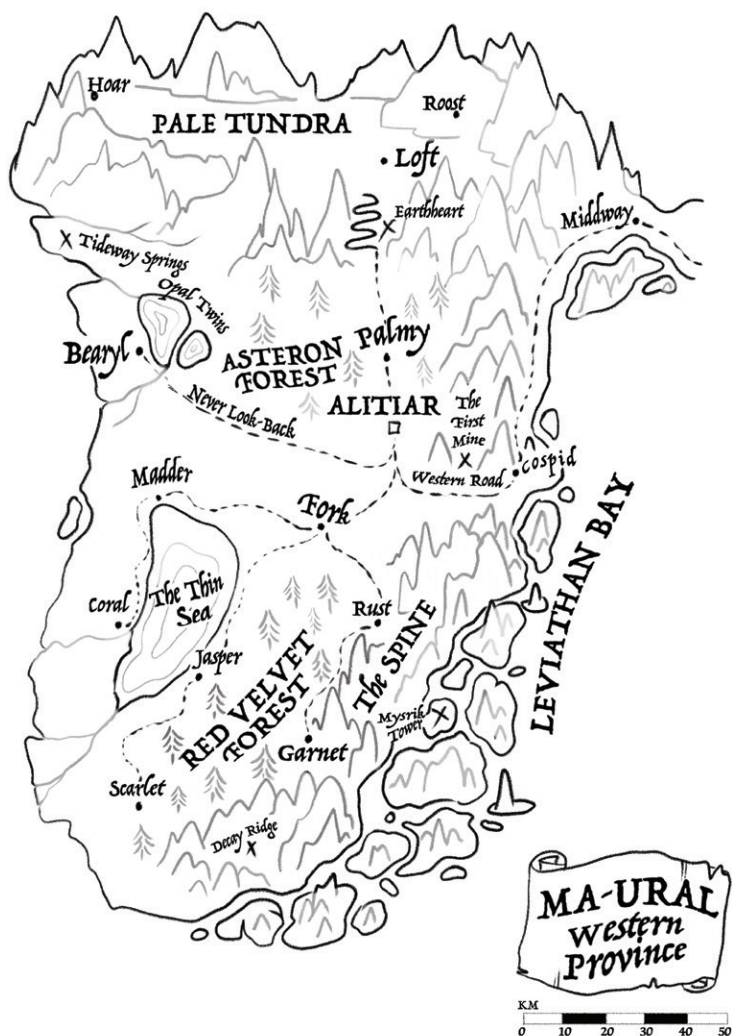
“Ha! They made you do dishes? Probably a first for you!” Elaria bel-lowed light-heartedly.

“Silence, *night guard*! Bet that was your first drink on this tub! Now carry me to my chambers!” Hoots exclaimed, throwing her arms up playfully, ready to be carried.

“Right. That’ll need to stop. You are walking all the way, unless you have money hidden away in those rags, because I don’t have enough for a horse,” Elaria said, strolling towards the stairs with Hoots. “Also, I have a name. Call me Elaria.”

“Ooh, *Elaria*! How fancy!” Hoots said, fluttering her fingers. Their friendly conversation followed them down to the cabins below.

The horned figure remained in the dark corner. Unmoved by any of the events that had occurred, his ears did not even twitch when the sailors entered and everyone else was transfixed. The horned figure remained stoic and still. He had done what he had to do, and it had gotten him here. Nothing would deter him from his own goal: escape.



CHAPTER 2

AS THEY DISEMBARK

Lost Personal anthropological notes (1 of 18)

I'm going to be taking some personal notes on this journey. I find it therapeutic to get some emotional and individual thoughts written down before diving into the academic writing.

The king of Alitiar, Gareth, has just accepted our requests to publish anthropological findings in our latest journal on the people of Ma-Ural. Never before has anyone had this opportunity. At last, the mysterious far-off land of Ma-Ural can be documented. I never thought I'd be this excited!

I have spent the last two days on the starboard side of this ferry, awaiting the appearance of the islands of Ma-Ural on the horizon. Finally! I will be sketching this area until the sun sets.

The eastern land is much larger than I expected, but it is largely an expansive desert. People have taken up residence in small towns on the coasts, I was able to spy a few as we sailed passed. A local gnome who accompanied me this evening described the largest city in the east, Valoon, as an immense city made of glass that is constantly traversing the desert on powerful stilts that puncture the ground deeply, in hopes of finding treasures long lost in the sands. This will be a must see! I foresee an entire chapter dedicated to this in my upcoming thesis. Smaller islands dot the eastern sea, and the largest

of these is Dizstrum, where a colony of dragon-kin—humanoids who resemble dragons save for wings—reside in solitude. The description seems not unlike the mainland dragon-kin.

The western land, where the port town of Cospid (the ferry's destination) resides, also has the capital city of Alitiar further inland. Alitiar is where the governing body sits and is completely independent of the mainland, I am therefore extremely interested in their politics and social hierarchy. I imagine being so far away from the mainland, being so isolated, helps preserve sovereignty. Apparently, they maintain a monarchy, hence 'King' Gareth, but a democratic council has also been established to help with relations, consisting of people of the four groups residing on Ma-Ural (I believe these are the humans, dwarfs, dragon-kin, and the people of Valoon).

—Side note, Valoon was once governed by gnomes but is now extremely multicultural; this will need to be investigated in depth.

The west contains much of the fertile land and rich ore, which fuels much of the economy.

The east and west portions of the main island are joined by a small land bridge to the north of a large bay: Leviathan Bay (Why is it named that?), with Cospid on its western bank.

The ferry has begun docking, so I must be off. An adventure awaits!

~ Associate Professor Lucky Montana



The smell of fish saturated the air as they began to disembark at the small port town of Cospid. Its signature cranes hung high, ready to unload the incoming transport vessel. A large influx of people had come from the western road and had done so recently. People were lining the dock, some awaiting the ferry's arrival, others simply trying to go about their business. Many of them had their hands full with sacks, packs, and other belongings.

Guards were all around and looked overwhelmed with the masses of people. There wasn't a panic exactly, but there was distress on many faces.

"I wasn't expecting such a welcome wagon," Hoots commented. All the passengers were crowding on the top deck of the ship in preparation to depart. Hoots and Elaria were close together, both travelling light, Hoots with a small rucksack and Elaria with a fresh backpack. Most people travelled in similar fashions; it was a transport ship but mainly for the exports—the people came second.

"I don't think these crowds are for you in particular, Hoots," Elaria remarked, concern in her voice. Hoots and Elaria stood in line along the railing, ready for departure. Elaria had donned her armour, now looking the part of a paladin. Shiny new heavy-plate armour enshrouded her, and she almost looked small nestled among large pauldrons, but she managed to fill it out sufficiently. Elaria was tall, well beyond average height for a half elf, and fiercely athletic, with long, thin blonde hair and deep beryl eyes. Some might have described her as classically beautiful, save for the large birthmark on her cheek. Her armour was plain and unadorned, with only a few ornamental patterns along the edges; it looked almost unused. Hoots stared into it and was able to see her own reflection, with her round head and round eyes staring back. Her slightly turned-up nose twitched as she got a whiff of the catch of the day from the docks. The ship pulled up close, and the rabble could now be more clearly heard.

"This place looks full to the brim! Any way that letter of yours would get us a place to stay?" Elaria asked, still peering down at the crowds, trying to make sense of such a scramble.

"Mmm ... probably not. I was just saving it in case I got into trouble with the guards or something. Don't think this lot are going to lay down a red carpet for a misfit like myself. I don't want to flash it around too much anyways." Hoots looked at Elaria. "Who knows what assassins might be out there trying to get me!" Hoots added playfully, nudging her. Elaria looked at her with concern; she didn't find the notion too funny.

"Fair. Well, let's just get off and see where our feet land," Elaria replied. As Elaria scanned the common folk at the docks, she noticed more and more troublesome sights: crude bandages wrapped around heads and limbs; injured being pulled in cart; and other people pulling carts full of

loosely stacked belongings. One man grasped his shrivelled, smouldering hand and let out a wail as two women held him on a stretcher; he was in so much pain his whole body curled in on itself. Another scene saw a child sucking his thumb, a small plush bear hanging by his side, and his other hand clutching a crying man who was desperately searching the crowd.

"They look like they just came from a war zone," Elaria said. "These are..."

"...refugees," a voice said from Elaria's side, finishing her sentence.

"Yes." Elaria spun on her sabatons to find the person taking the words out of her mouth. She found another half elf, a bard she had seen stumble into the tavern earlier. A rough and beaten rucksack hung lightly on his side. He clutched his lute strap, tightening it as he spoke.

"These are people, innocent people, caught in the middle," the bard continued.

Hoots frowned. "There's, what, *three* cities on these isles, and this hole is one of them. What are they caught in the middle of? Miners' dispute?" she asked, now spinning around, her brown eyes looking up to meet the bard's.

"The capital, Alitiar, was attacked last night," he explained.

"How do you know?" Elaria looked him up and down. As her head turned, the birthmark on her cheek came into the bard's view, and his eyes briefly paused on it before he answered.

"Ah sorry, one of our escorting ships returned with the news. I was just listening to them a few moments ago. My names Trit, by the way. Trit the bard." He leaned forward so he could ensure his introduction was heard by Hoots as well.

"Middle name *the*?" Hoots jested.

Trit chuckled. "Just want you to know what name they'll be shouting from the taverns this evening," Trit said, puffing his chest out with a raised chin. Elaria gave him an awkward smile before leaning down and close to Hoots.

"You sure no one would know you are here?" Elaria whispered.

"What? No," Hoots said, not whispering. She looked back at Trit. He was still smiling at them, not hearing Elaria's whisper. "He doesn't look like he could kill a fly, let alone me," Hoots whispered. Elaria nodded.

Hoots straightened up, speaking at her normal volume. "No need to look after me that closely, Paladin. There'll be enough righteous justice to

dish out here, apparently, seeing as we arrived just in time for a siege on the capital!" She sounded excited.

"Yes ... right..." Elaria said, her eyes darting briefly towards the refugees again. The three looked forward with the other passengers and observed the commotion on the docks they prepared to disembark onto.

Within the ship's tavern, the barkeeper looked out from a port-side window. Parting the window's curtain, he could see all the people standing shoulder to shoulder. The barkeep was able to see over to the cramped docks. He roughly ran his fingers through his long beard.

"Think we'll be docked for some time, lass," the bartender said, arching his neck back towards the bar. The waitress was picking up the last few flagons and plates left scattered on various tables, balancing everything on her arms as she talked.

"Trouble with the cranes again?" she asked.

"Nah, there be a mad amount of people out on that there dock today," he said, turning back to scan through the crowd.

"We weren't expecting that many people on the return, were we?" she asked, coming over to the window, her arms full, to take a look. "Oh, that ain't comforting," she muttered before heading back to the kitchen to drop off her load.

"Not at all. Somethin's gone down 'ere, lass. Best we stay on board for now," the barkeep said, eyes still looking worriedly over the hordes.

"No worries for me, boss," the waitress said, using her back to push open the kitchen door. "You know these sea legs weren't made for dry land." She dumped the plates and cups she had into the kitchen sink, slapped her hands, and made her way to finish clearing tables. The barkeeper was still transfixed by the foreign sight of a crowd of people clamouring to get passage on the ferry. Usually this was the final destination for travellers. The return trip generally consisted mainly of the ore for the mainland after all.

As the waitress picked up the last few things from the tables in the corner, she let out an audible gasp, and clutched her chest with her free hand.

“Oh sorry, sir, you gave me a fright! The ferry is docking soon; I thought you might want to be...” She paused briefly when she realized who she was talking to. “...collecting your things.”

In the corner, the horned figure slowly rose, pushing back his chair with a screech, his dark green cloak covering him almost entirely except for some leather boots that poked out from the bottom. He was of average height and his yellow eyes looked back at her as she slowly took the empty flagon and plate from his table. With purpose, he then strode out of the tavern, face unmoving and eyes unblinking. As he passed by her, she got a soft whiff of sulphur. He opened the door, letting the roar of people’s pleas from the docks drift into the warm tavern for just a moment. The barkeeper’s head had turned when the waitress gasped. He watched the man leave, his eyes still on the door.

“Dark past that one ’as,” he said before turning back to the crowd on the dock, and softly muttering, “No good runnin’ from a past that dark, not even here.”

The sailors moored the ferry and extended the plank for passengers to leave. People began pouring off the boat, tickets stamped for processing, belongings clutched in hand. Many had their heads down, not wanting to draw attention from those on the docks, and quickly disappeared into the town that stood to the right.

Hoots and Elaria made their way down the gangplank. Their room numbers were checked, the escort position Elaria had just taken up was documented and noted, and then they were free to move on. The crowds on the dock were being held back out of arms reach by a taut-rope fence, two metres high; they all seemed to want safe passage but were being kept at bay, their hands reaching out for safety—for anything.

The two looked around aimlessly, trying not to make eye contact with anyone. From Hoots’ height, she saw children scattered amongst the crowd; from Elaria’s, she saw how unsettlingly deep the crowd was. The two were directed from the docks and away from the crowds with a path that poured onto a stone road. The road curved around toward the town proper, giving a view of Leviathan Bay with the eastern land in view just a few kilometres away.



Lost Lost Personal anthropological notes (2 of 18)

The ferry served as a transport ship, taking passengers to and from the isles, but more importantly, it carried the main export to the mainland: mythril-rich ore and a plethora of uncut gemstones, both harvested from the plentiful earth. I managed to get a glimpse of this as I disembarked. Astonishing! Rubies the size of a fist by the barrel!

The main road out of Cospid goes directly west, according to the tavern staff, where the raw ore and gems came from; this road pours directly out into the docks, which sit south of the town proper.

It appears as though Cospid was settled purely for the purpose of transporting the precious ores to the ferries that were collected for export to the mainland. Cospid lies at the feet of the mountain spires right on the coast, where there's very little land. As Ma-Ural grew in popularity, there was a higher demand for people to man the docks, and so the town of Cospid grew. I suspect this is why Alitiar was built much later on, to house some kind of governing body, as true society could not grow on such a narrow strip of land. I don't think anyone expected this place to be so rich.

The residences and other buildings of Cospid lie on the northern part of the town, with the southern part being the docks. Although only a small town, it is the third most populous on Ma-Ural. It houses several inns, taverns, and residents, most of whom are either here for work at the docks or live as fishermen, supplying all people of the isles. I look forward to some well-made seafood before heading west in a few days. Though the town is not a thing of beauty, the residents seem to enjoy the simple, steady, and stable work, preferring not to anger any officials or guards. The west seems to be officially run and governed by Alitiar, the residents proudly wearing clothing adorned with a purple rose surrounded by thistles—also displayed as banners

above several public areas—which is the sigil of the Kai'sions, the ruling family of Alitiar, whom I hope to meet in the next few days. Every time I mention the Kai'sions, people talk highly of them, referring to them as “down to earth” and “eternally humble.” The people are particularly fond of King Gareth, who has been described to me on several occasions as “what all nobles should strive to be.” I look forward to meeting him in person after our recent correspondence.

More to come.

~ Associate Professor Lucky Montana



The smell of the sea lingered in the air and a soft murmur from the docks drifted around the corner as Hoots and Elaria headed toward the main streets of Cospid. Hoots looked around but couldn't see Trit nearby. *Probably off to the pub to make his name known, I guess.*

The road was set in with cobblestone of various colours and shapes, all meticulously fitted together, leaving no gaps between them. The houses, warehouses, and buildings were much the same, with expert masonry allowing the use of every size and shape of rock in the construction, making each look equally unique up close. Each building sported only a spare amount of wood as frames for the doors and windows, all of which were reasonably small.

The pair were able to now look out over the large bay where the ship had docked. To the north was the land bridge connecting the west and east portions of the island, just a small sliver of green land. Off in the near distance, directly across from Cospid, was the eastern landmass—sprawling golden sheets of sand dunes as high as small mountains—with the evening sun creating an immense display of oranges and pinks that painted the sky upwards. They both took a moment to soak in the sight, far from any home they had known.

“That’s where my cousins are from,” Hoots said. Elaria looking down to her to listen. “‘*Scouring the endless desert for riches of old.*’ That’s what my

parents used to say anyway.” The word “parents” emerged from Hoots’ lips like vinegar. Elaria looked back at the vast golden expanse.

“And do they find any?” Elaria asked, wanting to build some rapport with Hoots.

“Well, the west is richer; not much coming from a desert, I’d guess.” Hoots motioned to the road on their left, going north and around the bay.

The road was narrow. The wilds could be seen just out of the northern city gate, which breached a small wall that spanned the compact area, a few kilometres at most, from the shore to the foot of the mountains. It looked rarely used by wagons with heavy cargo. In contrast, the western road was well worn, and the street it poured into hosted many wagons led by horses. Most were parked near the cranes, ready to be unloaded onto the ship.

“So, you are descended or related to the royalty in the east? Thunderrock is a long way from here, and I’ve never heard of desert-dwelling gnomes,” Elaria pondered out loud, looking at the sands still shining in the last few minutes of sunlight.

“We’re descended from one of the families that set up here. We didn’t, ya know, just start there. These lands were pretty empty for a long time. Think dwarfs were here before the gnome families,” Hoots explained, starting to turn away. She didn’t seem interested in describing her family history.

“I have orders to take you west, though, to the Kai’sion family,” Elaria said, gesturing to the western road with her thumb.

“Tensions between the east and west being what they are, over the past few years, I feel like I might be a good-faith offering to the west.” Hoots spoke the last part sarcastically. “That’s why a paladin like you got interested in these islands, right?” She grinned. “Lots of tension for you to sort out.”

Elaria nodded proudly, hearing her headmaster’s deep voice in her head: *“You hold that pledge above everything, Elaria. You serve the people now. And don’t you forget, you come second. Everyone else comes first. You come second.”*

She smiled. “Gotta do my best, you know. Sun is setting. Let’s see if there is anywhere to stay for tonight.”

The two turned and entered the intersection of the main roads. At the corner was a triangular-shaped building. The sign above read “The Last Stop.”

A villager walked past—a grey-skinned, orc woman. Small tusks protruded from her bottom lip, and she was wearing a plain and lightly stained brown dress. In her hand was a basket with a fresh catch and some root vegetables.

“Excuse me, ma’am, could you recommend a place for the two of us to stay? We are only passing through.”

Tired, the woman spun around as she walked by. “Not much space left, not since all the refugees piled in this afternoon, but try your luck at ‘The Fisherman’s Aid.’” She motioned down the main street going west, adding, “Soft beds, good hardy ale.”

“Why not this one?” Hoots asked, nodding her head towards The Last Stop. The villager looked both of them up and down, her eyes pausing noticeably on Elaria’s pointed ears.

“I don’t think that place is for the likes of you two, meaning no offense. We like to *think* we are a little more open to all the kin here—”

“None taken,” Elaria quickly interjected. She was used to this.

“But The Last Stop is usually reserved for those going for the pilgrimage. They stop off there before heading out to the wilderness, usually north to the land bridge,” the villager explained.

“Where would the Kai’sion family have gone, if Alitiar got taken?” Elaria asked. “I have orders to escort her to them.”

The villager eyes shifted back to Hoots, and she frowned, but shrugged it off, figuring it wasn’t her business. “No idea how this siege is going. They could still be there, or they could’ve all retreated to the farming town of Palmy, farther north of Alitiar, but I honestly can’t say. Thing like this hasn’t happened before.”

Elaria nodded. “Thank you. Do you need help with your goods?” she asked.

The villager started backing away. “No, no, that’s quite alright, best of luck to the both of you.” She then promptly continued on her way. The two peered at the corner tavern as they headed down main street. From the window, they could see a small lobby inside, and passengers they vaguely

recognized from the ferry. Dragon-kin, lizard-kin, dwarfs, purple-skinned people with horns much like the man in the ship's tavern, elves—noted from their ears, much larger and more pointed than Elaria's—humans. The tavern seemed full, but all races were lining up to gain entrance, with the string of beings continuing out into the street. They were all boasting very different garments, some regal with rich purples and clean whites, others looking like they were soaked in gallons of blood, and others looking as simple as a commoner's. What they did have in common was a lack of belongings; they all travelled light, and alone.

A simple-looking human turned as the duo passed by, locking eyes with Hoots. It became clear that half his face was not his own; two beings were fused into one as completely different shades of skin were melted into each other. Hoots gave a little gasp at the sight.

"Come on, Hoots, that's not for us." Elaria hurried Hoots along. A hooded figure glanced at the pair as they turned away and slunk out of the line, hugging the shadows. Outside some of the larger establishments, people were huddled together, sacks and wagons surrounding them. They all wore a look of worry, bordering on fear.

As Elaria and Hoots made their way down the main street, heads turned at the sight of the paladin. Her clean and iridescent armour contrasted against the grime of tired people and the rough stone of the buildings. Even with a dimming sky, her armour glistened and caught people's attention. They turned, quickly looking her up and down, but then they receded back into their own worries. Hoots walked by her side. Humming softly to herself and not giving any mind to those around her, she kicked her feet along the cobblestone street haphazardly. Elaria continued perusing the crowded doorways, and she began to notice a trend: All these places had doorways bursting with people, bars and inns alike, including The Fisherman's Aid. Even if they could squeeze past these people, Elaria suspected there would be no rooms available.

They made their way down the street, past the taverns, past more residential housing, and smaller shops, until the cobblestone road faded into dirt. They had walked for some time, hoping to see some vacancy. Keeping out of sight, a pair of eyes peered out of the dark at them.

The unsettling sound of people trying to find rest faded behind them as

they meandered west to the outskirts of Cospid. Mountains encompassed their view. It appeared as if they were erupting out of the ground from just outside the town, stretching out like a wall all the way to the north, curving to the east. To the south, there was a gap not far from them, but the mountains continued their stance farther south.

“Well, wilderness for the night it is,” Elaria said.

“What?” Hoots looked up after kicking a loose pebble into a patch of grass, then glanced straight up at the rocky giants towering before her. She arched her head right back, almost losing her balance as she did.

“Wooo...” Hoots said in amazement. The clouds parted briefly to expose the spires extending beyond the height of the clouds. Snow dotted the tops.

“I saw them from the boat, but they really snuck up, eh? They are so ... imposing up close. Like they really just ... voosh! No foothills or anything!” Hoots made erupting motions with her hands; eyes transfixed on the magnificent upward view.

“They were supposed to be so intimidating that early settlers advised against living here, superstitious, thinking they were a bad omen,” Elaria said, also looking up at them. Hoots gave her a sceptical look. Elaria shrugged. “I think they’re pretty unique. I mean, they are intimidating. The barkeep told me about them—”

“What? The mountains? Intimidating?” Hoots scrunched her face up in disbelief.

“It’s how they are positioned, like a cage or barrier. Maybe they thought it wasn’t natural or something,” Elaria continued.

“Not a very good cage. Big-ass gap down there.” Hoots pointed to the western road, which went through a parting in the mountains.

“Come on, we can make a start walking to Alitiar on the western road and camp out on the way.” Elaria nodded a little, reassuring herself that her plan was reasonable.

“I’m glad I’m out of my parents’ place and all, but are we really about to sleep outside?” Hoots asked. Elaria looked back at the glow of the main street in the near distance, then turned back to Hoots.

“Never slept outside before? Not even with all your friends in a tent or something?”

Hoots looked down a little, not wanting to answer. “Not a lot of friends

to do it with. Can't you hack a few people down with that new sword?" Hoots tapped the hilt of Elaria's sword.

"First of all, I'm a paladin. A 'justice-fuelled protector.' So, no. I am not 'hacking people down' for a bed. Second, these people seem to have lost enough. It wouldn't be right to take a soft bed from them. We just spent several days with nice beds on that ship," Elaria said, turning and rifling through her bag. "I don't keep much on me, but I've got enough rations for the journey. A bedroll for you at least. The barkeep said it's at least one whole day by foot to Alitiar. Hey, how'd you know it was a new sword?" Elaria said, pulling some food from her pouch.

"Just ... I'm not used to seeing bright and shiny swords. The ones hung around the palace were usually dull, not used for fighting or anything," Hoots said, distracted. She wiggled her toes through her sandals, feeling the soft grass between them. She thought that maybe the night out under the stars wouldn't be so bad.

Elaria pulled her sword out a little from its scabbard, showing a well-polished and untainted blade. The whole set of armour she was wearing was new, given to her when she completed her training. The elders of her sect praised her for being the best fighter they'd had the pleasure of training, especially considering she had no lineage to speak of. But with nothing to her name, it had been hard, with the daily beatings and the disrespectful looks from everyone. She had worked hard though, and it got her here. It wasn't the most prestigious place in the world but one that needed a paladin. She had to prove she was worthy of this sword, this armour, this title. If she started small, was a hero to just one poor soul, then she'd be making a worthwhile start.

"Well, this sword isn't dull," Elaria said, as she pushed it back into her scabbard. "Best we make a start on Alitiar now by foot, be there ... tomorrow evening?"

Hoots looked up at Elaria with a hopeful gaze.

"No, I'm not hacking anyone down for a horse," Elaria added.

Hoots' eyes narrowed but were followed by a cheeky smile.

"And what happens if we meet the people who kicked all the people out of Alitiar?" Hoots asked.

"I am a paladin. Don't worry. I'll keep you safe," Elaria continued and

ruffled Hoots' hair, to her disdain, before walking towards the western road. Hoots began following suit, but only after feeling the soft, refreshing grass between her toes a little longer. A figure watched closely from behind a small building, shrouded in darkness, as the duo headed to the western road.

CHAPTER 3

AS THEY VENTURE

Lost Personal anthropological notes (5 of 18)

After just a day in Alitiar, I've noticed there isn't any established paladin sect or wizard school. This is apparently true in the east as well. I suspect there are tutors, as some nobles here in Alitiar seem to know rudimentary magic. I have not observed any druids, but the thick forest I passed on the way is likely to house all kinds of fey; any worthwhile druid would happily reside within. (Remember what Mother said, "Don't accept gifts from fey, no matter what!") I do not expect to see any sorcerers while I am here, unless they are taking this "pilgrimage." There's never been a society to openly accept sorcerers. I doubt Ma-Ural is any different.

Regarding the pilgrimage, since those who are successful, or deemed so, never leave the so-called immortal city of Mysrik, I have my doubts of its authenticity. But the people here welcome all those who commit to it with open arms. Apparently, my barmaid was a convicted murderer on the mainland, but after two years on the pilgrimage (which consisted of wandering the wilderness—more on this soon), she decided to settle in Alitiar. She has three children now and is considered a noble! Is the pilgrimage real? Or is the idea of Mysrik what drives the travellers to these lands for a new beginning? Truly a fascinating practice.

~ Associate Professor Lucky Montana



Night crept in, and a soft blanket coated the sky in dark velvet. The air was still, and the smell of the forest and earth sat within the nostrils of the two travellers, Hoots and Elaria, as they walked down the western road. The road was empty, and the dull lights of Cospid withered away behind them. They were enjoying each other's company as conversation danced easily from their mouths. Both had been lonely in their previous lives and found solace in these moments.

"So, they don't just teach you how to hack and slash, huh? You could actually live out here?" Hoots gestured to their surroundings. "Live off the land and such?"

"Well, yes, I'm expected to be out on my own a lot and taught not to rely on others for help. Not to impose on anyone or anything not pertaining to the quest at hand."

"Yeah, but that sounds lame. What if you didn't want to?" Hoots asked.

"We're trained when we are very young. I don't know much else honestly."

"But if you *really* don't want to?" Hoots pressured.

"Ha! Well, we take an oath upon graduation."

"Oh, boo! Who'd know?"

"It's not just a vow, like a wedding vow, which is really a promise. This is *binding*. If I go against my oath, I'll slowly wither and die."

"Yo! Really?"

"Yo!" She laughed. "Yes, our soul is bound to it."

"You aren't selling this whole paladin thing very well."

"Well, there's another side to it. The more I commit to my oath, the stronger I get. More powerful."

"I'd say you are big enough as it is. They should've stopped feeding you a while back," Hoots said, looking up at Elaria from where she stood, level with her waist.

"I don't get bigger, silly; my magic gets more potent."

"Oh wait," Hoots said, slowing her pace. "*You* can do magic?"

Elaria slowed to match Hoots. “Yes. It isn’t much, a bit of healing for wounds and some that give my weapon a bit of a punch. So, the more I pledge my oath, with true sincerity, the better a paladin I become. Both morally and physically, I guess.”

Hoots slowed to a stop. “I can do magic,” she muttered.

“You can?” Elaria asked with a smile. *She’s opening up!* “A wizard perhaps? I imagine royalty could afford good tutors.” *I didn’t see a component pouch on her though...*

Hoots nodded. “I had ... a tutor...” Hoots smiled to herself, and they continued walking.

The western road was well worn, and evidence of fresh cart tracks could be seen carved into the soil. The road was large enough for at least ten men to walk shoulder to shoulder. Beyond the path lay shrubs and various evergreens, sparingly littering the land before the mountains erupted upwards. The mountains weren’t wide, and since they were narrow, taking the passage through them was short. The duo found themselves about halfway through the pass fairly quickly, with Hoots telling her companion about her experiences being taught magic in a tutor’s small class.

“No way! He fell for it!?” Elaria bellowed in disbelief.

“Almost every time! He knew I *hated* using magic, so he just thought it was another student. No one ever ratted me out. It was just too damn funny,” Hoots said, proudly.

“What if he *knew* it was you and was just happy you were practicing magic?” Elaria asked, smirking.

“Oh, shut up! He was way too senile to know what I got up to! I was miles ahead of the others,” Hoots said, but she pondered the notion a little. Elaria walked a bit faster and turned around to face her.

“Show me,” she demanded. “What?” Hoots slowed.

“Show me, or I don’t believe you,” Elaria said, walking slowly backwards.

“Pffft, nah. Besides, you should be setting up my camp by now anyway.” Hoots waved her hands around.

“How about you show me this *talent* you say you have, and I’ll set up tonight’s camp without your help,” Elaria bargained. Hoots’ eyes lit up.

“Fine.” Hoots grinned. She stopped in the middle of the path, and Elaria walked back a bit farther before stopping to get a good view. Hoots reached out her hand, as if to push an invisible door open. Orange arcane lights appeared around her hand and forearm, like orbits around a celestial body, made up of rings, formed by runes and foreign script. Hoots gave out a verbal cue, and instantaneously, a glowing orange bird figure took shape from the orange lights and soared upwards, sparks of light following behind, contrasting against the dark night sky. The arcane bird slowly traversed the air between the two. Elaria was transfixed, watching the majestic image dance in the moonlight.

“Wow,” Elaria said softly, mouth agape. Most people knew about magic, and it was openly used, but many saw it as a potentially dangerous art with some negative associations. It was also reasonably uncommon. Paladins were taught from a young age in boarding schools, and even then, their magic was limited. Paladins are fuelled by justice, but even a powerful paladin could be corrupted, and with them their powerful magic. Wizards were common, but it was vital to have extensive teachings to harness magic safely, which were very expensive, and so the rich and elite were the most frequent wizards, and even then, it was still a rare practice. A wizard’s magic often required components—ingredients or talismans, like specific types of wood, stone, or herbs—that acted as catalysts. The intense power that came with that practice had caused civilizations to fall and begun endless wars. So magic was accepted, but it would attract attention. Right now, both Hoots and Elaria were enjoying the brighter and calmer side of magic. As Elaria watched the phoenix-like bird light up the surroundings, she failed to notice a translucent floating hand unbuckling her belt, which was attached to her scabbard. The weight of her sword pulled the whole belt downward, and it dropped suddenly onto the ground.

“Oh hey, what?” Elaria said, confused for a second. She then looked up with an impressed expression. Hoots ceased the bird illusion, the hand dissipated, and she shrugged with a smirk.

“Those are two of the four spells I know, but I can hide the gestures within one spell and cast them both at the same time. Just *pure skill*.” Hoots slapped her hands together in triumph.

“Doubling up on spells like that ... not a common talent!” Elaria said,

impressed, picking her sword back up and adjusting her belt.

“You don’t need components for those?” Elaria asked.

“Oh ... ah no. Not those ones. They’re too simple.” Hoots felt her skin warming.

Elaria shrugged. “Alright.”

Hoots quickly continued. “If you get good at a spell, you can make it *really* subtle. I played tricks on the old guy, unbuttoned pants, moved chairs around, slammed doors... Actually, I swear he got a heart attack from that one once!” Hoots said, excited. “But don’t expect the light show often. I prefer a more physical approach to my problems nowadays,” Hoots said, punching the air in front of her.

“Alright, alright, noted! Just don’t actually undress me! I don’t get to see magic stuff like that often, or really, at all. All my spells are ... well, healing. Not a lot of show to them.” Elaria slapped her thighs and looked around at a space just off the path. “I guess camp it is then.” Spying a small rise to the right of the path, Elaria smirked. “You know, for a royal, you are surprisingly good about being outside.”

Hoots looked at her, jeering and unimpressed. “Yeah, well, you are surprisingly not uptight, for a paladin” Elaria smiled warmly before laughing. Hoots initially kept up her unimpressed look but eventually succumbed to Elaria’s infectious laughter.

It didn’t take long for a campfire to be lit and to get settled. Elaria’s bedroll was rolled out nearby for Hoots, while her backpack would be used as a makeshift pillow for herself. The weather on Ma-Ural was temperate—not too cold while nestled amongst the mountains away from the wind—so sleeping outside was not a deadly endeavour. The slight rise off the path allowed them to stay out of direct view from the road, despite the reasonably flat terrain of the western road. As they both settled down, feeling every little pebble beneath them, Elaria got out a few rations, a combination of roots, nuts, and dried meat. She offered some to Hoots.

“Nah, check it,” Hoots said, bringing out several pastries from her small bag. “I ... err ... *borrowed* them from the ship’s kitchen.” Elaria took a forceful bite from some meat, her eyes narrowing towards Hoots, who shrugged.

"These were the old ones! Stale stuff they were going to throw out. Don't look at me like that," Hoots said, ripping up the hardened pastry before chewing it with some difficulty. "See? Stale *as*."

Elaria paused, expecting more. "Stale as what?"

Hoots looked to her and shrugged again. "It's ... stale *as*."

"Yes, but stale *as* what?" Elaria continued.

Hoots blinked several times. *Stale as* ... I dunno. It's just very stale."

Elaria appeared confused, peering at the pastry.

"It's just an expression," Hoots said with a full mouth. Elaria chuckled and gave her a small smile; then they both continued with their mediocre meal.

The two lay down on their respective bedding areas and gazed up at the sky for a few moments. The clear night painted them a starlit view, far-off nebulas and galaxies providing dashings of colour against the twinkling stars. Their field of view was partially obscured and framed by the mountain ranges behind and in front of them.

"Don't get nights like these back home," Hoots remarked.

"No?" Elaria asked, looking over at Hoots from the other side of the campfire.

Hoots shook her head. "Not with the fog. This is wild."

"Fog?" Elaria asked.

"Oh yeah. In the city, there's like a layer of it. Stops the stars coming through like this," Hoots explained loosely. Elaria thought little of it. "Part of me hated coming all this way," Hoots added.

"Oh?"

"But *part* of me..." Hoots shuffled, pushing her hands into the long grass nearby and brushing her fingers between the blades, "...part of me needed an adventure like this."

"A nice, *safe* adventure, if you don't mind," Elaria said.

"Like ... maybe a *little* danger."

Elaria chuckled. "The less stuff that happens between here and the Kai'sions the better."

"I'll find my own adventure then."

"Oh, will you now?" Elaria teased. "Well, maybe it will be *stale as*."

"That ... that's not how that expression works."

“Maybe it’s my expression now.”

“You ruined it. You can have it.”

Elaria just smiled, and for some time, they both continued to stare up at the sky’s painting staring back at them.

“Alright,” Elaria said, getting up and readjusting herself. “I’ll take first watch. I’ll wake you up in a couple of hours.”

“Wait, what?” Hoots asked disapprovingly.

“It is still *the wild*. We have to keep an eye out for anything. I’m sure we’ll be fine, but it never hurts. We’ll take turns keeping watch. Relax, I’ll wake you up in a bit. Get some shut-eye for now.” Hoots frowned, then slumped into her bed roll, thankful for the rest. She slipped into a slumber with the soft crackling of the fire keeping her company.

As quickly as she went to sleep, Hoots was abruptly woken by Elaria.

“Your turn,” she whispered. Hoots let out an audible groan and sat up haphazardly, revealing a nest-like mat of hair on one side of her head. She meandered up as Elaria took her armour off piece by piece. Elaria seemed dwarfed by her massive plate armour, but she was clearly fit and athletic underneath it all.

“You wake me up in a few hours. Take some food with you. And don’t fall back asleep, okay?” Elaria said and continued to strip down to her under armour as Hoots plodded her way to her bag.

She splashed her face with some water from Elaria’s water skin and headed up the small rise to where Elaria had been sitting. There was some flattened grass on the rise, and Hoots sat near it, assuming it was a good place to be looking out. Blinking herself awake, Hoots took her watch.

Nothing stirred for the first hour. A few chirps from crickets, a rabbit bounding past, but nothing eventful. This was not a bad thing, but it did mean Hoots was struggling to stay awake. She threw another chunk of pastry into her mouth and placed another piece of firewood onto the dull embers of their campfire. Elaria shuffled slightly but did not wake. Hoots sat back down on the rise overlooking the western road.

For a few more moments, there was nothing, and then out of the corner of her eyes, just at the tree line across the road, she spied a humanoid figure

lurking. She looked at it. It wasn't making a noise. No twigs broke under its steps, and the trees and shrubs it passed barely moved. The figure moved swiftly and with purpose. Hoots rubbed her eyes, wanting to ensure that this was actually something tangible and not her mind playing tricks in the darkness. Then she ducked down until the grass pressed against her face. This had certainly woken her up. Her eyes darted back to the campfire.

Should I put it out?

She turned back to the figure to see if it had any interest in moving in their direction. The figure continued heading west, parallel to the road, but still out of immediate sight. The figure then cut across the road about two hundred metres away.

Did it see us? Is it circling?

Hoots leaned out a little further to see if there were any obvious advances towards her. The figure went up another slight rise further down the road. Without even thinking, Hoots set out after the figure. Hoots was not great at sneaking and the sound of loose dirt and pebbles being disturbed could be heard as she attempted to move silently on the road. Uncaring, Hoots made it to where the figure had disappeared. There was a small path, barely visible due to overgrown shrubs blocking its beginning. Hoots looked east and west down the road. Seeing nothing, she decided to ascend this hidden path. Curiosity was clearly getting the better of her.

Further up the path, the tall blades of grass brushed against Hoots' face. She pushed them aside with her hands. The path curved around and over the poor excuses for foothills. Ascending for a few minutes, she reached the mouth of a small cave in the mountainside. The entrance was visible within a light clearing in the grass, shrubs, and trees. Cautiously, she approached the cave, peering into the darkness within as she advanced. Hoots swore she was hearing murmurs from the deep.

The unknown was enticing. A deep dark mysterious cavern was the opposite of what she was used to, so of course, she was curious. As she continued to approach, her foot forcibly connected with a hard object on the ground. She let out a silent scream, mouth wide, and then bit down on her own hand, hard, to suppress it. Looking down, she noticed the object she had kicked was squared off with smooth surfaces. She brushed the dirt off it with her feet, revealing it to be a piece of corroded metal. Just next

to it was another. Having a revelation, she inspected the mouth of the cave once more, noticing the craftsmanship, the precise cuts. Paired with the size of the cave, she realized what these hard blocks were: cart tracks. This was a mine. An old abandoned mine. She knew there were many mines on the isles, but they were all immense and none she had heard of were abandoned. This fuelled her curiosity even more, so she stepped inside, grinning. *Adventure!*

Elaria had left Hoots on the watch for a few hours as the road was unknown. They might have been able to squeeze into a room at Cospid, but she had been on that ferry for almost a week, in a cramped room, and conducting guard duty as payment for her passage. An excuse to spend the night under the watch of stars had been too good to pass up. With the warmth of embers and the soft chirping of nearby crickets filling her ears, Elaria had fallen asleep right away. After a few hours, she was feeling completely relaxed and rested.

From the shadows of the bushes and the tree line of their small campsite, a dark figure shifted around and approached the clearing. Elaria began to stir, trained not to drift off in this environment for too long, her senses in tune with the surroundings. She was trusting Hoots on watch, but she found it hard to completely trust someone she had just met. Her pointed ears twitched a little at the breaking of a branch and the rustle of leaves. Elaria knew someone was near, approaching her. She wasn't completely exposed. Her pack, and armour were placed in a neat and organized pile, shielding her slightly. A shot from even the best ranger would barely hit her, let alone be an instant kill. If someone was going to kill her, they would have to get close. Elaria lay still, pretending to be in a heavy sleep. She wanted the threat to come close, to become exposed.

Why hasn't Hoots signalled?

What if Hoots had already been caught ... or worse? The first real job she had taken on after being blessed as a paladin, and she had possibly failed within the first day.

No. Hoots is fine. She has to be.

The figure inched closer to Elaria, and not stealthily either.

Is this Hoots? No, Hoots is small, and her stride is much shorter. Her weight would mean lighter steps too.

These steps were heavier with larger strides. The presence got closer—close enough to prompt Elaria to act. She launched her left hand across her body, grasping her long sword. Sweeping her legs underneath her, she bounded upwards. Her right hand landed exactly on the mark, the attacker's arm, which she quickly pinned to their side, placing her long sword right on the throat of the intruder. Her eyes scanned the rest of the campsite, looking for other attackers. None. Her gaze then settled on the one in front of her.

"You?!" Elaria exclaimed from between gritted teeth.

Hoots' eyes were accustomed to dark places. Like many races of the natural plane, gnomes had good eyesight in the dark, much like dwarfs and those demon-spawn she had heard about. Hoots was able to pick out features in the near distance with ease, but with a lack of light, it all appeared in grey scale. This didn't matter, for it was all dirt and rock. She carefully navigated around the corroded mine-cart track and continued inwards. As she got further in, the walls became smoother—unnaturally smooth, definitely the work of stone masons. This far in, the walls hadn't been subject to weathering like at the mouth of the mine. The roof hung low, only one and half meters at the most. This, of course, didn't bother Hoots with her short stature, but it made it clear that whoever had made this mine was likely short as well, the work of gnomes like herself, or more likely, dwarfs.

Both dwarfs and gnomes were known to mine, but dwarfs would often dig deep, whereas gnomes would mine for what was available on the surface or close to it. The dwarfs of Ma-Ural were not overly different to those of the mainland, and mined deep into the earth, uncovering the intensely rich earth with all the gemstones imaginable and the mythril veins that ran even deeper. The gnomes that took the eastern land for their own had found it difficult to dig and instead utilized the sand, which was prodigiously available, together with extreme heat, they yielded magnificent glass-based materials used for armour, weapons, tinkering tools, and more importantly, the great city of Valoon, which was entirely made of glass. The gnomes perfected their art and could make the glass hard, soft, opaque,

clear, coloured, or everything else one might want, but many gnomes saw this as a fruitless and unrespectable trade, especially compared to the dwarfs. Many gnome families left, as they longed for the rich earth, but the ever-moving city of Valoon still scours the desert, in hopes of finding the same wealth the dwarfs once had, but in the meantime, they were committed to the trade of glass making.

The mine opened up down the path, Hoots' eyes further adjusting to the darkness as she navigated the narrow hallway. She slunk forward with her arms stretched out wide. Her slightly rounded ears were becoming attuned to the eerie silence, flicking a bit at the slightest hint of sound. Finally, she came to the end of the entrance tunnel and was in disbelief. What she beheld was a great shaft, maybe thirty-five to forty-five metres in diameter, with a spiral walkway going clockwise from her left and continuing down as far as she could see.

Along the walkway were dozens more hallways. What was the most spectacular was how perfect and ordered it all was. The circular shaft was smoothed out to a perfect cylinder, burrowing deep. She had only read about these types of mines that the dwarfs had built. When the earth was so rich in all types of minerals and gemstones, they would strip the entire area, darting out in all directions to ensure all veins were completely depleted. This was a small one, also created to house workers and their families. Since it only had one apparent entrance, it mustn't have been very successful, but shafts like this were often interconnected to make a sprawling network. Looking up at the ceiling, there appeared to have once been an intricate mosaic, but time had eroded the details. From what she could make out, it had depicted dwarfs in dull attire, giving offerings of jewels and antiques to a large stone man or creature, the size of a mountain, depicted as having clouds circling its shoulders. The features of the people and offerings had been lost to time.

At that moment, a creak and a shuffle from far below caught Hoots' attention, and she sprang back into sneak mode, arms outstretched and stance wide. Carefully, she made her way down the spiral path, inch by inch. Every time she passed one of the side tunnels, she peered in but saw nothing but blackness. Hoots got about halfway down before cold feet set in, thinking that maybe this was a mistake, and that she should go back.

Hoots looked up and saw how far she had come already. What a wonder this place was! Taking on a sight not seen by anyone for decades, at least, gave her that sense of adventure she had longed for.

What would Elaria think? Oh yeah! Elaria!

Hoots had been so caught up in this small venture, accustomed to doing everything alone, that she had completely forgotten about Elaria, who was probably still sound asleep.

But what if...

Down a tunnel Hoots passed by, as she thought about turning around, a scuttle and shifting of loose stone, much like her own feet were making, could be heard. Backing up slightly, she looked down the tunnel. It looked the same as all the other dilapidated tunnels. But there it was again: the shuffling sound.

Hoots focused her eyes more on the darkness before her, adjusting them further to the lack of any light. Any detail would become visible to her, any slight change would be noticed—she just had to concentrate. As the silence took over, her senses felt heightened, transfixed on the silky darkness. A figure began taking shape.

Is that the figure I followed here?

A short and hairy figure lurched forward, its hefty nostrils twitching, taking in wafts of the air. This was not the figure Hoots had seen from the road. This looked more like a goblin, but not quite. This was not what goblins usually looked like. This one looked unnatural, grotesque, or feral. Its skin looked as though it might have been rotting. Its eyes were partially clouded over, and it dragged its knuckles as it shuffled towards her, still sniffing the air. When it was about twenty metres away, Hoots decided that this was enough adventure for one night.

Elaria will be worried sick, right?

It felt almost nice to know someone would actually notice her absence. Hoots turned ninety degrees to head back up the spiral path to the entrance, but coming right out of the next tunnel up, another feral goblin appeared, snarling. It didn't appear aware of exactly where Hoots was, but her presence was attracting attention. Where there was one goblin, there were surely more—many more. The snarling was not natural, even for goblins. These looked completely absent of social awareness; their clothes

were tatters, and they didn't wield any weapons. They looked diseased or decomposed, and it made Hoots more uncomfortable the more she thought about it. Their knees were distorted and bent in differing directions, their teeth large and sharp, and their noses pointed. The two present goblins continued to slowly wander towards her. Hoots assumed an aggressive stance, fists at the ready, when suddenly three more came out of the tunnel up the path, doing the same shuffling and sniffing.

Five? That's a good fight. Alright, we got this.

Several more limbs became apparent in the tunnel to her right. Limbs were piling and folding over each other as a dozen more came into view, crawling on the ceiling of the tunnel. The way they traversed the stone walls with disturbing dexterity was frightening. This situation had become more troublesome. Releasing her stance, she started to back away down the path, further into the cavern. All the goblins were sniffing the air more and more, and were following her still, teeth now visible, drool dripping off their exposed mouths and bare gums. Hoots slowly turned, and with a deep breath out, she exploded into a full sprint.

As soon as she began moving with such purpose, the goblins began leaping into action, some running after her on two legs, others on all fours. All were in pursuit. The goblins crawled on the walls and amassed over each other, all wanting a piece, with little regard for one another. Hoots sprinted further into the ancient mine.

Oh, I hope there's some kind of other exit somewhere!

Breathing heavily, she made her way down the spiral path. She could see that it flattened out below her; she had gotten close to the bottom. Looking back, she could see that several dozen more goblins had joined, with the obviously quicker ones bounding ahead. She knew that, if she spread them out thin enough, she could take them on in small groups at a time.

Hoots pivoted on her leading foot, planting it firmly as one of the quicker goblins, hot on her trail, bounded towards her. Starting from her waist, her hand flew up, forming a fist just as it contacted the goblin's jaw. With such force, she sent the goblin flying backwards, almost barrelling into another one. Another goblin, close behind, ran at her, baring its jagged claws, but she launched her foot right into its face. This one stumbled off the edge of the spiral path, giving a helpless yelp as it fell. Hoots, seeing

more approach, kited them further by running ahead. She got another thirty meters down the path and repeated her technique, a punch, a kick, and back to a sprint. With this, she was able to thin the herd. Unfortunately, Hoots soon reached the bottom.

It was a smooth, round, and expansive base, and several more tunnels were leading off from it in all directions. The goblins that had fallen lay as lifeless heaps. With heavy breath, Hoots looked back up the path and saw just as many goblins coming after her as before. Even though she'd been able to take some out, more seemed to have replaced them. Hoots made for one of the tunnels at random but was halted from her explosive sprint, feet skidding along the ground and dust kicking up from beneath her from her sudden stop.

A massive hairy beast stomped out of the darkness of the tunnel: a bugbear, like a goblin but several meters bigger, meaner, hairier, and with a shorter temper. As it came out of the tunnel, it brandished a large club that it had been dragging. It lifted it up and brought it down violently towards Hoots. She nimbly stepped out of its trajectory as the club rang loudly against the hard-stone ground. One of the feral goblins made it to Hoots and started going for her face. Hoots quickly jabbed at it, so it crashed to the ground close by.

The bugbear crashed down its club once more, Hoots only harrowingly leaping out of the way. The bugbear swiped the club towards her along the ground, but with quick and light feet, she jumped straight upwards. Her leading foot, the left, landed on the bugbear's elbow, and with swift thinking, she ran up his arm on her tip toes. Before the bugbear even had time to react, Hoots' knee contacted the bugbear's cheekbone. She grabbed its ears and swung around to the back of its head, and the bugbear let go of his club and reached up to grab her.

Perfect.

As it launched a meaty hand back, letting out a roar in frustration as it did so, Hoots grabbed the thumb and pinkie finger, kicking off his back and arcing forward. With each of her hands grasping a digit, pulling them outstretched and holding its hand just above the ground, the bugbear gave out a deafening wail of pain. At the distance she held him in this grip, it couldn't reach out to grab her without causing more pain, but it continued

to do so, cursing in gravelled goblin-speak as it did. She knew this grip well. More of the abomination goblins had arrived and now encircled her as she held out the hand of the bugbear, her eyes darting around at the mob. They snarled and glared at her, just out of reach, and cautiously shifted around her, unsure of how to approach her as she held the behemoth at bay. If she had now attracted them all, perhaps then making her way back up the shaft would be the best plan, trailing them behind her. It had worked before; it should work again. Maybe Elaria had noticed her absence by now. What a first night to be looking after her!

Hoots arced around, and the grip was so painful to the bugbear that it walked with her. She was attempting to put her back to the path, with the bugbear in front of her blocking enough of the goblins to give her a good start. She could feel it struggle against her hand hold. As her breath started to quicken, adrenaline began to pump through her veins as she prepared to burst into a sprint. Suddenly, she felt the bugbear's hand loosen, her grip no longer necessary. Hoots looked up in surprise to see the bugbear begin to distort and buckle in pain. She wasn't doing this.

Is something else affecting it?

The bugbear let out another yelp of pain, and the other goblins started taking notice, looking around the base landing. Some looked at Hoots and then at the bugbear in confusion. The bugbear then tried to bring its hands to its back, possibly the source of its pain, Hoots released her grip. In doing so, it began to turn. Behind the bugbear was a dark figure—the dark figure, horns crawling out from his head and an arm outstretched from an unwashed dark green cloak. His hand was in contact with the bugbear, a dark purple aura emanating from it, and the bugbear's flesh around it was quickly decaying and turning black. Veins all over it were becoming visible with the black decay, inking out all over its body. The figure, yellow eyes fixed on the task, turned with the bugbear, coming into view of Hoots. The bugbear began to collapse in pain as his externals turned necrotic. The figure let go and stood at Hoots' side. Hoots stared in both confusion and bewilderment.

"Your curiosity has become detrimental to me," the horned figure said sternly. The goblins looked at their fallen captain and back at the two intruders, whose backs now lay to the slope of the circling path. The

goblins brandished their claws and teeth and began to advance.

“Keep them back for a moment,” the horned figure said, grabbing a small piece of phosphorus from an unseen pocket inside his robe, his arms began to light up, engulfed in orange flames engulfed them as he uttered words of enchantment. He rotated both arms and hands in front of him in particular patterns, sparks of flames trickled off him. Some of the goblins reached close and began jumping at the two. Hoots, still in a little shock, managed to knock them down. She continued to fend them off, some requiring a one-two combo, others a kick upwards, or down flat onto the ground, or off to the side, slamming against the wall.

The goblins became more daring, jumping at them a few more at a time. Hoots was able to redirect them at each other with the back of her hand, shifting their fists or claws to whichever goblin was next to them. As she started to struggle, the figure stepped forward, magical flames engulfing his arms completely and his eyes a brighter yellow. With the utterance of a single mystic word, he forcibly threw his arms outstretched to the flood of goblins facing them, and a wall of fire erupted a metre in front of them. The horned figure’s hands dropped to his sides. The wall of fire, five metres tall, sat as a half circle in front of the two, separating them from the goblin horde. The heat from the flame was instantly felt on Hoots’ face, and she stepped back, withdrawing as she observed the imposing spell the horned figure had just conjured. The wall of fire burned brightly and fiercely in front of Hoots. She turned to the horned figure, who was backing up the slope, one palm still open towards the fire wall. Hoots turned back to see some of the goblins trying to breach the wall. They would eventually get through, or the spell would end; either was a good excuse to start running.

The horned figure backed up, turned, and started jogging next to Hoots. After about a minute of scurrying up the slope, the fire wall disappeared. A few goblins had made it through, severely burnt and more disfigured. A few of them had collapsed nearby, but others were limping towards them, ever determined to catch up. With the collapse of the wall, the horde was now unleashed, and the remaining able-bodied goblins fell over each other in frustrated fury as they advanced after the two. The duo had a head start though, and had made it to the top, their breathing sharp, and their pace slowing. They finally reached the tunnel that led outside. Both looking

across to the path they had just ascended, their goblin pursuers continued without slowing and had gained more followers. Several more bugbears had joined from various side tunnels. Time was not the duo's ally, and the goblins had replenished their forces. Before Hoots had a chance to catch her breath and talk to the horned figure she had foolishly followed there, he was down the entrance tunnel, his devilish tail trailing behind him.

Hoots darted after him, the path turning from the smooth stone to the more weathered finish as the soft moonlight came into view in the distance. Hoots' breath echoed within her skull, filling her ears, making the small enclosed tunnel feel hot and claustrophobic. The sound of scratching and biting filled the air. Peering behind her, Hoots could see the goblins had made it to the tunnel and begun clambering over each other, thirsty for her flesh. There was vengeance in their eyes, and as they got closer, the pace quickened. In another time, she would take them all on, as a narrow hallway like this would imitate a practice session, with just one after another piling up in front of her, but this was not the time.

The cold brisk air of the still night abruptly engulfed her bare face, like a splash of cold water. At the speed she was going, she skidded slightly on her feet. The figure was standing at the entrance, hand outstretched once more.

"Mould the earth," the horned figure spoke, eyes darting from the tunnel to her. "It'll close the tunnel." Hoots turned, hand outstretched as well. She looked at the figure. She didn't know this spell, so she just tried to mimic his movements instead. She contorted her hand, putting her index finger to her thumb, with the other three fingers stretched out but then folded over each other. With this gesture, this somatic component, she could feel the earth beneath her, in front of her, all around her... She felt like her hand was that of a giant, able to shift and lift it all with little effort. Each particle in the dirt had a place. She knew those places and that they were not fixed.

Together, the duo began to move the earth of the tunnel with swift and deliberate flicks of their hands and focused minds. Tapping into the weave with the same spell, they could each feel what the other was focusing on—what area of earth they called out to. The figure had focused on a cube of earth ten meters down the tunnel and at the top half of the hallway. Hoots then focused on the bottom half, the same distance away. Together, they

began to close the tunnel by sliding cubes of earth together. With her at the bottom and him the top, they created a barrier between the outside and the goblin horde, like thick doors of earth, sliding together. They synergized their magic to mould the very earth of the cavern to their wills. The goblins leapt, seeing the earth move in front of them, but were pushed into and trapped in the dirt, until the entrance where the two stood had closed completely.

Silence then surrounded them both once more. Their hands relaxed and fell to their sides. The horned figure adjusted himself, and his hand disappeared within his robe, his limbs completely obscured beneath.

"Those weren't anything I've seen before," Hoots said, in between gasping breaths as her mind raced. "Some kind of underground goblin?"

"All goblins are underground goblins." His voice was deep and sounded like he chewed gravel most mornings. "Now, return to your paladin, young monk, and stop following me. I wish to remain alone without your curious interventions." The horned figure turned down the loose path.

"Hey! No, you answer a few things first! I saved your ass down there!"

He gave her a hard look from beneath a lowered brow, "*I saved you*, and those things were unaware of me until you came," the horned figure said bluntly, stopping to answer her. "Don't expect thanks for something you caused, Monk."

"It's Hoots, not *Monk*, and how'd you know I was trained like that anyway?" she asked, bounding after him as he continued on his way.

"You are too precise for a typical brawler, too strong for one of your stature," the horned figure said.

Hoots bit her lip at the comment about her height. "Then how'd you know I could use spells? Not exactly a monk thing now, is it?"

"You and your paladin friend aren't quiet travellers," the horned figure remarked. He stopped; his yellow eyes looked down at Hoots, whose gaze was determined. "I saw you perform for her."

"So?" Hoots snapped.

He leaned down towards her. "Without using a component."

"I didn't need one ... not for those spells"

"Don't try to lie to me, *Your Majesty*," he said, crudely. "You are no wizard." His face showed no emotion.

“So?” Hoots continued defensively.

He looked her up and down. *Fine*, he thought, *let’s do this*. “Your spells were not based in nature, so you are no druid.”

Hoots felt her skin warm up.

“You are not in fine shiny armour like Elaria; you are no paladin.”

“I could be—”

“No, you couldn’t,” he barked. “Sorry. No, you couldn’t, *Your Highness*. Someone as young as you, without armour?” The horned figure was circling her now. As he passed by some of the tall grass, it brushed against his robe. “No. Besides, those weren’t paladin spells. Next, you weren’t bestowed your magical gifts from the gods. I’ve never met a warlock that was so humble.” With his hands behind his back, but still underneath his robe, he leaned down behind Hoots, just above her shoulders. “And I’ve met ... *a few*.” His walk and the way he talked showed his confidence. “And finally, you do not use a component pouch. You are not a wizard.”

Hoots remained silent; she knew what he was going to say next.

How’s he know so much?

“You are a sorcerer. Uncommon, for sure, and no need for a component pouch, just all raw elemental energy from within. You are new to your gifts as well. Why else would *you* want to punch your way out of things? Probably trying to push those magical thoughts down. Tell me; did you hurt someone when you found out? The first time tends to be ... explosive.”

She was in disbelief. “How’d you—”

“This isn’t the most obvious thing about you.” The horned figure continued to circle her, looking like he was playing a game, or solving a puzzle—one he had played many times before.

“It is your eyes. It is always the eyes.” The horned figure stopped right in front of her. Hoots gasped a little and looked deep into his bright yellow eyes. The horned figure wasn’t classically handsome, with his pockmarked skin, but he still possessed prominent features.

“Your eyes, darting everywhere, not landing on one thing specifically, this—all of this—it is new to you, but it feels natural to you. The outdoors, the night sky, a dark cave...” Hoots continued to look at him. “Not something a royal is so comfortable with. You may have lied to get this far, but you cannot lie to me, especially when it is so plainly painted on your face.”

Hoots gulped loudly. *Read me like a book.*

As he stood up, the moonlight caught his horns. Hoots looked at them. He noticed. "Haven't seen my kind before, have you?"

Hoots shook her head, a droplet of sweat flying off in the process.

"I assure you, despite the names, we are not actually demons, just ... demon adjacent. When you are treated as such, you often become what they want you to be." *That should shut her up*, he thought. "Now leave me on my way," he said, beginning down the path towards the main road.

"You here on the pilgrimage?" Hoots asked, skipping to his side.

He let out an audible sigh. "How'd you guess?"

"You don't look like a local, but also ... the dirt under your fingernails. You seem to be pretty skilled in magic—moving earth is easy for you—but you *buried* something. And it was personal. Why else would you do it by hand?" The horned figure brought his hand out in front of him and inspected the dirt beneath his nails. It seemed to bring back some memories as he stood in silence for a few moments.

Hoots nodded. "I can read you too, you know. Look, I hear a lot of you die out in the wilderness while out on this pilgrimage."

"Your point?" he asked with disdain.

"That wasn't the worst display of teamwork back there. Why not stick with us, so you don't die so easily?" she asked.

The horned figure stayed silent as they both continued down the hidden path, with him sticking to the middle of the path. Instead of going single file, Hoots forced her way beside him, fighting the unkempt grass and brush as she did so.

"I can handle myself," he told her. "I have handled worse."

"Okay, fine, be lame. But answer me this one question: Why were you down there? What were you burying? You owe me that much for following you down there," Hoots said, skipping along next to him. They had now reached the main road. The moonlight caused the shadow of the mountain spires to decorate the road, with half of it in more darkness than the other.

The horned figure looked back up at the path, and for a moment, his shoulders lowered, and Hoots saw him relax as he thought to himself, removing himself from his body for just a second. Finally, his chin lifted, and his thin goatee was more visible.

“That was the dwarfs’ first mine. They were said to have been met by giants, as big as mountains. It was here they praised them and gave offerings to them to gain acceptance in these virgin lands.” The horned figure let out a breath, and the cold air made a small mist of water vapour. “The giants disappeared into song and legend, but this mine ... it stayed, thought to be untouched. Their acceptance into this land ... it remained as well.”

Looking out into the distance, not focused on anything in particular and lost in his own words, he continued. “Places like that hold a significant power, latent and ancient, that lingers in the air. It stays dormant in the rock and soil. You can feel the history. The memory of a place with such importance ... it shouldn’t be forgotten.”

“And you want to bury your past where others had.” Hoots pondered his answer for a moment but then nodded in satisfaction. “Sure. Why not? I like it.”

The horned figure stayed silent for a moment, then snapped back to reality. “I graced you with that answer. Now, be gone with you. Your paladin must be worried.”

“Well, thanks. You sure know a bit about places like this. You headed to Alitiar?” Hoots asked.

He turned now towards her. “You better not follow.”

“We are going there anyway. Probably see you on the way!” Hoots exclaimed with an excited smile.

The horned figure looked out into the distance for a moment, a fed-up and tired look on his face. “You are going to make this my problem, aren’t you?”

Hoots gave him a cheeky, toothy grin, her eyes squinting. “If you won’t join us for safety, you can join us so I don’t follow you all over the isles of Ma-Ural. If I follow you now, Elaria would freak out and come find us. So, she could join us later, or you can come back with me tonight. Your choice.” Hoots’ sass was showing. The horned figure looked down at her, defeated. He had finished arguing, and he was tired.

“I will join you until Alitiar, assuming you are more tolerable this close than from a distance. I have my own travels, after which, you are not to follow me. The current takeover of Alitiar makes travel uncertain,” the horned figure explained.

"If you go into ancient dwarven mines and into perilous dungeons, I might catch up anyway," Hoots said, smiling.

"That paladin, Elaria. She volunteered to travel with you on the ferry, didn't she?"

"Sure did!"

"When no one else would, she stood. Typical paladin—"

"She isn't as uptight as you might think actually."

"Figured," the horned figure said with a sigh.

"Come rest with us tonight. I was supposed to be on watch, so don't tell her I left. I'll just say you needed a warm campfire to rest at." Hoots turned back west along the road. The horned figure stayed silent, as Hoots went ahead a few steps. He paused for a moment, weighing his options, but then started to turn and with a single long step reluctantly followed Hoots down the road. Hoots, having survived an ancient mine, strutted confidently down the path, arms swinging comically.

"Let's go, my dude!" Hoots hollered.

"Please keep your voice down." The horned figure looked around to the surrounding forests as an instinct. "And do not call me '*my dude*'."

"Alright. I shall call you, 'curls,' because of your big curly horns," Hoots said, twirling her fingers in the air.

"No," the horned figure said quickly.

"Alright. What can I call you?" Hoots asked.

"You can call me 'Carion,' and nothing else," Carion said, disdain on his tongue.

Elaria pushed the figure away, longsword swinging loosely to her side. Trit, the bard from the ship, was white as a ghost, his body stiffened completely. The holes in his ragged clothes were obvious in the descending moonlight. A large lute was strapped to him and hung from his back.

"Oh man, am I sorry!" Trit said, skittish in his speech, one hand rubbing his neck where the sword had lain. "I didn't mean... I didn't want to... Oh..." Trit hadn't started breathing right away, but he was now taking in large deep breaths. Exhausted from fear, he threw his hands to his knees and leaned down.

"You were alone... I wasn't sure how to approach..." Trit continued, facing the ground. Elaria, in just her arming doublet, stood there looking at him with a befuddled look, then glanced around again for anyone else.

"Wait! Where's Hoots?"

"Oh ... the gnome?" Trit asked looking up from his hyperventilation. "It was just you here. I saw you two head down the road this evening, and I wanted to join, but it felt ... rude..."

"So, you snuck up on us in the middle of the night?!" Elaria asked.

"No! Well yes, I did, but I rested in Cospid. Thought I would catch up to you both in the morning and just sort of ... I don't know ... say hi?" Trit said, standing up, shrugging, and rubbing his cheek. Elaria looked at him, still confused, but he seemed innocent enough to her. She then turned around to where she'd last seen Hoots on lookout.

"Alright, but *where* is Hoots?" Elaria looked around frantically. Trit began looking around with her. Together they jogged up the rise, Elaria's longsword still in her grip. Over the rise was a clear view of the main road. They saw nothing. Elaria leaned down to the spot where Hoots had lain and began investigating the ground. Hoots was light, so she wouldn't have pushed the grass down too much. Feeling across the soft grass with her bare right hand, she felt for where Hoots would have laid down. She found that the grass hadn't returned to its original position just yet at a particular spot, one that wasn't big enough for her. Elaria continued to feel and look around for any footprints or signs of distress.

Trit was looking at her while she conducted the field work. He knew how to survive the streets, but out here in the wilderness, he was lost. This was not his domain. This was as foreign as it got for him. Trit had stumbled upon her by accident. No way was he able to track them. He was just glad there was only one main road, otherwise who knew if he'd have met up with her.

"No signs of a struggle or anything," Elaria said, looking up, still squatting over the slightly flattened grass. Suddenly, two figures appeared, walking close, coming from the west down the centre of the road—one considerably shorter than the other. They were walking with purpose and with no intent of keeping a low profile. Elaria ducked down a little, hoping they'd pass close so she could get a good look. Trit copied her. Only

just able to stay balanced while squatting, he leaned and wobbled as he lowered. The two figures came closer, and Elaria got a good look at them as they began approaching the rise. Elaria stood up fast, making herself obvious. Trit tried to do so as well. He stumbled but quickly placed his hands at his side to try and pull off the move.

“What the hell?!” Elaria said, making sure her voice, and the tone it carried, travelled to them. “You were supposed to stay on watch!” she continued, pointing with her sword at Hoots. “You’d get castrated if you were a soldier! And who is this?” Elaria eyed Carion, sword now pointed towards him.

“Hey, Elaria. Yeah, sorry about that. We were fighting messed-up goblins in an ancient dwarven mine!” Hoots said excitedly.

“Okay... *What?* And you thought, *Hey, yeah, this is a great idea in the middle of the night?* What good is my word if I can’t even keep you safe for one night!” Elaria said. Hoots and Carion came up the rise and approached her and Trit at the top.

“This is Carion. I saw him go in and thought he was up to something,” Hoots said introducing Carion, who nodded his head towards her as a quiet greeting.

“We are fine. Nothing we couldn’t handle, besides, now we have a buddy!” Hoots extended her arms to present Carion.

“I am on my way to Alitiar before going elsewhere for my pilgrimage. The dangers of this land are ... more unpredictable, and it may seem wise to travel together, for now,” Carion announced. Elaria, breathing a little more normally with relief, looked at Carion.

“You! You are from the ship, right? You sat in the corner out of sight. Bartender said you were going for a pilgrimage—”

“Yeah,” Hoots interrupted, “he wants in on Mysrik. Has to be given a sign or a calling before he’s welcomed. Something like that, right, Car-Car?” Hoots nudged Carion playfully. Carion eyed Hoots.

“It’s *Carion*, but yes, that was me on the ship. I saw you two meet.”

“Can we trust you?” Elaria asked, looking at him hard. Carion’s yellow eyes met with hers, and they stared at each other intensely.

Hoots nodded. "He saved me; we were a pretty good duo down there. If he wasn't trustworthy, I don't think he would have done much for me with those goblins."

"That true?" Elaria's eyes didn't leave Carion's.

"She held her own. If you want me gone, I'll gladly depart. She threatened to follow me, so this seemed ... logical," he said, his gaze locking with Elaria's for a second longer.

Elaria lowered her sword. "Alright, rest for a bit and remove your weapons, any magic junk too. We can depart in a few hours. I'll keep watch though."

"Hey! You got a buddy too! Hey, 'Mister *The Bard*.' Joining us to Alitiar?" Hoots asked Trit, who had been off to one side during the meeting. Trit chuckled.

"Only if you'll have me, and that's *Sir The Bard* to you!" Trit and Hoots both laughed as Trit made a crude bow. Elaria made herself comfortable on the rise. Giggling, the other two looked at Carion, whose face was unmoved and unimpressed.

"You went to a dwarven mine! That's awesome! You must tell me all about it so I can sing your tale at the next tavern," Trit exclaimed. The three headed towards the dying embers of the campfire.

"YES! So much yes!" Hoots said. The adrenaline hadn't completely dissipated from her system.

"Not now, Hoots," Elaria said, "To your bedroll." Pointing a few metres away from the campsite, she said, "Our two visitors can stay over there. And Carion?" She stopped Carion with the flat side of her sword as he attempted to pass her heading towards the campsite. "Try anything and you won't be making it to Mysrik. I'll be keeping an eye on you."

Elaria relaxed then and sat down on the rise. Carion ignored her threat and headed down to the area near the campsite that Elaria had pointed out and lay down, his large cloak giving him enough cushion to get comfortable.

"Hey," Hoots loudly whispered. "Hey, Trit!"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Keep an eye on Carion; he tends to get himself into trouble." Hoots let out a small laugh,

“Alright, I’ll be on *Carion watch* for a bit,” Trit said, leaning over and nudging Carion. “Hey, how’s it going?”

Carion remained still, eyes unblinking. Trit didn’t get a response, so he shrugged and settled onto the hard ground, looking happy at his decision to come this way at such a fortunate time.

“I hate this,” Carion muttered to himself.

CHAPTER 4

AS THEY TRAVEL WEST

Excerpt from the Legend of the First Visit of the Immortal Sheef, by Archmage Ivar:

A figure wrapped in a white robe, with small patterns stitched into it with luminescent red silk, descended from the mountain spires and spoke to the four groups of mortals:

“I am the Sheef, the Immortal Protector. The spread of destruction that created the now vast empty desert in the east, killing the golden dwarfs that dwelled there, was halted by my hand. I wish to use Ma-Ural to build a city, Mysrik, a sanctuary for magic users of all creeds and practice, where they can give up their dark ways and reside peacefully for eternity. All are welcome, if they are deemed worthy. Wander the wilderness until the mark appears, and I will speak to them. As a token of my appreciation and your cooperation, I will provide you with a gift: a protector.”

Sheef, the immortal, conjured flesh, bone, and bile from the very air itself and stitched together a mighty leviathan above the bay, throwing it into the waters.

“As I protect the magic users, the leviathan will protect your waters from the squabbles of the mainland.”

The four mortal groups—the Kai’sions, the dragon-kin, the pale dwarfs, and the gnome families—knelt at his feet.

“The humans are to reside to the west and nurture the land. The pale dwarfs are to protect their culture to the north. The dragon-kin are to prosper on the far-east island. And the gnomes are to spread the word of Mysrik, so all will know of the immortal promise it provides. But leave the eastern desert; it is nothing but a tomb, and the dead should be allowed to rest.”



“No, you can’t! Don’t do this!”

An angelic woman’s voice echoed in Carion’s mind, ringing through his skull, and his eyes darted wildly under his eyelids.

“Please! You don’t have to! We can live together away from all of this!”

Carion erupted from his slumber, bolting upright. Sweat dripped down his brow.

“Bad dreams?” Trit asked, sitting cross-legged and quietly fiddling with his lute’s tuning pegs. The other two were up, packing up the few things they taken out of their bags and grabbing a few bites to eat for breakfast. Elaria was stomping on the campfire, her armour only partially on. Hoots attempted to munch on some stale pastry, unimpressed with her choice. Carion shuffled lightly to his feet and brushed himself off before pulling his hands back into his large, hooded cloak.

“Just the same dream,” Carion muttered.

Within earshot, Elaria looked back towards him, without him noticing, and stared for a moment. “We are almost ready to go,” she said finally. “We should reach Alitiar by this evening if we aren’t interrupted. You have any more sightseeing to do?” Elaria asked Hoots, as she began strapping her guards to her forearms. Hoots looked up from her pastry.

“Oh, I dunno, depends on what we see on the way.” She grinned. Trit had walked over, and together, they were picking apart the pastry. Hoots slapped his hands back playfully.

“If I disappear, don’t come looking,” Carion directed to the group.

Trit turned around. “We all still going to Alitiar?” he asked.

“We,” Elaria said, motioning to herself and Hoots, “are going to Alitiar.” She waved her hand dismissively at him and Carion. “You two can feel free

to be on your way to wherever.”

Trit shrugged a little. “Adventure is thata way.” Trit pointed to the west. “Don’t you want a traveling bard to regale you with tales of wonder?”

“Yes, we do!” Hoots said excitedly.

Elaria frowned. “While in Cospid, did you hear anything about the location of the royal family, Trit?”

“Some people retreated to Cospid when an army of red-armoured soldiers forced them out, quite violently from what I hear,” he said through a mouthful of stale pastry. “Maybe an invasion, but most people went north to the main farming village. Palmy, I think it was called? Royalty wasn’t in Cospid, so they probably went to Palmy then? Or died? The refugees weren’t all that talkative to me, but that’s what I picked up.”

Elaria finished packing her things, getting the last of her armour together; it still shimmered brightly as the sun rose. “Then we bypass it, go straight to Palmy,” she announced.

“We might be walking right into the beginning of ... I dunno! Something! You still wanting to deliver Hoots into the middle of whatever it is?” Trit asked, swinging his lute around to his back.

“Well, I am tasked to escort Hoots to the Kai’sions. She’ll be safer there, and with any luck, I’ll be in good favour with them and will be able to continue being a paladin here.”

“Alright, off to Palmy we go!” Trit said with a bright smile. Elaria glared at him. Seeing her reaction, he said, “Okay, you two go to Palmy, and I will follow?”

Elaria rolled her eyes. “You good to go, Hoots? No more wandering off now, right?”

“Yeah, good to go,” she said, her pack reasonably empty and her bedroll rolled up poorly.

“Good. We should keep close to the path, but as we approach Alitiar, let’s take a rest. We’ll have to bypass the city, which will likely take a day to get around—sounds like it’s large, and our route will be off the beaten track. You can handle that, yes?” Elaria asked, shoving Hoots playfully. Hoots stumbled a little and then shrugged.

“All right, but you might have to carry me,” Hoots responded.

Elaria looked down at her; she was brighter today, much more so

than she'd been on the boat. This whole adventure and the new experiences seemed to be affecting her positively. Elaria felt good about this; she wanted to be a positive influence in this land, and this was a nice start. The four were ready to go, and together, they set off down the western road with the mountain spires towering on either side of them.

Elaria led, her head held high in her ornate and untainted armour, shield on her back, longsword at her side. Hoots followed, her small legs shuffling quickly to keep up with Elaria's longer strides, her eyes darting around eagerly at the surroundings and the road before her. Trit held his lute strap and kept looking over at Elaria; the birthmark on her cheek still interested him deeply. *What a place to find her!*

Carion followed behind, his arms and torso hidden in his green cloak, head slumped a little, appearing to retreat into his mind and letting his feet take him forward as he plodded behind the others. Together, the four headed into the untamed western land of Ma-Ural.

Meanwhile, deep in the ancient dwarven mine, past where Hoots and Carion had met and deeper still, lying in the ever-present darkness, several decrepit goblins shuffled around aimlessly near a pile of gems that were dull against the blackness in the depths, but with the small circle of light from the torch of a goblin who was passing by, they shone a deep ruby-red colour. The goblin disappeared down another tunnel, the light following it. The gems lay untouched in the darkness, waiting. Just below the pile was freshly disturbed rock and soil.



Lost Personal anthropological notes (3 of 18)

Alitiar's towers will sit within my mind for a lifetime! They are huge! How such tall and thin structures were built will need a proper investigation. Truly a spectacle that could only be witnessed with the naked eye.

Remarkable.

I will be spending a night under the stars, as the walk took longer than expected. I will admit my stout nature likely slowed my travels,

and so I will camp out for the night in the shadow of the wonderful towers.

—Sidenote, I have developed an interesting rash. I believe it to be from the inn in Cospid.

I will not be recommending 'The Sunken Rat.'

~ Associate Professor Lucky Montana



After a long day of walking, Alitiar erupted into view of the travellers. The purple towers pierced the sky as the sun began to softly sink behind the mountain range. The land to the west contrasted the mountains nearby; the west was flat, with no more than a few rises here and there, otherwise the view from the top of the trees could reach all the way to the horizon and to the south, all covered by a thick forest. To the north, where Alitiar stood, was a path leading to the grand city, the forest becoming sparse around the city and its walls. A mountain range could be seen poking up all the way around to the north, where the mountains collected in a mass of spires.

The party had arrived earlier than they had expected. All four lay down on the soft grass just off the path to the south of Alitiar.

"Those towers..." Trit said in amazement.

Hoots nodded, her eyes on the tallest of them. "They are all so tall, almost as big as those mountains! Bet you could see the ocean from almost all sides from up there."

"Something you were wanting to tick off your sightseeing list, Carion?" Elaria, equally impressed, smirked at him.

"I don't think I could have missed it if I tried," Carion said. Although his expression rarely changed, his tone gave off a hint of appreciation.

"So, what's the plan here?" Hoots asked. "If this place is currently occupied with an invading force, they aren't likely to have an open-door policy to strangers like us."

“Yes, especially royalty,” Elaria agreed, “or those wanting to see royalty. They’ll probably want you for ransom or something.” She narrowed her eyes towards the top of the towers. Carion looked over at Hoots, who had lowered her head a little at the comment about royalty. Carion’s eyes narrowed a little but then returned to the towers.

Elaria continued. “They’ll have eyes up there I bet. We could set up camp, but I bet they’ll see us, if they haven’t already, and send someone out to check. We may have to use the cover of darkness tonight and hug close to the city walls. Once past, we can continue north to Palmy.” Once the towers had come into view, shortly after coming out of the mountain pass, she’d had to give more careful consideration to their next moves, especially since it wasn’t just the two of them anymore, for now, at least.

“You’re quick to take sides,” Carion muttered loudly.

“Excuse me?” Elaria questioned.

“You don’t know the people who invaded, and you don’t know the people here. Their drive could be just. Not unlike your own cause,” Carion explained.

“Good people don’t kick other people out of their homes!” Hoots said. “These red soldiers who invaded don’t care about the pain they could have caused. Didn’t you see those who managed to get to Cospid?”

“Yeah, who knows how many got killed in this *invasion*?” Trit added.

“And those invaders could be Hoots’ people from the east, right, Hoots?” Carion said to Hoots, watching her with unblinking eyes. She didn’t answer right away, and just scowled at his remark.

He must have heard everything Elaria and I talked about, she thought. How long was he walking near us? Was he tailing us?

“You listen too well,” Hoots muttered.

“I listen the right amount, *Your Highness*,” Carion muttered back.

Elaria interjected, “Carion is right; we don’t know these people. But Hoots is also right; they aren’t going to think we are on their side, and we can’t risk our own lives to find out. So, before we take sides, how about we meet with those who are more willing to talk, and maybe then we can help out however we see fit. Minimal casualties.”

“Spoken like a true paladin,” Carion mocked with a sarcastic voice. Elaria didn’t pick up on the sarcasm and took it as a compliment.

“We sneak past. Delivering Hoots is still my top priority,” Elaria said, looking over at Carion and Trit. “You two better not get in the way.” Elaria began readjusting the straps in her armour to ensure any sound was muffled as much as possible. “So, if you are following, let’s get a move on.”

After some readjusting and preparation for a sneaky approach, the party hugged the treeline.

“Hey, ah ... why don’t we just use the trees as cover? Go right around the city, and far away from it too,” Trit whispered.

“That could take days,” Elaria said, “even more since it is unfamiliar territory. I, for one, don’t have the rations for that kind of journey. That and I’ve heard there’s a decent number of fey wandering about these parts. I don’t want to antagonize them at all.”

With that, Carion peered deep into the forest, his eyes darting about for a few moments before returning forward.

As they got closer to the city limits, the trees became scarcer. Elaria was not naturally stealthy; she was a tall person and boasted heavy and noisy plate armour. She looked tempted to simply storm the place, taking out each guard one by one as they ploughed through. Part of her wanted to get caught as they approached, allowing her to really make a difference the only way she really knew how, but she knew she had to learn that it wasn’t always the best approach. Although she’d heard what Carion said earlier, she didn’t really care for these invaders. By taking Hoots in, she had already picked a side, as much as she didn’t want to. She would have loved to remain in partial.

Even as they approached the city, the towers of the castle loomed overhead. Their size seemed to barely change as they drew closer. The road they followed was the main one from Cospid. A few smaller roads led off in other directions as they walked, either further west or south. Since this was considered the trade route, not many homes or farmlands sat nearby, those being mainly situated to the north. The main road was well worn, and wagon tracks were sprawled about, showing signs of constant use. The road itself became wider as they drew closer, so at least two wagons could go side by side.

The gates to Alitiar were large but nothing spectacular. There weren’t many wars or battles in this part of the world. Ma-Ural had remained

sparsely populated for quite some time. It was only in the last decade that its popularity had started a more rapid incline. The walls were stone and built several stories high, surrounding the city to the east and west of the party.

Expecting to see a small number of guards at the entrance, or at the very least some patrolling the walls, they were instead greeted with nothing. The sun was setting slowly, and there weren't even any torches lit up; the city looked dead. There was an eerie silence. Earlier there had been soft sounds coming from the forests, the chirping of crickets, the flutter of birds, but now they met the gates with a blanket of stillness.

"I mean ... I've seen more liveliness in a necromancer's living room," Trit remarked quietly.

"Pppfth! Ha!" Hoots let out a laugh from behind her hands. The stigma of laughing right then made it seem much funnier. Elaria glared at her as she tried to muffle it.

"Sorry, sorry..." Hoots said, attempting to contain herself. She clearly found Trit rather amusing; they had been chatting playfully all day. Elaria looked back and eyed the walls.

"I don't like this," she said, shaking her head. "Why would an invading force leave one of their main entrances just ... unguarded? Trit, the people in Cospid, they said soldiers in red came and took it over?" Elaria whispered, turning to Trit.

He was still smiling at Hoots a little, but then raised his eyebrows as the question was directed to him. "Oh ah ... yeah, that's right," he answered.

Elaria used her hand to make a quieting motion.

"Sorry, ah ... so they either escaped north to Palmy, or some went to Cospid to try find ships out. But yeah, it was soldiers in red, pushing everyone out of their homes and being aggressive and cutting anyone down who didn't do as they asked. Got the impression they weren't asking *nicely*," Trit explained, his voice lowered.

"We didn't see any red soldiers heading east to Cospid," Elaria said.

"Imagine they all went north then," Trit remarked.

"Hmm... Yes, they probably did." Elaria's eyes turned back to the wall a hundred or so metres in front of them. It looked abandoned, but it didn't feel ... right. She was now regretting not asking around town more. She

had been so keen to go out on her first quest, her first mission as a paladin, that she forgot that information from all the locals could have guided her more. “They might have eyes on this road still. We get as close as we can and hug the wall. Single file.”

Hoots and Trit nodded. They didn’t have any other plans or thoughts that might help, and they saw Elaria as a voice of reason. Carion was listening, but his eyes were scouting the walls as far as he could see, as well as the towers high above them. Elaria was right; there was no movement at all. Carion thought that those towers would be perfect vantage points, but there was nothing, not a torch lit.

Carion wasn’t up to sharing his past, especially not to strangers. He had enough rattling going on his head—the same headache for years now. Despite the constant thudding in his skull, he knew what to look out for, as he had snuck into places more guarded and more dangerous than this before, but from what he could tell, this was a peculiar case. He had wandered Cospid the previous night, gathering information, and what Trit was saying was correct; it appeared to be a hostile takeover. But that same city that was recently taken over now appeared abandoned, and armies don’t just vanish. This concerned him. He was trying to escape all the conflict, all the power struggles. *All that damned screaming!*

He felt the thudding in his ears get louder and took a large, sharp breath in, and then let it out. The thudding subsided.

That’ll do for now.

He was so used to doing these things alone; after all, it was usually easier to sneak one person into guarded areas than several. He looked over to Elaria, who looked uneasy, concerned ... scared. Carion knew paladins would gain magical abilities the more often they recited their oath and acted upon it. One particular ability she had was a magical “sense” for the unnatural. Elaria had probably been taught about that sense but would never practice with it until she was out on the field—not until her initial oath was taken at least.

I bet that sense is tickling right about now, isn’t it? Carion thought. *Probably has no idea what it is. Probably confusing you, young paladin. I feel it too... I’ll put a plan into action regardless.* Carion’s mind began to race: *Hoots, a young sorcerer, claims to know four spells:*

One, Spectral Hand; two, Glowing Lights; three, Earth Mould. What's the fourth?

...Thud...

Spells known are related to personality. Hoots' personality: reckless, curious, short-fused, cocky. Sorcerer spells are all elemental based.

... Thud ... thud...

Possible other spells known at this time: Water Control, Fire Spray, Gust, or Earth Bind.

... Thud ... thud ... thud!

Damn it! Leave my mind for just a second! Carion peered over to the faces of the other three.

"So innocent, aren't they, Carion?"

Shut up!

"Delicate and pure..."

Piss off!

"I'll never leave, Carion..."

Carion closed his eyes and took a large breath in

"... This is your eternity, 'Carion'..."

And with a large breath out, his mind was clear ... enough.

Which spell fits best? He frowned, concentrating. *Which ones would Hoots know...?*

Carion picked a legume seed from his component pouch inside his cloak and passed it to Trit next to him.

“Pass this to Hoots,” Carion whispered. Trit looked at it, a little confused, then threw it into his mouth and chewed it.

“Oh nice. Cashew,” Trit remarked, still chewing. Carion rolled his eyes and got out another.

“You didn’t hear me, did you?” Carion asked rhetorically.

“Oh, hmm?” Trit responded, not realizing the rest of the party’s eyes were on him. He looked around anxiously. Carion grabbed another legume.

“Pass. This. To. Hoots,” Carion ordered. Trit passed it quickly this time, feeling guilty. Hoots looked confused at the legume. This one was a peanut.

What does he want me to do with this? She looked over to Carion.

“You may need a component, remember? For the spells you know. As a wizard,” Carion explained slowly.

He ... he’s going along with the idea I’m a wizard, isn’t he? Hoots thought. *He knows the spells I know?*

“Ah yes ... the wind one?” Hoots guessed. Carion nodded slowly.

“Ooooooh ... yeah... Okay. Why?” Hoots asked.

“Was I correct to assume you know this spell?” Carion asked.

“Yeah... yeah ... apparently.”

“Apparently?” Trit muttered.

“It ... it is just a wind, right?” Hoots continued.

“We aren’t rogues; we need the advantage. Aim it to the right of the door and be sure to rustle the trees as *much* as possible,” Carion demanded.

“You want us to make noise?” Elaria exclaimed.

“With the armour you have, and the group’s general inexperience, we do not have a choice. As we are sure to make noise, cover it with *more* noise, a natural and uninteresting one, and at least turn any eyes away from us,” Carion explained. “Darkness will continue to come, and with it, spotlights and torches. We cannot hope there won’t be any. The sun is low; shadows are long. This is a good time to do it.”

“There’s no one looking at us.” Trit gestured to the vacant turrets along the wall.

“That I don’t fully believe. With the lack of tree cover around the city, if we hope to bypass it, we hug the walls. Any lookout won’t be able to see us there. So, on your mark, Hoots. I will follow it up with stronger wind to

the far left. I'll push it away, making it look like a violent gust of wind away from us."

Carion pointed to the far left. Hoots nodded, stood up slowly, and reached her hand out. Focusing for a moment, she softly said an incantation. She squeezed the legume, pretending like it actually mattered that it was there. Hoots then twisted her hand in a particular fashion, thumb outstretched, her index finger circled in. Then with a full rotation of her hand, a bolt of wind erupted from her and moved forward in a straight line. Her rotated hand locked the spell in place. Carion jumped to his feet. He let out a similar incantation while clutching his own component, and with a flick of his wrist, a volley of air was swept up about eighty meters away, launching leaves and loose debris into the air.

A few moments passed, and then Carion motioned for the rest to move forward. Elaria and Trit both got to their feet but looked at each other, taken aback by the performance. Carion grabbed Hoots by the shoulder and started pushing her forward. She started to run. Together, arms outstretched and focused on their respective spells, they caused an uproar of wind. Hoots was covering them as they moved, and Carion was causing a large, distracting wind and noise buffer nearby, which then swept to the west. They used the shadows of the trees as cover. Elaria and Trit stayed close, and the group swiftly moved forward towards the right side of the gate, hugging the treeline as much as they could. As they were forced to leave the cover of the trees, as they approached the wall, with only shrubs around them, their pace quickened. The group's movement turned from a jog to a run, and then to a sprint right before they threw their backs against the stone wall. Elaria's armour made an audible metal clunk as it hit. Hoots closed her fist around the seed and her magical wind ceased. Carion made a pushing motion with his hand, and the winds he had created began moving further west, and then faded from their awareness. All four had been breathing heavily but caught themselves and nodded to each other, indicating they were okay. They'd covered only a short distance, but they did so as swiftly as possible. Hoots presented the seed to Carion, but he lifted his hand in rejection.

“Keep it,” Carion whispered. He then motioned with two fingers to the east. Hoots realized that he wanted her to lead. Hoots nodded, and the group began to traverse the outer walls of Alitiar.

All four moved cautiously. Hoots was focused on leading them, and Elaria had her hand on her sword’s hilt the whole time, eyes on the shrubs and few evergreens nearby. Trit’s heart was pounding so much that his hands shook. Carion just calmly walked close to Hoots. The quartet had been walking for some time, slowly circling the castle that stood at the east of the city; they were now starting to walk more northward. At such a slow pace, they weren’t likely to be able to clear the city that night and would possibly have to find shelter midway. As they came over a rise, Carion stopped, held his hand up, and grabbed Hoots tightly by the shoulder. Everyone else stopped and began looking around for whatever Carion had spotted. But Carion’s eyes didn’t move. He hadn’t seen anything; he had *heard* something up ahead. He put his finger to his lips and focused on it for a few moments. It was definitely people, several, and he realized they weren’t being quiet, which meant they didn’t know about them. He crouched down a little, and the others mimicked him. Trit came around Elaria a little ways to listen better.

“There are several heavily armoured people up ahead,” Carion whispered.

“There are?” Trit said, poking his head up to see if he could see over the rise. Carion nodded.

“They haven’t seen us, and they aren’t moving towards us.”

“Then what’s the play?” Hoots asked. Leading had given her more vigour to participate. Carion noticed it in her voice.

“Let’s get a better look at them first. A patrol maybe, but if it is their encampment outside the city, we may have to rethink how we avoid it.” Carion got on all fours and crawled up the rise in the soft grass. The others followed cautiously. Ahead, was a small encampment, glowing softly with torches. About five red tents were set up in a small clearing next to a riverbed; only a little water trickled through it currently. The stream ran out of the forest of the foothills and into a drain at the wall of the city. The quartet focused their eyes on the situation. They saw a dozen soldiers, adorned with red armour, walking around the tents.

“That’s an encampment alright,” Elaria bluntly pointed out.

“Should we have gone around the other direction?” Trit asked.

Hoots shook her head. “That’s loads of wasted time.”

“I’m not convinced we’d be in any less danger taking our time, honestly,” Trit continued, convincing himself to not go near the soldiers. Then Carion, who was studying the encampment, announced, “They aren’t in any formation.” The others look confused at Carion and at the encampment.

“There are no defences set up. There’s no patrol. This just looks like a big campsite. They are armoured, but they look lazy about it,” Carion explained.

“What do you mean? Are they not the soldiers we’ve heard of?” Elaria asked.

“I never said they weren’t the same,” Carion answered, “but they don’t look set up for an attack, or an occupation. This looks ... sloppy ... or reckless. But the ground beneath them is worn. They’ve had this set up for a while, it is like—”

“Oh, like they’re training,” Trit interrupted. The other three all turned their heads to look at him. “It’s like a training camp. I used to play for soldiers and sometimes came back with them.” He saw their expressions. “Hey, they tipped well.” He shrugged. “This looks like one of their training camps. See? Look at the big tent.” Trit pointed out the largest tent, from which a small group of red-armoured soldiers was leaving. “That’ll be the mess hall; the rest would be their sleeping quarters, probably a small training area behind them. They probably rotate around when others come in.”

“What do you mean, ‘when others come in’? What are they training for, if they just invaded?” Elaria asked.

“I don’t think we know the full story about what happened here,” Carion remarked. “Trit, go talk to them.”

“Whoa, what? No, no, no.” Trit put his hands up in front of him as he came up from his belly to his knees. “Why would I do that?”

“Why not?” Elaria said. “You are just a bard, a *travelling* bard. You play for soldiers, like you said. You talked your way into this party. Just talk to them.”

“*You* go! You at least have armour!” Trit argued.

“I am not approaching looking like this.” Elaria gestured to her outfit. “I am much more threatening. Say you were travelling these lands for more

tales, which you are. Say that no one answered the gate, so you came round to say hi and see what's up, and if things get a little heated—”

“We come in blades a-swinging!” Hoots said excitedly. Elaria gazed at Hoots, smiling playfully.

“No, just leave. If they are a training camp, they'll just want you out. You are no threat.”

“I could be threatening...” Trit said in a huff. Carion looked at him and sighed, uninspired. Trit's mouth was agape, and he appeared nervous.

“They aren't going to cut you down. Look.” Carion pointed at a group circling one of the tents. “Armoured, but no weapons. It is what made me question the situation initially. Now go.”

“What's the signal if things get messy?” Trit asked anxiously.

“A scream and you waving your arms wildly!” Hoots giggled. Trit's eyes widened in fear.

Elaria placed her hand on Trit's shoulder. “We'll know. Go. I've got your back.” He felt warmer and safer feeling the weight of her hand. “We've all got your back,” she said, “... just from way back here.” She grinned.

Trit breathed deeply, stood up straight, and looked to the others. Hoots gave him a solid nod, a toothy smile, and a thumbs-up. Carion, expressionless, also gave him a thumbs-up. Trit stepped down the small rise towards the encampment. As he walked down the hill, Hoots turned to Elaria.

“He might die, right?”

Elaria turned to her. “No, Hoots.”

“How do you know?”

“He's a bumbling bard; he'll be fine,” Elaria said, nodding to herself.

Thoughts resurfaced in Carion's mind.

“You like them, don't you?”

You aren't real.

“... What? You think, if someone liked you, I'd go away?”

You left when I killed you.

*“You think, if you weren’t alone, you wouldn’t have to hear
me anymore?”*

You are just whisper of times long gone. You aren’t real.

“Do you really believe that, Carion?”



CHAPTER 5



AS THEY PLAN

Lost Personal anthropological notes (6 of 18)

I've managed to gather some information pertaining to the growth and economics in the western province during my stay in Alitiar.

Several decades before Alitiar was founded, dwarfs, known as the “pale dwarfs” due to their eggshell white skin, found rich ores in the frozen north; they had few resources or connections with trade outside of the isles, as no one was very willing to conduct a venture in an unknown place so far from the mainland. Who knew if the gemstones and ore would run out the next day, or whether the cost to ship it all was actually worth it?

A small human family, the Kai'sions, were young entrepreneurs who took a gamble and set up a post at what was to become Cospid. Soon after that, the magnificent gems and plentiful mythril became the main export, gaining the family riches. The Kai'sions, despite claiming nobility once established on Ma-Ural, were not selfish; they spent much of their wealth on building Cospid, and given the large influx of people desiring work and respite in a faraway land, they decided to build a much larger and grander city, and so they founded the city of Alitiar, named after the mother of the first “noble” born on the isles.

With continued growth, the pale dwarfs of the north abstained from greed, instead adhering to a tribal and rustic lifestyle. Their relatives, the golden dwarfs, who lived in the expansive mountain region to the east, vanished in a mysterious and violent earth-shaking event only a year before the Kai'sions arrived, the event resulting in the east becoming a vast desert. No golden dwarf was found—not even their bodies. So, are they dead?

No one knows what happened that could have caused the landscape to change so dramatically. The pale dwarfs hold this event close to their hearts, believing they weren't able to save their own kin, and hold themselves partly responsible. According to locals, this was when they started to become highly reclusive, barely leaving their northern domain. During this time, the undying city of Mysrik was established. A lone mage (Sheef?) told of its eternal and forgiving nature, instructing all those who returned to the mainland to tell tales of the city of Mysrik.

—Side note: Remember to look up the legends about this.

The isles were originally named the Pale and Golden twins, but this soon changed to Ma-Ural, a combination of the names of the last golden dwarf leader, Mazak, and the pale dwarf leader at the time, Urallious.

The famed city of Mysrik became increasingly popular among magic users as a place of ultimate forgiveness, and the gift of immortality. This was followed by a large influx of magic users taking what is now called the pilgrimage to the eternal city of Mysrik. Many mages don't make it; they initially escape the mainland but find themselves establishing peaceful lives on Ma-Ural, earning the isles a reputation of being a land of second chances. I suspect this also increased the population during this time. This continued for several generations.

In appreciation to the Kai'sion family and their compassion towards the dwarfs of the land, and their ways, the pale dwarfs erected a magnificent castle in Alitiar for the Kai'sions. To imitate the beauty of

the treacherous mountain range, the castle contained several towers standing tall enough that they could be seen from all corners of the western land. The purple-tiled roofs became a beacon of royalty and prosperity and sat as a reminder of the appreciation of the pale dwarfs and their alliance to the royal family. The tallest tower sat several stories above the rest and contained a large open cavity near the top, offering the viewer an almost three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the western lands, save for the columns holding the roof above. The Kai'sions are loved by all those who live in the west.

However, since the golden dwarfs vanished during this unnamed event (I refuse to call them dead for the moment), the east has different feelings towards the Kai'sions.

~ Associate Professor Lucky Montana



Trit strode down the hill to the riverbed that separated the small rise the others lay on from the training camp. He skipped across over some stones, avoiding the small amount of water within the stream. In another season, this would be a roaring torrent, but as the last of the snow had nearly all melted from the mountain tops, the river was naught but a small trickle. Up the other bank was the training encampment. Trit briefly looked back at the rise; even with his good eyesight, he could barely make out a few lumps perched at the top. He knew the others were watching him closely. Calling them “friends” might be a long shot, as it wasn’t but a day ago he had met them. Somehow though, Trit found himself enjoying their company. Being all foreigners in a foreign land made it easy. They were all here for a reason, but boiled down, they all seemed to be finding themselves in one way or another.

The life of a bard can vary, the life of a half elf is usually filled with prejudice, and the life of an orphan is generally lonely. Trit was all three. His was a life of travelling from one place to another, never fitting in, and just getting by, playing whenever he could, or whenever they could tolerate his mixed race. Thankfully, soldiers were often much more accepting,

usually because they were misfits themselves. He could try his luck here. It was just like any other town, right? Just another tavern full of patrons who just wanted songs to go with their drinks.

It'll be fine... It'll be fine?

A soft light, provided by a few lanterns that hung high up on poles and a few dying braziers, coated the encampment. Murmurs and talking could be heard from all directions. The smell was a mix of sweat and stewed food. It surrounded Trit as he casually walked in. He couldn't see anyone around, but the ground beneath his feet was worn and fresh footprints were all over it.

No blood is a good sign.

Trit could hear people nearby, so rather than looking out of place, he went straight for the mess hall that he had pointed out earlier. As he approached the front of the tent, he could hear more of the murmurs within, but they were coming out clearer. There was laughter and the slamming of flagons against hard wood. He knew this sound well, and it gave him a little confidence. He pushed apart the opening of the tent and entered.

"In he goes," Elaria said, watching Trit enter the large tent.

"He's fine, El, don't worry about him. I was talking with him heaps earlier today. Sounds like he's been around, performed all over the place. Got some great stories. This'll be a cakewalk for him, I'm sure," Hoots said, lying on her back and looking up at the night sky. Her sandals were off, and her feet were nestling into the grass of the hill.

"Let's hope so, this all just ... *feels* ... so odd—Wait! Did you just call me 'El'?" Elaria asked.

"Yeah, I did," Hoots said, smiling. "You like it?" She shrugged. Elaria smiled warmly.

"Yes... Yes, I do. No one's given me a nickname before." Elaria looked over at Carion. "Get some rest; I'll take first watch." Carion nodded and moved back down the hill, heading towards a small collection of trees nearby.

"Go on, Hoots; you'll hear me if there's trouble," Elaria said.

“Couple more minutes.” Hoots was still looking up and admiring the stars. “Let me enjoy this a little longer.”

Elaria looked up at the night sky; the stars were bright, and the moon lit up the towers of Alitiar nearby, making a brilliant skyline. Elaria smiled at Hoots’ simple enjoyment.

“Well, better you’re doing *this* than gallivanting off again.”

Some time had passed. Carion and Hoots had both gotten some rest and had relieved Elaria. They were now watching the camp.

“He’s taking too long,” Hoots said, pacing behind the rise.

“There has been no change. He’s fine,” Carion said to Hoots, lying flat on his stomach and keeping a watch on the camp. Elaria rested against a tree nearby, just fading into sleep. It was hard lugging her pack and armour about and a little rest was doing her good.

“Can we just storm in?” Hoots asked. “What if we pretend to be his backup singers?”

“No,” Carion said bluntly.

“Bet you have a nice singing voice,” Hoots said, collapsing down next to him, grinning widely. Carion turned to her with disinterest before adjusting his gaze elsewhere.

“So, what is your deal?” she asked. “You seem pretty comfortable sneaking around with us. Used to steal stuff?”

“No,” Carion answered.

“Sell stuff?”

“No.”

“Were you a mercenary?”

“No.”

“Kill people?”

“...No.”

“You hesitated.”

“Didn’t.”

“Did too. Who’d you kill?”

“No one.”

“Okay, but you can tell me! Was it someone you knew?!”

“No.”

“Oh! It was, wasn’t it? Did you kill old gran in her sleep?”

“I’ll kill you in your sleep soon,” Carion muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Hoots continued to look at him, studying him as he watched the camp. He had an unnatural, undying focus. Carion’s face was emotionless and didn’t change with any tone. Normally. At this point, though, Carion rolled his eyes as he realized she was still looking at him thoroughly.

“You get *one* question. I will answer, honestly, at my own discretion,” Carion informed her. “And only if you promise to shut it and go rest before Trit gets back. I value my life as it is.”

“Oh yay! Yes! Okay, okay, okay, umm...” Hoots tapped her fingers on her chin as she pondered her question, like a child pondering their wish before blowing out birthday candles.

“Oh! Okay, got one,” Hoots announced.

“I am *dizzy* with anticipation.”

“*Why’d you kill me?*”

Hoots’ voice changed, and Carion spun his head to see a radiant woman lying where Hoots once rested. Short chestnut hair, a slightly turned-up nose... The violet eyes of an elf stared back at him.

“*What?*” Carion asked in horror.

“Why’d you come this way round?” Hoots’ normal voice had returned. With a blink, the woman was gone from Carion’s vision, and Hoots was just staring back with her large round eyes, anticipating the answer. “Like, why not go the other way? There were heaps going on this pilgrimage, and most went to that land bridge.”

Carion’s head was still spinning, and it took a moment to get the cogs in his head rotating in the right direction once more.

“Oh ... ah ... the pilgrimage.” Carion turned back to camp, trying to erase the image from his eyes. He stared blankly towards the ground for a moment.

“Are you alright? Maybe you should get some more rest,” Hoots said. She had just seen the first sign of emotion on Carion’s face, and it was terror.

“No. No, I’m fine. Closing my eyes doesn’t help.” Hoots was about to interject, but Carion went on quickly, answering her earlier question.

"The pilgrimage is supposed to be different for everyone; the calling to Mysrik comes in different forms for different people, based on what kind of person you are and how you used magic in your life." Carion rubbed his temple, his eyes still open. "I didn't exactly walk the path of most people, so it seemed fitting to go a different direction..." Carion paused. "That," he muttered, "and I ... made a promise."

"What was that last part?"

"That and I hear snow fruit is delicious. It is only from the northern tundra of the western lands," Carion quickly said, saving himself. Hoots simply giggled.

"You weirdo," she said, flipping over to face the light cloud cover and fresh night sky. Then she slowly closed her eyes with a small grin. "But now I know where to follow you, if you wander off."

A few uneventful moments passed. Hoots had just begun to slumber when, suddenly, a figure emerged from the tent in the encampment. Trit's silhouette could be seen against the light of the tent. He waved back to someone inside and then made his way over the depleted river and up the hill. Carion, checking he wasn't watched or followed, went to inform the others.

"Elaria," he said, nudging her gently with his leather boot as she lay against a nearby tree. Her eyes were glazed over but almost instantly returned to her natural deep beryl in a blink as she returned to consciousness.

I hate how elves sleep like that; she picked that up from her heritage, I guess.

"Hmm?" Elaria murmured.

"Trit. He's coming back," Carion announced. Elaria nodded silently and stood up. With a little stretch, she followed Carion back up the rise. Hoots was right where she had been earlier, but her body was more distorted and entangled from turning in her sleep. Elaria squatted next to her.

"Hoots, wake up."

"Mmm ... nah," Hoots grunted.

"Mmm ... yeah," Elaria said.

"...mm." Hoots drifted back into a slumber, so Elaria haphazardly scooped her and rolled her down the rise. Hoots rolled a few times before jolting awake.

"Okay, rude. I'm up. Far out..."

Trit reached the top of the rise and saw the three on the other side of it, waiting in anticipation. He walked over, then looked behind him, making sure he was completely out of sight of the camp.

"So?" Elaria blurted. "How'd it go?"

"Didn't have anything to worry about! Just a bunch of trainees! I mean, it *is* a training camp. It had all the things that made it a training camp, sleeping quarters, mess hall, training dummies—"

"How many of them?" Elaria interjected.

"Ah ... about two dozen at the most. Friendly lot, yeah," Trit continued.

"What were they wearing? Did they look like red-armour people the refugees were talking about?" Hoots asked.

"Call themselves '*redsands*,' and yeah, they had red armour."

"They had no issue with you at all?" Elaria asked.

Trit shook his head. "None at all. Like I said, they were all very friendly. I think they really enjoyed the singing." Trit showed them some gold coins from his rucksack.

"We could hear it from up hear a bit. You're ... actually good," Hoots added.

Trit smiled. "Thought I was just good looks or something?" He grinned. Hoots scrunched up her face.

"What are they doing here?" Elaria asked.

"They weren't giving me too many details about it, but I think they are going into the city in the morning. The river is low, so the tunnel that the river runs through can be walked. Leads under the city I think," he explained.

"Wait... Why would the redsands sneak into a city they already sieged?" Elaria was puzzled.

"Yeah, this is where it's going to get a little weird. Look, most soldiers, give them a few drinks, and they'll happily talk about whatever, you know? But this lot? Friendly, but..." Trit stopped, searching for the words for what had transpired.

“What was wrong though?” Carion said, noticing the concern on Trit’s face.

“What do you mean?” Trit asked.

“What didn’t add up to you?” Carion asked. He was good at picking up on subtle facial triggers.

“They didn’t ... have any memories. It was like this camp was all they knew. Every time I tried asking or probing about where they came from, or their families, just details about anything, they just, drew a blank. It was really weird,” Trit said, concerned.

Hoots and Elaria look at Trit, confused. Carion stared blankly.

“And the other weird thing was what they were saying about the city. They kept saying it was abandoned, but *not* recently... They were saying it has been like this for *years*.”

“Years?!” Hoots exclaimed.

Elaria pondered that for a moment. “That doesn’t add up.”

“Brainwashed,” Carion added. The three looked to him for further explanation.

“When people get brainwashed, by most means at least, they have simple tasks and simple responses. Trit asked about their past. These are things the brainwashed person or creature doesn’t know about, but they can still respond to things, like by being friendly to strangers and mentioning what they do know, or what they’ve been led to believe. In this case, it’s that the city is abandoned,” Carion explained. The other three nodded their understanding.

“How do you know it’s these guys that are brainwashed and not all those who said the city was sieged?” Hoots asked. Carion looked at her, almost impressed.

“That’s too many people to brainwash. Powerful charm spells can get a few people, or a small group like this, at most. Not an entire town or city. I’d know.” The other three would rather not ask how Carion knew. “So, what did you say about us?” Carion continued, directing his question to Trit.

“Nothing really. They didn’t even care. I acted like I knew the place was always here, and said that I was camping nearby, but no follow-up. They welcomed me like it was a place everyone knew; I ran with it, and it

worked out I guess.” Trit looked back at the encampment, just reassuring himself of that last part.

“Good. Well done.” Carion placed a hand on Trit’s shoulder. “Then we can leave once they’ve gone into the city.”

“And just ignore this whole crazy situation?” Hoots asked.

“This is of no importance to me. I said I’d stay with you until Alitiar, but now that there’s safe passage further away, what you do doesn’t concern me.”

“There’s some weird, brainwashing cult happening here, really screwing with the atmosphere, and you are just gonna run away?” Hoots began to raise her voice, disregarding any possibility of being heard by the camp nearby. Elaria came to her side and stood steadfast opposite Carion, letting Hoots know she stood with her. Carion sighed at their surprise at him leaving.

“I never intended to stay, and so I won’t. Don’t expect me to. This pilgrimage is my own.” Carion plodded down the hill with his head down, trying to not even look at them. He’d let many people down before, and he didn’t want more on his conscience.

“Hey, Carion,” Trit said quickly, “before you go, can I just ask? ... Why’d you trust me so much?” Carion turned towards him. “I could be lying. I could be in on it, so why’d you send me down there? Why do you believe me now?” Carion looked at Trit for a brief moment

“What? You were lying?” Hoots mumbled. Trit looked back at her with a reassuring look. Carion took a breath; he hated having to explain himself.

“I read people; it is what I do.”

Trit. Half-elf. Personality traits: Clumsy, thoughtful, resourceful, innocent...

... Thud...

“Innocent...”

“You are too good of a person to lie. Too ... *afraid*. We sent you down there because you are simply expendable.”

... Thud...

*“Yeah, that’s right. Push them
away!
Can’t have innocent people in your wake, Carion!”*

Trit stepped back. Carion retreated into his cloak and made his way down the hill. Trit stumbled back to Hoots and Elaria.

“You guys think I’m expendable?” Trit asked softly.

“I don’t know you, and frankly, I *didn’t* trust you,” Elaria said, approaching him, “but I can tell you are telling the truth.” She stopped, right in front of Trit, her eyes meeting his. “I think you are too good-natured, and all I needed was that Trit. We need a bard with us if we are going to see what’s going on in this place, but I’m still keeping an eye on you, so watch it. I don’t know you that well yet, but this is one step closer!”

Trit appeared a little taken aback by someone who had started as an aggressor changing to a soft, reassuring friend right in front of him.

“You didn’t have to put me in mortal danger for that proof!” Trit complained.

“Yes, but it makes for a better story. Think of the songs you’ll write!” Elaria slapped his shoulder with a large smile. “You were never in danger; don’t you worry.”

Hoots leaned in to join the conversation. “I kinda wanted you to die though. Could have been a good excuse to storm the grounds.”

“Her words, not mine,” Elaria said, with her hands up. “But if you are lying, I will kill you!” The three laughed quietly amongst themselves, enjoying their newly forged bond. It had been a reckless way to initiate Trit, but one that had cemented at least some level of trust. Carion looked back at something he’d once had as he laid his head down.

... Thud...

“You had that once...”

Like all things he had experienced, this had become a tainted memory, of which he didn’t want to be reminded.

Elaria, fully rested, decided to take the watch until morning, intending to alert the others when the soldiers made their move. She watched closely as the lights dimmed at the encampment and eventually were extinguished. Elaria's eyes adjusted nicely to the dark. As the sun sluggishly rose once more, she noticed the redsands stirring in the dark. Shadows of people moved around slowly. As she watched them, she made breakfast; there weren't many rations left, and so she thought it might be best to make use of them as a stew for the early morning venture. She was also a little nervous about the next conversation she had to have ... or *wanted* to have, at least. As the soldiers continued to stir, she scooped up a bowl of the stew she'd whipped up and went down the hill to Hoots and Trit, who hugged his lute tightly in his sleep. She kicked Trit, and he jerked awake.

"Hm? What's up? We going? We ready?" Trit questioned, eyes darting around aimlessly.

"Almost. Keep a watch for me while I get Hoots and myself ready," Elaria whispered. Trit rolled over, stumbled up the hill, and threw himself down on the grass.

Elaria looked at Hoots, once again finding the gnome distorted from her animated sleeping style. Then she looked over at Carion, who hadn't moved. *Good, he hasn't left.* She breathed deeply and headed over to him.

Carion might be a still sleeper, but his eyes darted violently underneath his eyelids. As Elaria got closer, she could hear him talking under his breath. It was mostly nonsense she couldn't make out, or possibly it was in another language, but a few words did emerge that she could understand:

"... *She... Don't... Ca... Can't do... Look away... Sh-She...*"

Elaria continued to approach, and once close, she made herself comfortable near him. She watched him for a moment as the inner torment appeared to leak out of him. The look on his face, the ever-moving eyes, the words... It all fell out of him, and she felt him suffering. She leaned in and placed her hand on his upper arm. The touch initially didn't stir him, but then suddenly, he came to, looking up and then back to her, his eyes shocked and his pupils large. They looked shell-shocked and desperate. Carion breathed heavily for a moment as reality hit him, and then he became his stoic self once more. Elaria extended her arm to him with one of the bowls.

"I thought you might like something before you leave." Carion looked at her and then at the bowl. He took it tentatively. Elaria smiled softly at him.

"What's her name?" As the words left Elaria's lips, she instantly regretted it, but she wanted to be as friendly as possible.

Carion looked at her, unimpressed. "*She* was no one," he said stubbornly.

"Hmm, well can you do me a favour when you are out there on your own? I just wanted to ask you, otherwise it'll plague my mind when you aren't around." Carion looked down at the mediocre morning stew.

"And what's would that be?" he reluctantly asked.

... *Thud...*

"I've been watching the three of you. You, Trit, and Hoots. You aren't the only one who reads people. I like to think I see good in people. I've been around a mixed lot, and I like to think I have good judgement." Elaria looked over towards Trit briefly. "Especially when they don't shut up. But you? I feel like there's something ... difficult. But I can't force you to stay. So, I want you to do something every day," Elaria said, moving away a bit to grab her own bowl of morning stew so they could share it together.

"And what do you want me to do?" Carion asked, blinking his eyes, focus returning to his pupils as he clutched the bowl Elaria had passed him.

... *Thud...*

"Wake up," Elaria said, turning back with her own bowl and joining Carion on the grass. "I don't know you very well, and I don't know what you are going through. You don't have to share it with me either, but what I can do is be there for you. You want to leave? Go for it, but I just want to know you are going to keep waking up. It's the only way to get through the hard times you seem to be going through." Elaria gave a large, closed-mouth smile and then slurped some stew loudly. Carion stared down at his, taking in the warmth of the steam on his face, as well as the fact that someone would care enough to say this to him.

... *Thud...*

Elaria went on. “I used to get kicked awake by the others in training. You’d think paladin training would be a little kinder, right? They gave me bruises for days and broken ribs for a few more, but what got me through was simply waking up—waking up to take on the morning—because I was so determined to prove to them, even though I absolutely *hated* them, that it didn’t matter what they were planning on doing to me. I’d still get up, still defy them all and take it on. It was hard. *Man*, was it hard! And I wish ... I wish I’d had someone, but I didn’t. It was just me. If I stayed asleep, maybe they’d leave me be, but that’s not really living, is it? I’d miss out on doing what I really wanted. I guess I thought it was like they would win, so I kept getting up and dealing with it. So, maybe I can help you. You aren’t getting beaten awake, but something is plaguing you. Just wake up, every day, and every day I can be here. It gets easier. You just have to keep doing it. That’s a promise. *My* promise. Just come with us, because ... I care that you wake up from whatever nightmare you are having.”

Wait ... where’s the thud?

There was no thud... Did... Did it really go away? Was that all it took?

Carion looked down, not really knowing what to say. Maybe he was still half-asleep, or maybe it was the first nice thing someone had said to him for a long time, even though it was from a stranger he’d met only a day ago. Instead of responding, he just sat there.

“But I’m also not going to force you to do anything, so at the very least, promise me that, when you are out there alone, you’ll wake up as I did. You’ll wake up and take on the day. You’ll wake up from the nightmare. For me. Those nightmares win if you stay asleep.”

Carion continued looking down at his bowl, warming his hands comfortably. Elaria let him be and took a gulp of stew, turning away slightly.

“Ditta.”

“Hmm?” Elaria said with a mouth full of soup. She turned to Carion, eyes wide.

“Her name was Ditta,” Carion said, still staring down at his bowl. He then quickly stuffed his mouth, before anything else could come out—before any emotion could leak through. His eyes didn’t move away. He’d have to properly process this later.

Elaria gulped quietly and smiled. They shared the moment together in silence, save for the swigs from their morning brew. Carion soon realized that Elaria was taking on the mantle of a paladin seriously ... and that her cooking was terrible.

CHAPTER 6

AS THEY ENTER

Excerpt from the Legend of the First Visit of the Immortal Sheef, by Archmage Ivar:

A call to the Kai'sions and the dragon-kin of Dizstrum rang out over the land, and Sheef greeted them as he once had long ago. He materialized from the clouds and came to their leaders and spoke.

"The influx of magic users has grown my city of Mysrik, but latent magic pours forth, and so I have captured it within a vault, a great tower south of the mountainous spires. This is where all magic energy left behind from the residents, along with their powerful possessions, will be kept. You both will hold the keys to this great vault."

Sheef placed a pearlescent orb of light in the hands of King Golbert Kai'sion and Stromward of the Dizstrum dragon-kin.

"House these keys; construct vaults of your own to protect them. You allowed me and all the pilgrims to live in this land, and now I share what we no longer need."

The remaining gnome families had snuck into the meeting. Tired of the dragon raids on the eastern coast, they cried out to the Kai'sions.

"Use the key against the dragons and the dragon-kin! Smite them before they smite us anymore!"

Golbert looked at Stormward and spoke. "I will never use the power of the vault against the dragon-kin, for they are also protectors of this land and the Mysrik tower."

And so, from this day, a truce was achieved between the Kai'sions and the dragon-kin of Dizstrum.

The power of the Mysrik tower lay untouched and the keys safely protected by the two mortal groups. The Kai'sions keep their key in a vault in the tallest tower in Alitiar, whereas the dragon-kin keep theirs in a subterranean haven, both on Sheef's recommendations. These magical keys were to return to their origin if they were to ever be used.

But, no one has ever used the keys, nor have they been seen since they were gifted and stowed away.

The gnomes grew bitter, but Sheef had no patience for them; they had settled in the deserted land he forbade and were not worthy of this gift in his eyes.



Trit whispered as he started inching back down from the top rise on all fours, looking back to the others. "Alright, looks like they've all started moving out, in formation. What's the plan?" Everyone had mostly packed up; they were all pretty used to travelling light, so it didn't take long. Carion was absent; he had been since he and Elaria had finished their morning stew. The sun had begun rising from over the mountain tops, lighting the crimson tops of the tents. Elaria finished the last few straps of her armour and grabbed her shield.

"Wait for them to show us how they plan on getting into the city. Make sure we aren't in earshot, and we'll pass by."

"And if we're caught?" Hoots asked, inspecting her last pastry. She decided it wasn't worth the trouble, or the jaw work, and tossed it aside.

"We've got our bard; he can talk us out of it, right?" Elaria nudged Trit as he stood up. He was being overly cautious now.

“Maybe we were waiting outside, and no one answered?”

“You are a terrible liar.” Hoots sighed.

“Ah yeah, please don’t make me do the talking,” Trit quietly pleaded.

“Well, the three of us will have to walk for most of the day,” Elaria said, “especially if we don’t want to camp out again. I’m getting a little low on rations, and we don’t know exactly how far Palmy is; so Trit better have some songs to distract me.”

“Oh yeah. I can help with that. Of course, a lot of songs I know are about food and ale,” he added, with a smile, “but I can ad-lib.”

“Wait! Just the three of us?” Hoots asked, looking around. “Where’s Carion?”

“I talked to him this morning. I think he’s on his own path now,” Elaria said, saddened by his absence. “Maybe he just wanted some safe passage.”

“Man, he gave me the creeps,” Trit added.

“Oh, I liked him!” Hoots exclaimed.

“I just got the shivers around him. I had a really bad nightmare about him last night. I can’t sense evil, but still—”

“That’s very black and white of you.” Carion’s voice came from behind them, and he slunk out from behind a tree, one that seemed almost too thin for someone to hide behind.

Trit jumped back, startled, “Don’t jump out like that!” he wailed, holding his chest. Carion passed purposely close to Trit as he joined the group. “Good and evil isn’t black-and-white. It’s all shades of grey,” Carion said. “Just because someone’s decisions don’t line up with your morality doesn’t make them evil ... *or* good.”

“Of course there’s evil. There are evil things out and about everywhere, like *fiends* and such.”

“Fiends consider us...” Carion paused for a moment, considering his words, “... *smart insects*.”

“So, you don’t think they’re evil?” Trit asked.

Carion shook his head. “An ant would think you’re evil, if you squished his friend. That doesn’t make you evil though, does it?”

“Okay, but there’s demons. True demons. Not like you. I used to hear all about them.”

Carion's eyes narrowed a little. "Demons act like a virus; they don't even consider us as anything but an obstacle." He circled Trit intimidatingly. "Like a horse eating grass. In their eyes, we are just to be stomped or eaten. It is perspective, Trit. That's all it is." Carion looked at Elaria. "So be careful, young paladin. I've seen the righteous commit genocide, and the tyrannical practice mercy." Carion had certainly made his entrance.

Hoots butted in, mocking the whole discussion. "*Ooh, I took a philosophy class once!*" She shook her head, grinning. "This ain't school, so are you coming with or not? Going to point out the philosophical dilemma of morality as we go?"

Carion looked back to Elaria with kinder eyes. "Yes. I am coming with. More precisely, I'm going in the same direction, and you three can't be avoided."

"Why?" Trit asked.

Carion looked at him with malice, his eyes narrowing. "Sightseeing."

Trit chuckled nervously.

Carion wished he could join in with their good humour.

"Oh, make up whatever excuse you want."

"They don't know who you are after all."

"Still," he said to Trit, "that doesn't mean it isn't dangerous, Trit, so just don't get too distracted." He pointed up the rise, reminding them of the task at hand.

"Oh right, yeah, people. I was watching..." Trit voice trailed off as he darted back up the hill. Elaria followed but not before looking back at Carion and giving him a soft smile. Carion noticed and nodded, then Hoots approached him.

"I'm glad you are staying with us, even if it's just for a bit longer," Hoots said.

"How else would you be able to ask me annoying questions every night?" Carion asked.

Hoots giggled. "Oh, I get one every night, huh?" Hoots continued, watching his reaction. This was where Carion could laugh or smile, but

his face might crack under the pressure. Instead, he squatted down so they were face-to-face.

"You're going to have to tell her eventually, you know," Carion whispered. Hoots' face turned cold. "She's going to find out one way or another."

"What? How'd you know?" Hoots asked unevenly. Carion just looked right at her. "Right, reading people. You won't say anything, right? I'll tell her soon," she said nervously.

Carion nodded his head a few times.

"Good."

And then he went up the rise. Hoots looked down in nervous thought for a moment before joining the rest of them. They all collected at the top of the rise, crouched down, and stayed quiet to observe the morning sun trickling over the now-abandoned camp.

"They all went through the drain there," Trit said, "climbed in one by one, just a few moments ago." He pointed out the large stone opening, covered by a grate. With a powerful enough flow of water through it, it could fuel a city's worth of wheels.

"They were able to just climb in?" Hoots asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, just lifted up!" Trit answered.

"Alright, let's move past, quickly, but don't look suspicious," Elaria said as she headed down the hill. Hoots trotted closely behind, as did Carion, with his arms within his cloak.

"Come on, Trit, we're leaving without you!" Hoots hollered over her shoulder. "You'll miss my faaace!" Trit grabbed his lute strap tightly and dashed down with them.

Carion grabbed Elaria as the other two headed forward. "You feel it, don't you?" he whispered.

"Feel it? Feel what?" Elaria asked, puzzled.

Carion looked at her with a stern face. "I know you feel something; you just don't know what it is. Look, I've dealt with all kinds of things, believe me, but this place, this city ... I'm picking up something."

"Something?" Elaria asked. *I do feel something*, she thought. *Is this what the elders called 'the sense'?*

"That's my point," he said. "I don't know what this is. Whatever happened, or is happening, is nothing I've dealt with, and I don't like it."

How come he can feel it too? Elaria spoke anxiously. “Yes, I do feel something. I felt it when we got close. It’s like ... an unease. Parts of me tingle uncomfortably all the time. You don’t know what it is?”

Carion shook his head. “Demonic, fiendish, fey... It isn’t any of these. I just want you to be aware and not to ignore feelings like this.”

“And this actually worries you enough to travel with us?” she asked. “Or did my little speech this morning actually work?”

Carion sighed. *Why can’t I admit I might like the idea of having a friend?*

“In a way ... but like Hoots said, I think I’ll be safer with you lot. Dying doesn’t get me into Mysrik, and traversing the wilderness during a civil war isn’t ideal. I don’t think I’m safe anywhere ... but I wouldn’t mind seeing the castle from the other side.”

Elaria raised an eyebrow.

“Remember? Sightseeing?” Carion said. *Yeah, stick to that excuse.*

“Then keep close, and let’s get a good view,” Elaria said with a smile.

“Actually, wait you two,” Elaria barked at Hoots and Trit, who had clambered up the bank towards the camp. “Don’t go too far. I’m filling the waterskins.” They both then tossed down their own small waterskins to her with a giggle. Elaria sighed and grabbed them.

Carion stood close to Elaria as she bent down and started filling them up from the stream. “You know it’s clean?” Carion asked.

“Yes. Looks like it’s coming off the mountains. It’s still running fast enough, but more importantly, it looks clear.” She let the cool clear water run over hands.

“And what if isn’t?” Carion pushed.

“How do you mean? I just wouldn’t drink it.”

“I imagine you’ll be reciting your oath again to the royal family; would you be able to purify it?”

“I know the somatic parts of that spell, but like most paladin magic, I won’t know exactly until, well ... like you said, when I recite my oath with true honesty once more.”

“Only three paladin sects teach that.”

“You trying to read me too?”

Carion shrugged.

“I’m part of a small sect called the Eight Winds,” Elaria told him,

swapping to another waterskin. “They sort of teach you a little of everything, see what you are natural at, and then double down on it. I wasn’t very magically inclined, so I wasn’t taught to be an out-right healer. I mean, I can do a little, as I said, and hopefully I can purify a bit of food or water. But some students went on to be experts.”

“What did they see in you then?” Carion asked.

“A fighter. They said I was a well-oiled machine when it came to physical capabilities. So, it was sparring, weapon maintenance, sparring, running up a mountain in armour, more sparring...”

“They start young at that sect.”

“Oh, you know it?”

“I’ve heard of it.”

“Well yes, very young....”

Meanwhile, Trit and Hoots were scouring the tents, both just curious and interested to see it all.

“It’s pretty basic,” Hoots exclaimed as they looked in the mess hall. The whole encampment was plain, with just the bare necessities. What was left behind was just furniture. Trit recognized the mess hall exactly as it was the previous night, with two long tables and benches on either side, and a few kitchen supplies off to one corner.

“Ah yep, that’s all there is really,” Trit said in agreement. “I told you we weren’t going to find anything exciting.”

“Yeah, but I still wanted to look! What’s in those tents?” She motioned to the surrounding smaller ones.

“Sleeping quarters, I’d imagine.”

But it was too late; Hoots was already looking through them. Trit couldn’t be bothered. He was familiar with soldiers and camps like this. He’d often return to one like this after a night out. Usually there’s a good amount of coin could be gained, but otherwise, he would find a vacant bed he could sleep on and some warm food to fill his belly. Soldiers were often so kind, especially the grunts and newbies; it was their superiors who would kick him out the next morning.

Repetitive, but it’s a living, Trit thought. He parted a tent opening nearby as Hoots clambered about the others, just passing the time. He looked

around from the opening, seeing nothing special, just a wooden frame for a bed, a mattress maybe three inches thick, and a huge mound of bed sheets all haphazardly tossed on top.

Just one bed? Probably the captain's chambers.

"Oh, these guys are slobs!" Hoots yelled from a nearby tent. Trit smiled warmly; he had been traveling his whole life alone. He never really knew why he liked people but didn't like sticking around them for long, as if it was uncomfortable, like an itch, or a leg that wouldn't stop twitching when he wanted to go asleep.

Perhaps it will be different this time? Hoots is fun, that's for sure, so curious and full of energy, and Elaria...

Trit swung his lute in front of him; it was old and ragged, much like the encampment. It was basic, but it was his, and it had been for a long time—for about as long as he could remember. He flipped the lute over. There, on the back side, was a marking etched into the wood: a large blotchy shape. It had been there for some time, the exposed wood from the etching having darkened with age. The shape was exactly the same as Elaria's birthmark.

Who hell are you to me, Elaria?

As Trit's thoughts danced around in his head, the mound of sheets shuffled. Trit immediately went wide-eyed and threw his lute onto his back, clutching the strap tightly.

The mound rose, and as it did, sheets and fabric slipped off slowly, accompanied by a soft groan. Trit took a step back, and as he did, his back brushed the tent, making the light that trickled in dance a little. The mound made a small but sudden movement and stopped. Trit froze.

Probably just slept in... Yeah, but soldiers don't sleep in...

"Hey, Trit!" Hoots called from another tent.

More fabric slid to the floor, revealing the humanoid beneath it. A hulking orc now towered above the bed, wearing red sand-encrusted armour. Large tusks protruded from his lower jaw, and his skin was a light grey. His eyes were blood-red ... and glowed.

"You, ah ... just missed them," Trit said softly. The orc bared his teeth in a snarl.

"I'll ... I'll just go, yeah..." Trit started to back up. The orc took a step off the bed, puncturing the damp ground with a soft squish. Trit continued to

back up. The orc took another step and grabbed the hilt of a battle axe that was slung across his back.

An unaware Hoots came to Trit's side, flinging open the fabric doorway, calling, "Hey! Find anything good?"

The orc roared, and with both hands, drew the battle axe and ran at the two of them. They yelped and darted outside, heading to either side of the tent, as the battle axe came thundering down into the dirt, narrowly missing them. They ran around to the back of the tent, almost running into each other, then stood side by side, hyperventilating.

"What was wrong with him?!" Hoots whispered loudly.

Trit answered between breaths, "I dunno, but his eyes were, like ... *really* red."

Hoots looked over the bank down to the river nearby, just passed a similar tent. She looked at Trit, who nodded, and then they rocketed forward and made for the bank. Trit had more spring in his step and made it there first, sliding down and out of sight. As Hoots was about to do the same, the orc came into view from the tent next to her and cut her off. His nostrils flared, and he shook as if he was cold. He swung the axe sideways, and Hoots fell to the ground, managing to duck low enough, but she could feel the breeze the axe took with it just above her hair. Scrambling to her feet, Hoots backed up. The orc kept approaching. Now she could see him twitching, and each time he did, Hoots could hear a joint click. The orc's blood-red glowing eyes didn't leave her own. Hoots kept backing up slowly, not wanting to make any sudden movements, and he continued his approach, plodding forward with a long, wide stride.

"Excuse me."

The orc spun to see Elaria, who had come up the bank and stood firmly before him.

"What seems to be the problem?" Elaria asked, her hand on her sword hilt.

The orc roared, and with his battle axe overhead, he ran at her, swinging it down at her. Elaria, barely moving, placed one foot behind her, pivoting slightly. The battle axe thundered down and punctured the dirt at her feet.

One

"Sir, I must ask you to stop so that we can discuss this situation civilly."

The orc wrenched his battle axe back up and swung horizontally at her. With elegance, Elaria lifted her right hand, and with it, her shield. The battle axe contacted it but was deflected.

Two

"I am a paladin of the Eight Winds. I am here to—"

The orc quickly swung horizontally again, this time from the other side, forcing Elaria to pivot and block it again.

Three

"Alright ... *fine*," Elaria muttered. With that, she drew her sword with her left hand. The orc rotated his battle axe once again, coming from Elaria's right. She spun close to the orc and came around to his back, between him and Hoots now. Hoots had been watching closely but now felt safe. *Very safe.*

"You will drop your weapon and surrender, or judgment will be swift," Elaria said, making a powerful stance, shield out and sword pointed directly at the orc. The orc looked confused for a second, mouth agape, but then batted the sword away and lunged. With her planted back foot, Elaria launched with her shield, bashing the orc back. Elaria planted her front foot immediately and used the momentum to continue shoving the orc. Although he was large, so was Elaria, and she was both skilled and strong. With another big shove, she pulled back her shield. The orc stood at the edge of the bank, demonic red eyes staring at her.

"Final warning," Elaria said, lowering her sword. Without a second thought, the orc lunged at her one last time. Elaria lifted her sword, and he practically ran onto it. Elaria made sure it struck through with a mighty plunge into his heart and out his back. At that instant, the glow in the orc's eyes diminished and the warm heap slumped to the earth. With her sabaton, Elaria kicked the orc off her sword. The corpse rag-dolled down the bank. Looking over, Elaria saw Carion, with Trit hiding behind him.

"Come on, Hoots, we ..." As Elaria turned towards Hoots, who appeared relieved, a hundred more red eyes peered at her from just beyond the encampment, as dozens of soldiers began approaching. Without even thinking, Elaria grabbed Hoots and shuffled her to the bank's edge.

Confused, Hoots struggled a little. "Hey, what are you—oh."

A horde of redsand soldiers, eyes unblinking, plodded towards them.

“Down the bank,” Elaria said calmly. Hoots turned, eyes on her feet, and trotted to Trit and Carion. She almost ran into them, not realizing they were facing a different direction.

“Guys, we have a ... situation.” Hoots looked up, and on the other side of the bank, saw another hundred eyes peering down, still unblinking. Soldiers with red armour and helmets, adorned with glass shards, surrounded them. Elaria quickly joined them, sword still in hand. The four stood with their backs together and looked around them as the red eyes looked on.

They were surrounded. Elaria started breathing heavily, adrenaline pumping through her in full force as her eyes widened. She pushed Hoots behind her. Carion stepped forward in front of the other three, and quickly thrust a hand inside his robe, eyes not leaving the red glow of the soldiers surrounding them. He then pulled his hand out as a fist, and a soft mist of powder followed it, which he rubbed thoroughly on his hands and between his fingers. Then, clasping his two hands together, fingers wrapped around each other in a pattern, he pressed the opening to his mouth. Suddenly, Carion’s voice could be heard coming from some distance away.

“Over here!”

And then again in another direction.

“Run! They’re coming!”

This continued as he held his hands to his mouth, and the soldiers began looking around, confused and distracted. Carion turned to the other three and whispered. “To the grate! Go!”

With purposeful strides, the three got to the grate together. Elaria began lifting it very slowly, not making a noise as she did. Once it was open enough, she climbed up into the tunnel. Once in, she waited for Carion to start holding the grate open, and then put her hand back down to help the others. Trit grabbed her hand, and she lifted him in as if he were as light as a child. Next was Hoots. Carion was looking back at the soldiers, many of whom had scattered with the distraction he’d made.

They’ll catch on shortly.

Hoots lost her footing as she tried to step up, and Carion’s head spun towards her. She managed to get up, but the slip had been heard. Carion looked back to see blood-red eyes all locking onto them once more,

followed by an immediate roar and a stampede.

Carion threw Hoots the rest of the way in; then Elaria caught the grate and Carion lifted himself in swiftly. The stampeding soldiers crusaded down the riverbed towards the grate.

“Oh, you’ve *got* to teach me that spell!” Hoots said.

Carion ignored her. “Run!”

The four ran single file down the waterway tunnel. It was only just large enough for Elaria, but she had to hunch over. The walls were made of stone and covered in grime. These waterways had been there since the city had taken shape and snaked under the entire city, where they would become exposed. There were several of these tunnels, each allowing water to pour into the city’s canals. Right now, the water was low, but every step the quartet took made a splash. Elaria was leading, she was quick despite the armour, but everyone was able to keep up.

The darkness had enveloped them. There was no light inside the tunnel, so Elaria was using her hand on the wall as a guide. They hadn’t had time to consider that Hoots or Carion might see better than her in the dark. They could soon hear the grate open and close violently behind them, along with the uneasy sound of soldiers pouring into the tunnel. They had gained some distance though and were approaching a crossway. Elaria skidded to a halt and held out her hand, feeling the other walls.

“Which way?” she hastily asked. The four gathered and stared off in all directions. Carion noticed some scrapes on the wall of the left tunnel, lower than where Elaria was touching, and looking down the tunnel, he could see a few more.

“This way,” Carion said, taking lead. “It’s the way those other soldiers went.”

“You want us to go *towards* those soldiers?!” Trit wailed, unnerved by the sound of the pursuing soldiers in the near distance.

“It means a way out! We don’t know where the other tunnels lead! Come on.” Carion started running swiftly down the chosen tunnel. The groans and roars of the soldiers behind them were getting louder as they got closer. The other three followed Carion. They had little choice.

With Carion’s superior eyesight in the darkness, an attribute provided by his demon-kin ancestry, allowed the four to move a little quicker. The

frantic sprint turned into a brisk run, then a jog as the sounds of their pursuers diminished. Finally, Carion came to a halt.

“What’s up?” Hoots asked.

“You see that up ahead?” Carion motioned forward.

“Oh! A ladder!” Hoots exclaimed.

“Yes, but what do you make of this?” Carion motioned down a smaller tunnel to his right. It was thinner and lower, and rather than being walled with slimy stone, it was dirt.

“So? We can go up the ladder,” Hoots said, ignoring Carion’s interest.

“This dirt is fresh.” Carion sniffed. “This side tunnel was constructed recently.” He bent down and rubbed some of the dirt between his fingers. It was compressed, as if it had been stepped on, but the smell of moved earth hung around it.

Why would they make a separate tunnel? Wait... How long ago was the attack? The surprise attack... Carion started making connections.

“I say we go this way,” Carion said, his interest peaked.

“What? Why?” Elaria asked from the back.

“They might be expecting more soldiers up that ladder. This is another way up.”

“How do you know?” Trit asked with a turned-up nose.

“The only reason you’d make a tunnel under a city is because you wanted to come up somewhere specific. The stone tunnels go this far, but whoever made this one wanted to come out at a specific place, and they wanted it recently. There’ll be an exit.”

Carion walked down the tunnel carefully, testing the ground with each step, listening to the dirt compressing beneath his boot. The other three cautiously followed. After only a few minutes, Carion came to a complete stop.

“Oh, what now?” Trit asked with frustration. “Another small tunnel of interest?”

“Quite the opposite.” Carion moved to one side to allow the others a view. It was a huge bored-out shaft, going straight down into what seemed like an endless abyss. Upwards, there was a hint of light, about another story up. The ceiling, from what they could tell, was part of a structure of some sort, like a building.

“That’s a way out,” Carion said, leaning in and feeling the walls. “All dirt. Hoots, think you could climb up?”

“What if she falls?!” asked a very stressed Elaria. “That thing has no bottom to it!”

Carion pulled out three feathers from within his robe. “I’ll catch her if she does.”

Elaria frowned. *He has been helping this whole time*, she reminded herself.

“At least tie a rope around her,” Elaria said, passing some forward.

Carion tied it firmly around Hoots, giving the rest to Elaria to hold. “Kick your feet into the dirt of the walls, hard. It’s only a few steps, and I’ll catch you if you fall. Then secure the rope so the rest of can get up.”

Hoots nodded at Carion but looked over to Elaria for some comfort. Elaria’s eyes were so kind, even in the darkness, that Hoots felt at ease. Carion had his hand pointed at Hoots, a feather between each finger, his eyes containing immense focus.

As Carion said, it was only a few steps up—for Hoots, maybe five—before her hands would be able to reach the floorboards of the dilapidated building above them. The wall was soft, and with each kick and handhold she made, she patted the dirt down hard to make it tougher. If it had been any other material, it may not have been possible. Soon enough, she made it up. The ceiling of this place was not a ceiling, or perhaps it once had been, but now it was the rubble of a caved-in house. She was able to find some footing and landed safely. A small creak rang out in the silence as her weight was received by the floorboards. She sought out something strong and spied a support beam, in the dim sunlight that was filtering through the debris, maintaining its presence against all the toppled walls. Hoots leaned down to look at the others, who all looked up in anticipation. She gave them a delighted thumbs-up. She went for a better look outside. The sunlight of the day gave her a front view of a stone street. They must have been running for some time because it was nearing midday now. Sunlight lit up the pale grey exterior.

Hoots turned back to the beam, eyes now hazier due to the sunlight, and wrapped the rope around it, tying a knot and pulling it tight. Hoots then returned to the edge, leaned over, and held up the rope so they could see it, hoping they understood. She thought she saw them nod.

"Trit, you go up next," Carion said. "Kick your boots into the walls as much as you can to make steps, for yourself and for us to use when we follow."

"Oh... Okay... Yeah, okay," Trit nodded to himself, trying to get motivated.

Trit grabbed the rope, and Carion wrapped it around him, then turned Trit around to face the dirt. Trit did so and began to climb. White-knuckled, he clasped the rope tightly. Hoots saw him and guided the rope to the wall to avoid him swinging out. The loose, kicked dirt fluttered down the shaft, luckily making no noticeable sound as it descended. The sound of Trit cutting the earth with his boot did echo down the shaft though. As soon as Trit was within reach, he threw his hands up to the floorboards. Hoots held onto his hands and began pulling him up, leaning back with all her weight. Trit was finally able to place his forearms on the surface, pushing down hard on them to get the rest of his body up.

Together, Trit and Hoots managed to get Elaria up, her size making it easier as she was able to reach the floorboards in fewer steps. Finally, Carion, with Elaria's hand to help him, got up with ease. The four stood in the mass of the dimly lit rubble.

"Let's ... let's just gather ourselves and think about our next move," Elaria said, all the events coming at her at once. She got out a water skin and passed it to Hoots before slumping down on a darkened wooden beam nearby. Hoots and Trit went to look outside, and Carion moved to Elaria's side.

"Was that your first?" Carion quietly asked Elaria, who had pulled out her sword, inspecting the blood and flesh still coating it. Elaria nodded.

"It doesn't get easier," he told her. "You just get used to it."

"How do I know it was okay?" she asked him.

Carion turned to her. "He attacked Hoots and Trit; that is your justification. Tell yourself that."

"Is that how I do it? Just ... justify it, and it's okay?"

"You're going to have to. You'll likely kill again. You'll likely *have* to kill again."

Elaria took a big breath in and nodded to herself. *It's never going to be easy.*

"I ... I need to clean this," she said, getting out a particular cloth from a side pouch. Sombrely, she began wiping the blade.

Hoots and Trit were at a small hole in the rubble, gaining some insight into where they were.

"What do you reckon?" Hoots whispered to Trit.

"Oh, in the city for sure, but I'm more concerned about getting out. I mean, that small army doesn't just disappear, right?" Trit's adrenaline from the climb caused him to speak quickly.

Hoots turned around to see Elaria, wiping her sword. Carion was looking around the rubble.

I don't think that was easy for her, Hoots thought.

"You've got to come up with a better line," Hoots said to Elaria, who looked up.

"What?"

"*You will drop your weapon and surrender, or judgment will be swift.*" Hoots smirked. "I mean, it's a little boring, for one thing."

Elaria gave her a half smile with saddened eyes.

"Yeah, you have to have something punchy," Trit added, turning back to the room.

"What would you have said?" Hoots asked.

"*Die demon!*" Trit said in deep voice before looking over at Carion timidly, "Oh, ah sorry..." but he ignored Trit and continued investigating the area.

"Nah, nah, '*I am judgement!*'" Hoots said enthusiastically.

Trit and Hoots chuckled, but Elaria wasn't overly amused. After a few moments, Hoots approached her and put a hand on her arm.

"Trit and I are probably here because of you. I mean, I *might* have been able to take him, but still."

"Didn't you take on a bugbear?" Elaria asked.

"Yeah, but they're like ... monsters. I didn't know *what* that orc was. I hesitated."

"What was up with their eyes? I didn't see that last night," Trit said. "Were they ... possessed? They seemed almost rabid."

"It was probably the possession occurring, as if a new directive was being broadcast to them." Carion was sifting through some of the remains

in the house; nothing out of the ordinary was interesting him, just kitchenware and parts of furniture.

“That’s ... creepy” Trit added, “but damn that spell you did earlier was wicked!”

“Oh, yeah! It was!” Hoots exclaimed. “What was that dust you used? I want some!”

“That was a component for a particular spell. I only had enough for one.” Carion continued looking around.

“You should have stocked up on it; have a whole bag full!” Trit said.

“Do you know how long it took to get that ingredient?” Carion barked over his shoulder.

“Ah ... ummm Six?” Trit suggested.

“Six?”

“Yes”

“Six what?”

“Mmm ... weeks?”

“Months.”

... *Thud*...

“I kept it for special occasions,” Carion added. He then found a small book-shaped object; he wiped off the black dust coating the outside. It was a leather-bound journal. The leather was misshapen and stitched poorly with a dull brown tone. He opened it, his eyes scanning the contents.

“What are you looking for anyway?” Hoots asked.

“This building was targeted; that’s why it sits under an excavated shaft. I assume this was related to the recent invasion.” Carion turned around, his head still in the journal. “It looks like there is more to this than a simple civil squabble,” Carion said, gesturing to the journal.

“This is a ledger, describing a series of packages being accepted to this particular location, all with dates leading up to a few days ago.”

“Is this how they got in maybe?” Hoots pondered out loud.

“That’s probably not the most concerning thing.” Carion then turned the book towards the three. The text in the journal showed runes, each of which had harsh edges and disproportionate ink use.

“This is the language of demons; in our tongue it is referred to as *hell-script*.”

CHAPTER 7

AS THEY WORK AS ONE

The moonlight was obscured behind a little cloud cover. “That weather mage better pull through,” Carion muttered, “paid top coin for a clear night.”

“Well, whatever you paid him; he got the temperature just right,” said an elf who was walking next to Carion, a playful smile painted on her freckled face. She closed her eyes and ran her fingers through her short chestnut hair.

Carion started to turn towards her. “The temperature doesn’t matter; it’s—”

The moonlight hit just right then, and he got a good look at her.

“Hmm?” She opened her violet eyes again.

“The moonlight!” Carion suddenly exclaimed and rushed off. She followed swiftly, her studded leather armour sitting snugly on her slender frame. She took large strides after Carion. They were ducking under dark branches in a dense forest, large bulbous roots blanketing the ground. Both began having to hop and jump over them. Carion wore his cloak open, revealing his own leather armour, which had floral patterns stitched into it. They neared a small clearing.

“There!” Carion pointed, looking up as the clouds began dissipating. “Oh perfect!” Carion exclaimed with a smile. He walked briskly over to a tree near the edge of the clearing, large blades of grass kissing his boots. He knelt down at the base just a metre away. The elf followed suit.

“See? When the light of the fourth full moon of the year touches a blooming oak, tendered and watered by a dryad, the root should light up!”

Carion was giddy with excitement.

Carion's smile was infectious, and the elf followed suit.

"Oh!" Carion spun around as the light of the moon radiated down and touched the roots of the tree. Which began glowing an iridescent blue.

"Okay, knife?" Carion asked, eyes transfixed.

"Knife." The elf slapped the handle of a carving knife into Carion's hand.

"We just take one; there's no need to be greedy." Carion began meticulously cutting the exact outline of one of the roots affected by the moonlight. With a slight pull, the small root came out; the blue glow remained.

"Perfect, perfect! Oh, I can't wait! I monitored this area for nearly a year! Yes!" Carion was ecstatic, lifting the pouch that was strapped to him forward over a shoulder and placing the root into a pocket.

"This is going to last years! Fantastic," he said, handing the knife back to the elf.

She smiled. "Happy to help."

"This is such a relief. Seriously, you have no idea what I can do with this root. Grind it, chew it, boil it ... it all does a different spell!"

The moonlight continued to rain down on the clearing as Carion looked into the elf's eyes, the purple within them almost glowing. She looked at him with such admiration.

"Let's ... let's just stay awhile. Have a picnic?" Carion asked.

"In the middle of the night? Did you pack one?"

"No, not really. Does it matter?" Carion said cheekily.

The elf leaned against the tree, slowly slid down, and basked in the glimmer. "Not at all," she said with her eyes closed.

"Those were better times, weren't they, Carion?"

Hoots, Elaria, and Trit were taken back.

"*Hell-script?!*" Elaria exclaimed.

"You can speak demon?" Trit asked suspiciously.

... Thud...

"I can only read it" Carion responded, flicking through the journal.

Trit looked at him, still doubtful.

“We don’t have enough tongues or mouths to speak it properly.” Carion then tossed the book to Elaria as he walked past. “It might be useful when you get to the Kai’sions.”

“What is this bound in?” Elaria asked.

“Skin.” Carion leaned over for another quick inspection. “Elf skin.”

... *Thud...*

“You really can’t run from the past, Carion.

It all just slips out; you can’t help yourself...”

“How do you know that?” Hoots asked with a quiver.

... *Thud... thud...*

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to,” Carion said as he went to look outside.

I’ve been running for so long; all it took was a slight respite for it to catch up. At least this voice in Carion’s head was his own.

The other three just looked at each other, not comfortable continuing the conversation. Elaria pocketed the journal, not preparing to look at it any further.

Hoots was concerned. *Who did we pick up along the way?*

“So, what does this mean?” Elaria asked.

“It means we should leave as soon as possible,” Trit said quickly.

“Should we go back the way we came or go outside? Which way is safer?” Hoots asked the room.

“I think neither are safe,” Elaria said. “The tunnels are covered, but who knows if that army that followed us are crawling all over them? Maybe even waiting outside?”

“And what if they’re on the streets out there? It looked clear, but still, they could be out there just out of sight.” Trit added.

"We keep moving; that's what's best," Hoots said, and Carion's ears twitched. "If we stay still, they could find us eventually, but if we are moving, like they're doing, we could lose them."

"Yeah, cool and all, but where are we going?" Trit asked.

Carion turned. "There was a south gate, right?"

"Yeah? Isn't that what we saw the other day?" Hoots asked.

"Then there should be a north gate; that's where we head."

"And how do we know they won't be waiting for us?" Trit asked, frustrated, walking to the broken window. *Maybe looking outside will distract me; I don't know!*

"If they split their forces up, there would be considerably fewer at either exit. If we wait around too much, they could mobilize more troops to both exits," Carion explained.

"And if we act now, then they will be the least organized, and have the fewest number of troops," Elaria added. Carion nodded at her.

Trit, by the light of the street, peered out. He was trying to get his bearings, but since he was a little more street savvy than the rest, he was also trying to gauge where in the city they may have ended up. Anything to stop him thinking about their immanent death. He saw a hint of some figures at the corner of the building just out of view.

"Hey, guys, I think there's other people out there," Trit whispered. The others instantly hushed up and headed over to the opening. "Over there, near the building two doors down, there was a bit of movement."

"Coming towards us?" Elaria questioned, grabbing her hilt. Trit shook his head.

"Nah, but based on the look of the street, I'd say we have our back to the castle, probably a bit further down from town square, I'd reckon"

"I'll have a look," Hoots said, climbing over some of the rubble of the collapsed building, moving towards the second story.

"Hoots, no!" Elaria exclaimed, trying to maintain a quiet voice.

"What? *You* going to sneak around dressed in rattling armour? Relax. I snuck out of my parents' place all the time." Hoots sighed and rolled her eyes at the sight of her surrogate mother disapproving of her lifestyle. "I'll check that the coast is clear, then come get you lot; calm down." Hoots disappeared from view. On the second floor, the roof was mostly caved

in, covering most of the large hole she had come from. Hoots emerged in a more exposed portion and could see the street below, paved in large cobblestones. There were several wagons and containers strewn around, with everything in a disordered state. She found the stairs that led down to the first floor; next to them was the front door. Foolishly, she stuck her head out, and looking down the street to the right, she saw a junction that went off in other directions. The houses and buildings were of varying sizes and upkeep. Some seemed prestigious and some were obvious storefronts. Business signs swung lightly in the smallest hint of a breeze, making innocent creaking sounds. To the left, she saw parts of the castle, the purple-tipped towers in view once more. Trit was right; they were close to the castle—some prime real estate. In the near distance, she began to make out some figures about two doors down, like Trit had said, but they seemed to be gathering some distance away.

Is this clear enough?

Hoots went back to the top of the stairs and back to the others.

“Coast is clear, but we will want to go right; the left looks like there’s a bunch of people just out of view, but they’re in the square doing something.”

“We’re near the castle?” Trit asked.

“Yeah, right next to the main square outside it!”

“Nailed it!” Trit threw his fist up in triumph.

“Alright, so we know which way to avoid,” Elaria said, now a little more concerned for everyone’s safety. “Let’s not stay too long. I am not getting a good feeling from this place.” She peered over at Carion who took notice of her statement.

Can I turn this sense off? Elaria hoped she could.

The four entered the street, one by one. Each of them gazed up at the magnificent towers of the castle that pierced the sky, all four arching their heads backwards to get the full view of them. Elaria looked down the street, also able to see the figures in the square.

“This side of the street, quickly,” Elaria motioned for them to come to her. The four moved to the opposite side of the street and stayed close to the wall. This gave them a more all-encompassing view of the castle and the gigantic gates that sat in front. Figures stood near the gate as well, at least two hundred meters away.

“They seem to be moving away from the gate.” Elaria tried to get a good look at them with squinted eyes, wanting to make out what exactly they were doing. From her periphery, she spied more figures, several fully clad in armour, moving inside of the building behind them. Elaria leapt back, drew her sword, and got ready to plunge it into the face of the closest enemy. As quickly as she had leaped into action, she realized the figure wasn’t moving. It was a person standing upright but with their eyes closed. Several were lined up in a row inside the building. Elaria looked through the broken window and spotted six more people in red armour, arms at their sides, and their eyes closed. The others had jumped when Elaria did, unaware of the threat.

“Are ... are they sleeping?” Trit asked, now looking through another window, just as confused.

“I ... I don’t think so, but if they aren’t, what are they doing?” Elaria answered with more questions.

“There’s more,” Carion said from another door to the right, with Hoots next to him. Elaria and Trit joined them. Carion pointed through the window.

“Not all are wearing the red armour either.”

The red armour, now fully visible, looked grainy, like sandpaper in parts. But other parts, such as on the arms, shoulders, and shins, were made of red-stained glass, in thick layers. Two of the figures in this building were wearing completely different armour, glazed on the metal surface was a purple finish; blue straps could be seen between the armoured plates.

“What are they doing? Do you know, Carion?” Trit asked.

“They look ... dormant. Brainwashed or charmed for sure, but I have rarely seen this on more than one person, let alone a few dozen,” Carion explained, concern dancing on his words.

“They are in almost every building,” Hoots said, walking past several more of the buildings to the right. Distracted, she approached the intersection.

“They are ... just standing there... There’s so many of the—” She cut herself off and slammed her body to the wall of the building. The others looked and did the same, and then they all began ducking into the nearest building through open doors and windows. Hoots slunk into the building

on the corner. Coming from around the corner were several people, four soldiers in a square formation walked around two figures, one dragging the other. The one being dragged wore similar purple armour with blue straps, but his legs were badly beaten and broken. Blood coated the cobblestones as he was dragged. The one doing the dragging was a tall gaunt figure in a wizard's robe, which were mostly plain but coloured a deep crimson except for the lining, which was a pale-coloured fur. They walked with purpose down the street, and the four adventurers all stayed as quiet as possible in their respective buildings. Hoots was at the far building and lay flat on her back. All she could see were the dormant red soldiers, or the shells of soldiers, standing over her in the building.

She tried to make every breath softer than the last. In this lighting, she kept thinking the soldier above her was moving. She kept having to convince herself that they were still, like statues. Trit, his hands over his mouth, sat next to Elaria, who still kept her hand on her hilt. The building they were in looked like a bakery. As the figures moved past, all of Elaria's hair stood on end. The uneasy feeling she'd had when she got close to the city now overwhelmed her, flooding her every nerve and consuming her mind.

Elaria grabbed the necklace from underneath her armour. It looked like an open compass, with all eight directions indicated by a different symbol. She held onto it tightly, knuckles going white. Carion was in another building, likely someone's house—due to the absence of an open storefront. His eyes glazed over as he focused, studying the footsteps of the figures moving past. The soldiers and wizard continued down the road and into the square. As they passed by, and their steps could no longer be heard, Carion got up confidently.

"They are gone," he said in a whisper. He knew the other three were listening carefully.

"Who was that?" Trit poked his head up to see the figures in the far distance going towards the gate barely in view. Elaria stood up, her eyes watery.

"El? You okay?" Hoots approached Elaria, who look terrified, her lips shuddering a little.

"I could feel it. I could *feel* the presence of something as they walked past. It was ... all-consuming. It was ... terrifying ... like my mind was being ripped from my skull and squeezed like a rag." Elaria started looking around in a panic, her mouth agape. "I sense it everywhere now, in the air, in the walls, in the ground... Oh, it is just ... *everywhere*..." Elaria held her head between her hands, unable to quell the pain that began filling her up.

Hoots held Elaria's arm, trying to calm her. Trit stayed back, not knowing what to do, as Carion strode to Elaria and moved right in front of her face. Carion placed his hands on either side of Elaria's head, bringing it down to his eye level. His hands were excessively warm, but right now, it was comforting.

"Your breath," Carion said softly. "Focus on nothing else; focus on your breathing."

Elaria tried her best not to scream as the pain pierced her body all over.

"Focus. Just your breath. In..." Carion took a large breath in. "And out..." Carion deflated his lungs. "All of it. All of the air goes out. That pain goes with it. Focus. Now." Carion's voice, as harsh as it was, sounded like a beacon of hope as the pain began to muffle out all other sounds. But Elaria listened. She breathed in. Carion did it with her. And together they breathed out, in sync. Slowly the pain subsided upon repetition, a bit of it leaving with each exhalation. Sweat coated Elaria's face, but she managed to open her eyes, and reality returned. Carion's dark yellow eyes stared back.

Carion nodded, reassuringly. "The first time feeling something like that, it's hard, but just breathe, and it will pass."

"It was so ... consuming," Elaria managed to say. "Did you not feel it?"

Carion nodded. "I'm just used to this. Numb to it now."

"Yeah, 'numb.' Let's go with that, Carion."

"You will be too, eventually. And no, I don't know what it was." Elaria looked deep into his eyes. She had never been this close to Carion. From this distance, his yellow eyes were intensely piercing. Carion backed away, Trit and Hoots had just been looking on, worried, but now Hoots, on her tiptoes, wiped a tear from Elaria's cheek. Blood returned to Elaria's face and she nodded, a little at first but then more firmly.

"You good?" Hoots asked.

"Yeah... Yes. I'm good now," Elaria said with a sigh. "Sorry."

Carion decided it was time to get back to business. "There were five of them walking, and one being dragged. Four of them were soldiers, but one of them ... walked differently. Their steps were peculiar."

"We aren't staying here," Trit said, shaking his head. "We can't; this was a *bad* idea."

"We just got here!" Hoots argued. "That person was being *dragged*, kept alive for some reason! They had been turning some of the soldiers into those ... statues! But that person, they kept *him* alive. We need to find out how they are turning them and keeping them here, and why they decided not to do it to that one."

"And," Carion added, "they still don't know we are here."

"You can't keep yourself distracted forever, Carion..."

"That square doesn't have any cover," Elaria said, standing upright and wiping sweat from her brow. "We are lucky the carts are blocking any line of sight at the moment, but how do we get close without being seen?"

"You can stay low if you need to," Hoots said to Elaria, who nodded.

"I'll just take a note from your book and *do whatever I want*," Elaria smiled. "Okay, we find out why they are here, gather whatever information we can, and then we leave. And we do it together. Let's do it quickly; if there are this many dormant soldiers, I don't want to do anything that'll wake them." Carion put his hand on her arm, and this time looked hard into her vibrant beryl eyes. Elaria stared back.

"One hell of first outing, Paladin," Carion said. Elaria swore she saw him crack a grin.

"Do we have a plan?" Trit asked. "What? You just want to walk up and say hello?" Trit kept his voice quiet but he was still a little panicked. "What have you got in that bag that can whisk us away? Magic powder? Colourful gems?"

Carion rolled his eyes. "I have carefully curated the contents of this component pouch, which took a lifetime. I may be good at what I do, but that doesn't mean there's some magical answer to every situation."

Trit sighed, and Elaria and Hoots look down in thought.

“That said, for this situation, I *may* have something,” Carion said as reached his hand into his robe, searching around for the particular pocket. He then pulled out a small, dull-blue root from his component pouch. It had clearly been cut down several times, and this looked like the last of it. Holding it on the centre of his palm, Carion presented it to Elaria.

“Chew this.”

At the front gate, the redsand soldiers stood silently around the robed figure who was hovering over another soldier in purple armour.

“OPEN. THIS. GATE.” The gaunt robed figure picked up the dragged soldier with unnatural strength and slammed him into the iron bars of the gate leading into the castle. Blood burst out of the dragged soldier’s mouth, which showed reddened teeth. One of his eyes barely flinched at the pain as it was almost completely swollen over. The gaunt figure wrapped his fingers, bony and grey, around the collar of the dragged and bloody soldier.

“You know how this opens. I know how this opens. So, make this easy for both of us and open the gate.” The robed figure’s dull-yellow teeth showed as he spat the words into the man’s face. The soldier spat back at him, blood dripping from his mouth as he did so.

Wiping the blood and flicking it angrily away, the robed figure leaned down close to the soldier’s ear.

“All I want is to get inside. That’s all I want. No more bloodshed. All your buddies can come back home. I don’t have to march them all north to your sister. You—”

“Say her name,” the soldier grunted, and blood gurgled from his mouth.

“What?” the gaunt one spat. The bloodied soldier, with his one good eye, looked his tormentor up and down.

“If you are who you look like you are, *say her name.*”

He recoiled, dropping the now-frail soldier, who collapsed under the weight of his metal armour, which clanged against the cobblestones as it pulled him to the ground. He laughed up at the robed figure. “It’s you, isn’t it?! How long has it been? Gareth went after you, took our key to stop you. He didn’t believe it either.” The bloodied soldier coughed up blood, which splattered against the stone. “Gareth used it didn’t he? Got something to

slow you down I bet, I mean, why would you be back? You think that since he used our key, it would return to the vault, huh? No matter what you try, you'll always be denied it, one way or another, it'll never be yours." He paused, catching his breath. "And you couldn't get the key in Dizstrum either, huh? Got so pissed you had to kill them all? How'd that turn out for ya, huh? Came *crawling* back. Just a child wanting a toy he's too immature to have."

The gaunt one ignored him and took out a scroll from a small pouch, unravelling it, shaking with rage. Inscriptions were scrawled all over it in a majestic style, with circular symbols and runes around the edges of the paper.

"This spell scroll was in your armoury. Do you know what it is?" He looked down at him with a quizzical look on his face. The soldier scoffed at him but stayed tight-lipped.

"One of my favourite spells. I always admired its ... simplicity. I'd like you to guess what it is," the gaunt figure continued.

"Is it '*how to become a prick*'? Because you got that down, mate." The bloodied soldier cackled. The gaunt figure's expression didn't change. "Are you really relying on a scroll for your magic? Wow, it really isn't you is it Kor? Come on, remove that guise and show me your real face. Or maybe whatever wears your skin is too much of a chicken shit to admit Gareth took your lucky Kor down ... Well maybe you don't know, but I am not at the seat of power. I can't open it."

"You know, part of me knew that," the gaunt figure said through a sinister grin. He began reading the scroll. The parchment began to glow, and as the final words of the incantation were read, the scroll disintegrated into liquid dust. The armour of the bloodied soldier began to glow, brighter and brighter as heat began radiating from it. The soldier let out an almighty scream as the intense pain of his superheated armour engulfed him. His skin started blistering and boiling, and he continued to scream out in absolute terror. The other soldiers, like statues, remained stationary around him, and the gaunt figure continued to stare at him as he rolled and writhed around in his red-hot metal armour. The heat became too much, and the man's body ignited in yellow flame inside his armoured shell. His screams turned from a howling wail to a gargling scream, and

finally to a soft whistle as the last bits of air were consumed in unholy fire, his body now a mound of smouldering scraps and metal. The gaunt figure paused a little, then looked up from the heap.

“Did you enjoy that little display? I did it just for you and your friends, though I would have thought the demon-spawn would have preferred to witness this up close.” The gaunt figure turned and looked at nothing, its only view the square in front of the castle, but his purple eyes stared right where he wanted them to be. A sinister smirk grew on his face, splitting his face from ear to ear.

Elaria, wide-eyed, stared right into the purple eyes of the gaunt figure. She had walked up so quietly.

Was I not quiet enough? No, that isn't it. There was no way he could have been suspicious, but he's looking right at me, no hesitation or anything.

He knew she was there, instantly. Hoots and Trit watched as Carion twirled his fingers around like he was juggling a coin between them. He was focused on his spell, his face unmoved and stoic.

As long as she keeps chewing...

The spell had allowed Elaria to easily wander right through the square toward the commotion, invisible and silent. There was no way this simple-looking wizard could detect her that effortlessly. Elaria shifted on the balls of her feet to one side and then the other, and the gaunt figure's eyes followed her.

Oh, that's really not good.

Elaria could feel the unease overwhelm her once more. She breathed in hard through her nostrils, and out through her mouth, as she grabbed the hilt of her sword. With the draw, the spells focused on her ended. The dormant guards now turned towards her. Carion looked up, eyes wide, and burst from the side street. Trit and Hoots followed. The gaunt figure turned his gaze to them, his grin still painted on. Elaria, shield and sword at the ready, was preparing to strike. Carion pulled up his right sleeve, which revealed a dark oak twig embedded and stitched into the flesh of his forearm. With a stroke of the twig, blue lightning leapt from it, and the gaunt figure's grin turned into a grimace as the lightning danced through the air toward him. Hoots slid across the ground. With her arms outstretched, she made circular motions with them, and light-yellow hands

magically appeared and wrapped themselves around the nearest guard's weapon, causing them to fumble.

Elaria made a mighty swing and decapitated the distracted guard instantly; his head flew off in another direction. Carion's lightning contacted the gaunt figure, who erupted in radiant blue light. He completely disappeared. Carion's lightning then contacted the castle gate and an invisible barrier dissipated the lighting with an audible crackle. Three of them rushed forward, while Trit stood back and simply clutched his lute strap lightly, watching nervously. Trit was no fighter or warrior, nor was he versed in magic. He felt useless. Trit saw Elaria strike the helmet of one of the soldiers that wasn't incapacitated and it flew off, skidding lightly across the ground. His eyes were red and teeth bare. But Trit recognized him.

"He's ... from the camp..." Trit said to himself.

Hoots ran up to the burnt corpse; the armour was still giving off a soft heat as the two flanking guards approached. Hoots spied a small broach clutched in the charred hand of the dead body. Hoots pried it out, grabbed it, and as she looked up, the two guards were upon her. As a sword was drawn by one, about to swing down on her, Elaria stepped in, blocking the strike with her shield. She gave the soldier a mighty shove, and the two locked into battle. The other was approaching as well, but Carion threw out a thorny vine, as a whip materialized from within his cloak. It wrapped around the arm of the other soldier as he attempted to draw his sword on Hoots. The soldier grimaced at Carion, but seeing an opening, Hoots launched up, and with a fury-filled strike, she slammed her fist into his helmet, which buckled at the force. The guard stumbled back as Hoots grabbed her injured hand.

I'll worry about that later, she thought, knowing it was broken.

As Trit was about to come to her aid, somehow, from across the square he spied a soft red glow start within the surrounding buildings. The shuffle of sabatons could be heard.

"Guys! GUYS! We gotta leave. NOW!" Trit yelled out.

Carion looked up as his whip returned to him. With a flick, it ceased to exist, bursting into a small wisp of blackened leaves.

On her shield and armour, Elaria was taking full swings from a two-handed great sword, which loudly sounded each time it connected. Hoots

weaved and dodged out of the way as the other soldier swung widely at her, from behind his own shield. Trit and Carion looked at them both. Carion lined up the wand in his arm, aiming at the soldiers.

“Help Hoots!” Trit wailed.

Carion was about to let loose on the soldier attacking Hoots, when he saw the one Elaria was fighting wind up for a blow that would clearly connect. Quickly, he launched his arcane lighting at them. It connected, and the now-off-balance soldier was no longer a match for Elaria. She easily took advantage and struck him under the arm. The crippled soldier fell, and Elaria brought her sword down against his neck, finishing him.

Hoots took the full force of her attacker’s longsword, giving her a nasty and bloody cut across the abdomen. She gritted her teeth and looking up at the soldier, who took a step toward her. Trit lunged forward, shoving him. The soldier stumbled slightly, looking at Trit in surprise. Trit looked equally surprised. The red glow in the soldier’s eyes dimmed for a moment, and a cracked and shallow voice came from inside the helmet.

“You ... played such nice music...”

Trit began to recognize the voice as another patron from last night. Hoots tried to stand, but her wound was worse than she had expected. She winced and struggled to maintain balance. Elaria threw herself over Hoots, and her sword punctured the soldier’s neck. He promptly collapsed in front of Hoots. Elaria moved to her side to help her up.

“The main street there!” Carion pointed to a large cobblestone street to the west. “We make north. Hurry.” At that, they saw a torrent of soldiers beginning to pour from the side street they had come from. They slowly trudged towards them, their glowing eyes like beacons from within their helmets.

The four quickly crossed the courtyard and got to the main road, which stretched across the entire city. Behind them was the south gate they had approached the other day. Redsands soldiers were pouring onto the street in front of it, all eyes on the four of them. Hoots held her wound tightly and leaned against Elaria.

“Don’t you dare carry me,” Hoots said through gritted teeth.

At the other end was the north gate; they could just make it out in the distance. Carion’s head was on a swivel; he spun around, assessing the

situation. He then hastily grabbed a small yellow gem from his robe, his eyes fixed on the north gate.

Elaria held her sword out, as the soldiers were trudging closer and closer to them.

“What now?” Elaria asked the group.

“Just ... hold them off! Give me a moment!” Carion then grabbed Trit, his mouth agape at the impending doom around them, his skin losing colour. Carion grabbed his hands and placed the small round yellow gem into it, then pushed both of Trit’s hands together and spun him so he faced the far-off north gate.

“You see that gate, or whatever it is, right?” Carion asked, pinning Trit in place.

“Get behind me, Hoots.” Elaria shuffled the wounded Hoots behind her as she braced for the soldiers.

“Y-Yeah, I see it, it’s wooden?” Trit stuttered.

“Squeeze that gem; squeeze it tight. Now, close your eyes,” Carion instructed.

“Close my ey—”

“Do it!”

“Okay!”

“Alright, now imagine the gate, imagine exactly how it looks.” Still talking, Carion swung around and launched his lightning twice at the group surrounding them. Elaria began swiping at them as well, shuffling backwards closer to Trit and Carion.

“Imagine how it looks, how it smells... What does the wood *feel* like? What does the stone feel like on your fingers?”

“... Oh... Oh! I can feel it...” Trit answered.

Carion launched more lighting at the crowd, fending them off only slightly. Elaria and Hoots were now back-to-back with Carion and Trit. The soldiers surrounded them.

“Oh wow! It’s like I’m *right there*,” Trit said with a smile.

The soldiers were upon them, several had their weapons up and about to strike down on them all. Elaria held her shield up, knowing that it was never going to be enough against so many.

Carion wrapped his tail around Hoots' arm, put one hand on Elaria, and the other on Trit.

"Pineapple," Carion muttered.

The four of them were launched towards the north gate instantly, feeling the wind rush by them and their hair swept back with it. Trit opened his eyes to see the north gate, a closed drawbridge, a few centimetres from his face.

"Ah! The hell?!" Trit wailed.

Elaria had braced herself against a strike but lowered her shield to see an empty street in front of them. She then had a sudden urge. She threw her sword down and immediately threw up onto the cobblestone.

Hoots looked around in amazement. "Where are we?"

Elaria had her hands on her knees and continued to dry heave.

"Well ... ah, we were there, and now ... now we are here," Trit said, pointing to the large wooden drawbridge.

Carion opened Trit's hands and grabbed the yellow gem, holding it aloft and inspecting it. As soon as it was exposed to the light, the once transparent yellow gem turned cloudy and crumbled into dust, which was carried off with the slight breeze.

"Four weeks ... four damn weeks in that stinking desert crystalizing..." Carion muttered as he walked over to a wooden door next to the drawbridge.

"Am ... am I wizard now?" Trit asked.

"No. I made that idiot proof, and you, the idiot, proved that." Carion looked over to Elaria, who was collecting herself. "There were complaints of nausea though."

Without reaching within his component pouch, Carion rotated his hands around one another before throwing them open at the door. A sprawl of matted vines appeared in a blink over the door. Carion clenched his fists again, and the vines contracted violently. The door creaked briefly before succumbing to the tension and burst apart. A small trickle of crimson blood came from the corner of Carion's mouth, and some from his ear.

There ... there wasn't a component for that spell, Hoots thought before turning back around. *Just like that whip he summoned earlier. Oh shit, this hurts...*

"There's more; they are still coming!" Hoots then said. She pointed at the side streets nearby; more possessed soldiers poured forth, all eyes fixed on them.

"There'll be a pulley wheel at the top, Elaria. Go," Carion demanded as the door collapsed in a heap.

Elaria wiped her mouth, picked her sword up off the ground, and sheathed it.

"Trit, come on, with me," Elaria said, and the two rushed up the stairs within the gated wall.

"You are going to have to 'let out' whatever made you run away when you became a sorcerer," Carion said, walking over to Hoots.

Hoots looked down at her side. As she lifted her hand, she saw blood soaking it. She looked up to see Carion looking down at her, one of his eyes bloodshot and a small red droplet running down his cheek.

"Your eye," Hoots muttered.

Carion quickly wiped it and inspected his finger.

"It's nothing."

"No, it's not."

"Now, here's what's going to happen—"

"I'm not reliving that! I can't!" Hoots wailed.

"Yes, you can Hoots. You are choosing not to, and you can choose to use it now. You are a sorcerer, are you not?"

"Yeah"

"And if you don't embrace that now, we are going to die."

Hoots' pulse quickened.

"Now, I'm going to make a very educated guess. It was fire."

"Yeah"

"Was it a big outburst? Like a line of fire?"

"Yeah... Really? You know that?"

I don't have time for this... “A sorcerer as spontaneous and curious as you, and as big a pain in my tail, would've never been another element. Alright. Aim down the street.”

More soldiers could be seen now, closing in on them.

“I-I can't aim it,” Hoots stuttered.

I really don't have time for this! “Just ... just push it forward, down the street. I'll get the sides streets.”

“How? How does it just come out?”

Carion had both arms outstretched to either side of them.

Hoots frowned. *He's doing another spell without components, isn't he?*

Carion tried to help her. “Emotion, smell, thoughts, sights, sounds... What was happening leading up to the moment when your fire first revealed itself? What happened during the event? What happened directly afterwards? The memory is there; use it. It is either that or death. I for one am not dying before I enter that immortal city, and I may not know you completely, but I know that, despite that pain and anguish you felt at that event, despite your reckless ways, despite running into danger, you...”

Hoots looked over her shoulder to Carion, her eyes large and welling up.

“You don't want to die, or else you would have jumped off that ferry yourself!”

Hoots looked back to the soldiers, with their red eyes, their gritting teeth, all their muscles tight with pulsating veins across their stretched skin. It was frightening, but at least she could look at it, understand it, unlike that night when she had learned about herself. Hoots thought back to that moment—that moment she became a sorcerer on that dreaded night. It was a memory she had pushed down and dared not revisit. She had run away from so much, but even her memories would follow her. Carion was right, though. She had to. She didn't want to die. That's not who she was. Hoots thought back to that night and did exactly as Carion instructed, asking herself what it had been like in her room: the smell of damp washing, the sound of the swamp nearby, the rustle of dishes in the other room. Suddenly an overwhelming heat had erupted over her, all over her skin...

What's wrong with me? She had thought desperately. *Why am I glowing? I'm so hot! Ah I'm so hot! Don't come in here! No no no... NO!*

Those thoughts filled her once more now, and once more, the fire followed them.

A torrent of flames erupted from within her, shooting out in front of her in a sweeping cone from her hands. She shook and sobbed as the fire cascaded from her. The soldiers that weren't engulfed jumped back. The firestorm Hoots had created encompassed the entire width of the street.

Meanwhile, Carion, with both arms outstretched, made sweeping motions with his hands. He then distorted his hands, knuckles almost bending backwards and in unnatural directions. With this he let out an arcane phrase before lifting his hands up slowly. The cobblestone of the streets cracked and splintered. Small plant shoots crawled out of the gaps between stones. Carion then snapped his fingers flat and parallel to the ground. At this motion, the small shoots exploded out, shooting three meters straight up, and large thick thorns then pierced outward through the wide stems, as they became fat and hardy. The wall of thorns covered the sides of the gate now, beside Hoots. With a wall of thorns at their sides, and fire behind, they were temporarily safe from harm. Carion looked at Hoots, both his eyes now full of blood that leaked down his cheeks. He coughed and a large chunk of tissue splattered the ground in front of him. Hoots then collapsed to the ground; hands still out in front of her though the flames had died. Carion picked her up and placed her on her feet. She was still conscious and looked around. The red eyes still glowed all around them, and the soldiers continued their pursuit. On the side streets, they hacked and slashed violently at the thorns, and in front, the soldiers pressed through the smoke.

Above the drawbridge, Trit and Elaria had made it to the top, and saw a large wooden pulley wheel.

"There!" Trit pointed. He grabbed the handles and began trying to turn it but slid backwards, unable to make it budge. Elaria looked out over the street and saw Hoots and Carion side by side; a large cone-shaped scorched mark scarred the street in front of them, and there was thorny brush to their sides, but soldiers were still swarming over everything else.

I'm glad he's with us!

Looking in front, Elaria saw more pursuers on the wall. She looked to Trit, still trying to turn the wheel. With her superior strength, Elaria gave

it a mighty push and the wheel started turning with a groan. The sound of chains clanging, and rolling could be heard as she turned the wheel. The large wooden drawbridge opened outwards over a small bare river running parallel to the wall, Hoots and Carion turned at the sound to see the top of it descending slowly. The last of the daylight shone down upon them. They both turned back to the soldiers, now rushing across the scorched ground towards them. The drawbridge behind them slammed down, open fully now and suspended outward as its chains reached their end, and Trit and Elaria felt a sharp clicking noise, as it locked into place. Looking up to the north, a large mountain range with lush greenery and farmland was now in their immediate view on the far side of the wall.

Looking back, Elaria saw thousands of soldiers in the street. The soldiers on the wall were now descending on her and Trit. As she turned to go back down the stairway they'd run up, a redsand soldier burst out, knives in both hands. She swiped at Elaria ferociously and with her full strength. Her arms flailed around dangerously as she growled at them. Trit stood behind Elaria, looking under her arm at the rage-infused woman. The two backed up but there was little room up there, on the wall above the gate, and they were already at the stone ramparts. Trit looked behind him and down to the dry riverbed on the exterior side of the wall. There was only dirt and patchy grass to catch their fall beyond it.

Carion and Hoots saw the exit as they looked over their shoulders. The fire and thorns had given them time, but Carion was running low on steam as blood leaked from him, and Hoots was still bleeding out from her wound. They both started running onto the thick wooden bridge, thudding with each step.

Elaria saw them making their escape below them, and over her shoulder, asked, "Do you trust me, Trit?"

Trit looked at her, his eyes wide with fear, but the look of Elaria's kind azure eyes and ever-familiar blotchy birthmark gave him a sweet release from the stress of looming danger.

"Yeah, yeah. I trust you. Kinda have to." He shrugged, and Elaria gave him a determined and trustworthy smile. She grabbed her shield and gave it to Trit and then wrapped one arm around him, holding him under his arms. Trit grasped the surprisingly large shield close with two hands. Just

as the possessed soldier woman lunged at them, Elaria drew her sword and made a shallow jump backwards off the side of the wall, twisting and turning to face the wall as she fell. Trit naturally gave out a pitiful wail, and felt his stomach lifting as they both entered a freefall. As quickly as she jumped, Elaria slammed her sword against the wall. It rang with the spark of lightning as it contacted the stone, and as Elaria yelled out her own incantation, a thunderous noise erupted from the point of impact, letting out a deafening sound that shook the leaves and grass nearby. At that instant, the two rocketed horizontally, clearing the riverbed. Elaria released Trit, who was still holding the shield, and he bounced roughly across the ground, his head whipping back and forth as he took the hard landing. Elaria rag-dolled close by, and her sword flew from her grip but landed safely nearby. They both coughed and sputtered from the winding they'd received. Elaria rolled to one side, half her body stiff with pain. Trit rose but his body shook a little. They were both beyond the edge of the descended drawbridge. Looking up, they saw Hoots and Carion running down it.

As Hoots ran ahead to meet the two daredevils, Carion stopped at the edge of the bridge. He turned his head, looking back over his shoulder. He had anticipated the soldiers being close behind, charred but charging towards them as the four made their escape. He was expecting a thunderous stampede. But they would've heard this against the wooden bridge. As Carion turned, he saw the soldiers, right at the edge of the city, lined shoulder to shoulder, looking at the four companions. Hoots, not hearing Carion at her side, turned back as well, the sight stopping her in her tracks near Trit and Elaria. The four witnessed the sun setting on the city, falling behind the spires to the east, and as it did, more figures rose, joining the others, lining the wall and gate exit, and staring down at them. Soon the whole wall was filled with soldiers staring unnervingly at them.

The four companions, breathing heavily, bruised, battered, and spent, looked at the occupied city. As it was encased in darkness, all they could see now was an ocean of unblinking, glowing red eyes, staring back at them.



CHAPTER 8



AS THEY CONTINUE NORTH

“Why even bother?”

“Waste of time”

Two humanoids stood, arms crossed, on a stone balcony of a damp and dimly lit cavern. The two were covered head to tail in dull-green scales. Instead of hair, they had frills that extended in a straight line over the tops of their heads, from front to back. The frills had red spines, with a soft light-pink membrane connecting them. Both humanoids had differing frill arrangements, with slight differences in colouration. They both had dark yellow eyes with slits for pupils, a snout for a nose, and a mouth with rows of small sharp teeth. They wore only tattered shorts and straps for a hooked sword to hang from. The two looked over a small cavern, where another humanoid, similar but older—another lizard-kin, whose scales had darkened with age—was watching over a small gnome: Hoots.

“Bringing in a pale skin?” said one of the younger lizard-kin. “What was he thinking?”

“Oh, it’s just a pet,” the other one answered. “Probably bored and senile and wants something to do.”

“Oh, absolutely, but he gets the whole training hall? Sheesh.”

“Yeah. but what if someone comes looking for the pale skin? Those things are usually part of some kind of brood.”

They spoke a language of harsh clicks and guttural groans. From the dark of the balcony entrance came another Lizard-kin then, taller and wearing a vest with coloured feathers covering its surface.

“Do not talk ill of Kar-Zuul; he watched your father’s hatch. Show him some respect.”

The other two bolted upright at the taller one’s presence.

“With all due respect, he may be the clan’s druid but training a pale skin? *Training* a pale skin? Not just allowing it to live? You are okay with this?”

The taller one looked over to Hoots and the older lizard-kin. Hoots was being shown how to deliver a proper punch, the older one putting on a demonstration with a flurry of strikes into the air. The area was a reasonably sized cavern, about four hundred metres in diameter. Devoid of natural light, it was dimly lit with fluorescent glowing algae that covered the walls. Hoots watched with a lowered head as Kar-Zuul finished his demonstration.

“Kar-Zuul has a plan for the pale skin; his intentions are beyond your understanding. I trust him, and so should you.”

“But sir...” one of the two started.

“If you do not like the view, change it and move on,” the taller one commanded.

The two eyed him but slunk off in the other direction, muttering to themselves. The tall one watched as Kar-Zuul approached Hoots, speaking in a broken variation of the universal language.

“Now, throw fist.”

As Hoots wound up her fist, her whole shoulder moved back, and as she threw her clenched fist forward, her whole body shifted off-balance, and she stumbled a little.

“Good,” Kar-Zuul said, his hands behind his back. His frills were more purple than the others. He wore a leather vest covered in floral patterns that had been meticulously hand-stitched.

“Good? I almost fell over?!” Hoots wailed.

“Now you know what bad fist is like, hatchling,” Kar-Zuul stated. He stood next to her, facing the same direction. “A fist does not start from up high. That is weak; that is too easy seen. True strength begins with control of body.” Kar-Zuul then stood in a small lunge position. “Fist starts from feet; strength moves up to hip, up into body, and out from fist.” He moved his hand slowly from his waist over the surface of his body, over his sternum, and finally out front, only making a balled fist right at the end.

“Okay, cool. I punch the air. You said this was going to...” Hoots started to well up. “You said this could help me control what happened.”

“To control your power, hatchling, you must control the body. A poor frame cannot support a strong interior.” Kar-Zuul continued. “Train your body, and the mind will follow.”

Hoots sniffed and blinked away some tears. “Alright, whatever. So ... what? It comes up? Like from here?” Hoots tried to mimic Kar-Zuul’s previous movements.

“Yes, good, relax shoulder. Good, hatchling.”

The training continued, Kar-Zuul helped Hoots learn a basic forward strike. She learned quickly, and soon all the thoughts of her sorcerer powers dissipated. Suddenly, her thoughts were becoming clearer, like a soft breeze pushing away grey clouds.

The taller lizard-kin watched on with curious eyes.

“This one will be strong. This one will do nicely.”



With a white glow, Elaria pushed her hands to Hoots’ side. Hoots grimaced as she lay on her back, dealing with the healing magic Elaria had to offer. Light illuminated the trees surrounding them; darkness had fallen quickly and the four had found a small refuge in a cluster of trees off the northern road. The forest was tightly packed, and the four were forced into close quarters. Large roots jutted out of the ground, making the surface uneven and uncomfortable. Trit was pacing. His heart was still racing from the earlier events, and his feet barely missed Hoots on the ground. Carion was leaning against a tree, staring blankly off into the night.

“So, what was all that? What were they all? Why were they all... Just why?!” Trit spat the words out in between erratic thoughts.

“This’ll heal up by morning, Hoots. Just rest for now, and we’ll be in Palmy tomorrow afternoon. I’d also avoid using that hand. I might be able to help the healing process, but bones can still take some time.” Elaria ignored Trit for the moment and comforted Hoots. Hoots wasn’t looking too pale, but she was obviously beat.

“Do you get paid less for damaged goods?” Hoots chuckled with a weakened breath.

“I always have your back. You are getting there in one piece, even if you keep trying to prevent that,” Elaria said, finishing up her healing magic. The two shared a smile as Hoots settled for sleep on the rough ground. Elaria stood upright.

“These roots aren’t going to be comfortable for you unfortunately,” Elaria said, trying to spy a clearer area, but the ground was covered. Carion looked over, lifting his large cloak over his horned head. It was thick and shaped like a poncho with a hood. For the first time, the three got a look of Carion beneath his outer garment. He was slender and fit snugly into his leather armour. The amour’s design was simple, but the shapes stitched into it caught Hoots’ attention as she looked up. Floral patterns and trees were carefully stitched into the leather, arranged beautifully over the basic armour. He had a satchel, with a single strap going across his body; the satchel was plain and weathered with a place for a small buckle that had clearly broken off. Carion passed his cloak to Elaria.

“This should make it comfortable enough,” Carion muttered before turning back to solemnly lean against the same tree. Hoots peered at the armour and its composition a while longer as Elaria lay out the cloak, and shuffled Hoots upon it, wincing as she moved. The wound was still a little raw.

I’ve ... I’ve seen those designs before, Hoots thought. *Where was it...?*

“We should all rest,” Elaria said. “Today didn’t go as planned—”

“Planned? Did we *have* a plan?” Trit threw his hands into the air.

“Calm down, Trit,” she said calmly.

“Does anyone *ever* calm down whenever *anyone* says that?!” Trit asked with a raised voice. Elaria gave Trit a hard look. While still breathing heavily, Trit looked at her and stopped pacing.

“So, what did we see? I’m trying to wrap my head around it. He looked *right at you*, even though you were supposed to be invisible ... and why aren’t they all crusading after us right now? Is the occupation even a thing or is everyone *else* brainwashed? I mean wha—”

“Okay, Trit, listen,” Elaria said. Trit was still looking around frantically, breathing hard. “Trit, listen!” Elaria’s raised voice rang loud, and even

Carion looked back at the confrontation. As quickly as she had yelled, Elaria returned to her calm self.

“None of us know what we saw, and I don’t think we know all of what is going on here. We got out of there alive, and together, and that’s what matters. Let’s rest. We need to reach Palmy tomorrow, safely and still together. So, lie down and get some rest. There’s still some room on the cloak. With clear minds, we can sort this out tomorrow, alright?” As Elaria finished, the stillness of the night could be felt for the first time since they’d set up camp. Trit nodded. His nerves still made him jittery, but he said nothing and lay close to Hoots, who was still thinking.

I do know where those are from! A wizard? Sure, but no wizard can manipulate nature like that, and a wizard would not have received armour like that... Her thoughts finally coalesced.

“Well, there’s one thing we definitely learned today,” she said, surprising everyone who had expected her to be drifting to sleep by now. She lifted a finger and pointed to Carion, who was still staring off into the near distance.

“That one’s a *druid*.” Hoots smiled before rolling over. “I bet he could turn into a cat and everything.”

Carion turned his head a little, knowing she had pointed to him.

*“She knows a druid when she sees one, huh, Carion?
That is intriguing...”*

So what?

“The sorcerer knows far too much...”

She doesn’t know me; she doesn’t know who I was...

“You used to have a saying about sorcerer’s...”

Drop it.

“Kill them while they’re young!”

He turned back to look deep into the woods. Elaria approached him then, and together, they stared out amongst the trees.

"You should rest up too. I can take first watch if you don't want it," Elaria said, adjusting her eyes to the blackness of the night.

As her eyes altered to the monochromatic palette, she spied a figure in the far-off trees, only just able to spy it from between the trunks from the position where Carion stood; it was standing and facing them. She readjusted her stance, suspecting it to be a threat.

"Relax," Carion muttered.

"Are they following us?" Elaria leaned in with a whisper. Carion shook his head.

"It isn't them."

Elaria looked back at the figure, trying to make out any features. The figure had a deer skull for a head and protruding from it was a pair of large seven-pointed antlers. The whiteness of the skull was easiest to make out. It wore thick brush as a robe, covering it from the neck down. The figure stood unmoving, and without eyes, it was difficult to tell where it was looking, but Elaria could feel it looking at her only for a brief moment before its gaze drifted.

"What is it?" Elaria questioned.

"The fey tend to keep a close watch on me when they can," Carion answered.

"What for? Because you're a druid?"

Carion peered down at the stitching on his armour, at how carefully detailed it was.

"Oh, I'm catching up, 'Carion.' Your past is always here..."

"Was," Carion said quickly and bluntly. He had heard Hoots' accusation earlier and was displeased about having more revealed about himself than he wanted.

"I *was* a druid. I guess I still am but..." He refolded his arms, still staring off into the trees.

... *Thud...*

“A wizard *and* a druid. I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Elaria added.

“I’m the only one I know of.”

“It’s good to know they keep a watch on you, even still,” Elaria added, trying to reassure Carion.

“They aren’t looking *out for me*; they are keeping an eye *on* me. Using druid magic...” Carion lifted his fingers. The blood he’d wiped from his face when he’d summoned the thorns had since dried. He rubbed his fingers together and flicked some off. “Well, when you are a rejected druid, the magical forces have to come from somewhere. My little display today has alerted them to my whereabouts.”

Elaria turned to him with a quizzical look. She didn’t know much about druids, but she knew they were well connected to nature and the fey. That was where their magic came from.

A ‘rejected’ druid... Is this why he came here? Probably why he was so keen to stick around...

“They just want to see if I’m still alive,” Carion said, straightening his back and heading toward the others, huddled close on the ground. “Just more vultures wanting to pick at what’ll be left of me,” Carion said. Elaria grabbed his arm before he left.

“Do I need to be careful of them? I mean, do *we* need to be careful of them? The least we can do is make sure they won’t take you before you are accepted to Mysrik,” Elaria said with both concern and reassurance in her eyes.

“Of all things that could be after me, the fey are the least of your worries,” Carion said. Elaria looked back to the figure. It stared back briefly, but then, without making a sound or discernible movement, it slowly slid out of view behind a tree and disappeared into the night.

“Eurgh! I am so hungry!” Hoots exclaimed; the sound of a rumbling stomach filled the frigid air of the morning.

“Hoots, you’ve just got to deal with it until we get to Palmy,” Elaria said, putting her armour on once again.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Trit said, nodding enthusiastically. “I hear it is a bountiful farming town! They’ll have some food.” His stomach groaned at

the thought. Hoots threw her hand up to her forehead and pretended to faint, falling back onto Trit, who was sitting up, slowly waking.

"I am so weak! You'll have to carry me! Oooh!"

"Get off!" He chuckled. "I ain't carrying you! You got a good sleep at least. You kick! And violently! I got pummelled!" Trit pushed her off onto the ground. Hoots stood up and assumed a fighting stance.

"I must always be ready. Training does not stop when I'm unconscious," Hoots said in the most serious voice she could manage before laughing loudly. Trit joined in. Elaria smiled a little. She was glad that spirits were up despite the questionable success they'd had yesterday. Carion rose at the sound of the younger ones messing about. Elaria saw this and moved close to him.

"Sorry I didn't wake you with anything this morning; you were very sound asleep. You almost looked peaceful, and I thought you may have needed it. We are heading off to Palmy, and we're a little low on supplies." Elaria continued to smile. The fact that Carion was waking up was enough to brighten her morning. Carion blinked himself awake.

He paused, listening for a moment. *Really? No 'thud'? Nothing? A nice change.*

He didn't respond to Elaria but stood up and brushed himself off. He rustled around in his component pouch and picked something out. It was a sprig of mistletoe. He uttered some soft words and swirled his other hand around the small branch. This brought the attention of Hoots and Trit, who had been busy pushing each other over. As they watched, several purple berries began developing on the mistletoe, and as Carion whirled his hands more, the berries became full and juicy. He then stopped and plucked them, passing each around.

"One berry?" Hoots said with her hand flat as she inspected the purple berry with disappointment.

"Ah ... aren't these poisonous?" Trit said inspecting it.

"The spell renders them safe. This is so I don't have to hear your stomach all day," Carion said, plucking his own before returning the mistletoe to his bag.

"Oh! This is a druid spell!" Trit said, flicking out a finger towards Carion, "because you're a druid!" Trit continued with a large smile and

threw the berry into his mouth, biting down hard so that all the juices were squeezed out and into his mouth. He then instantly scrunched his face up. Hoots and Elaria watched on.

“It ... it’s so sour!” Trit exclaimed, continuing to chew.

Carion shrugged a little. “Unpleasant, but it’ll sustain you all day.” He threw his into his own mouth, and his expression didn’t change as he turned to tidy himself up. He kept his head back, feeling blood begin to pool into his left eye. He managed to blink it away before anyone saw. The others followed suit, eating their berries and squinting at the sour taste.

The party tidied themselves up and gathered their belongings. As Elaria had said, they were traveling lighter after the escape. They headed back to the path; they had only set up camp one hundred metres from the road. Together, they continued north. Their pace lacked vigour, and they were often quiet, listening for anything from behind them, but there were only the soft chirps of birds and the rustle of leaves in the breeze. For several hours, they continued through the dense forest on a well-worn road, not seeing anybody, or even any sign of humanity. Then they reached the edge of the forest; the trees weren’t as close together, and the plains rolled out in front of them. Farmland stretched out in all directions. To the east, the mountain spires continued their march north. To the west, the expanse of the farmland continued, with more forest off in the distance. The north had a mountain range erupting out of the plains just at the horizon. A small collection of buildings could be seen in the distance.

“That Palmy?” Trit asked out loud.

“I’d hope so,” Elaria said, looking around at the misfits she was traveling with. They had been silent for some time, but they weren’t downtrodden. Healthy and alive, they had simply experienced some intense things and were still processing them. The party continued north, passing by lush green fields of both exotic and familiar plants: wheat, some canola, some fields of orchids, and exotic fruits. There were some root vegetables in tightly packed rows and others fields full of healthy and well-looking-after livestock. The road, still very worn, was straight, and the flat fertile land in the expanse on either side gave them an idea of the size of the western province of the isles of Ma-Ural. The lands here were unnaturally

fertile, unnaturally well kept, and disturbingly lush. There were enough crops being produced here to fuel several countries. No other place on the natural plane could sustain such a large variety of life and vegetation. They were approaching the city of Palmy, which was getting larger and larger the closer they got.

Carion's mind was racing, full of fear and doubt. *You can't keep this up. You can't travel with them. You can't get involved. They'll find out. You are you, after all.*

... *Thud* ...

"And you

... *Thud*...

will always

... *Thud*...

be 'you'

... *Thud*...

'Carion'!"

"Carion, a word?" Elaria slowed her pace, matching Carion's as he lagged behind. Carion looked up at her with his characteristic sombre look. He had been simply watching his feet move, one after the other, not paying any mind to the surroundings when he could avoid it. He acknowledged Elaria as she walked close.

"I want to get your opinion on what we saw back in Alitiar," she said. "I have very little experience out in the world, as you know, and I thought you might have something to share." Elaria was keeping her voice low, so as to not allow Trit and Hoots to listen in. The two had started talking to

each other, making jokes of various things, like the way they walked or the way they pronounced things.

"Alright," Carion said, disinterested.

"For starters, what were those people back there? They were possessed, you say?" Elaria asked, starting through her mental checklist of questions.

"Yes, they seemed to be possessed, brainwashed, or charmed. Any of those would fit."

"Seemed?"

"Brainwashing and possession aren't easy feats. I have seen both conducted before but not on such a large number of people. Even the most powerful lichs I know would struggle with several dozen, let alone several thousand." Carion said this simply, like he was reciting from a textbook, like he was explaining information to a child.

"You know lichs?!" Elaria exclaimed, careful not to be loud enough to disrupt the inane conversation of the leading two, who continued to giggle as they threw their arms in the air comically. Carion looked up at Elaria with a straight face, naturally uncharismatic but unimpressed that she couldn't figure that out herself. Liches were powerful spellcasters who had undergone horrific rituals to become undead. Of course, he knew them.

"See? Run or hide, you will always be you."

She saw the look. "Right. Sorry. Go on," Elaria said, looking down at her feet so she could focus on what Carion was saying.

"The place was desecrated, or at least cursed. I believe that's what you and I were getting a sense of, so I imagine whatever possession the person, or creature, conducted was amplified. I do not know the specifics, but it only amplified its potential to the city limits, which is why they didn't leave to come after us."

"They couldn't, or they were told not to?" Elaria questioned.

"Unsure."

"And you've never seen this before?" Elaria pressed.

"Like I said, not on this scale," Carion confirmed.

"And that journal you found. Any idea?"

"Whatever is possessing them needed to keep track of things. It is

organized and likely uses its natural writing, which was hell-script. Probably helps that not many commoners can read it.”

“This brings me to my next point. Who was that person we saw? You think he’s the one, right?” Elaria asked.

“I didn’t get a good look at him, but he wasn’t *really* there,” Carion said.

“How do you mean?”

“My arcane bolt went right through him; he had a physical presence, but it was easily dismissed, like a powerful projection. In addition, you were only invisible to our eyes. He could tell you were trying to be invisible, because I guess he could see things we normally can’t, like heat or something like it. He was simply toying with you. He wanted you to watch.”

“And is that projection thing a spell you’d know?” Elaria pushed.

“Not me personally, but I have heard of such a thing. Again, not something a wizard could easily learn, but there are still many possibilities. This is beyond basic wizard training, not even things you’d learn in ancient scripts.”

“So, we are dealing with a wizard then.” Elaria nodded in understanding.

“Do not include me in this.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said *we*. I have no interest in politics here; I am simply passing through.” Elaria looked at him in disappointment, not surprised though. Carion caught her look.

“Good, push her away.

Don’t put more people in your wake.”

“I know you are boasting your paladin duties on your first outing, looking out for the downtrodden, but do not expect this to be so easily reciprocated,” Carion said bluntly. Elaria looked in front of her again, trying to ignore the statement.

“So, this wizard, what do you think his story is?”

“I said I do not want to get involved in politics.”

“I’m not even asking about that!” Elaria exclaimed.

Carion threw his head up, looking to the sky, teeth clenched as he let out a sigh through his nostrils. “You told me what you heard at the gates.”

“And?” Elaria questioned.

“The other person, the one subjected to the scroll that heated his metal armour. They *knew* each other. This is not a simple thing—not just some pissed-off wizard; this is the beginning of a civil war. I want to leave; I want to go to Mysrik; I do not want to get mixed up with what is going on here,” Carion said sternly. “I appreciate you, Elaria, I really do, but respect my wishes.”

“So, the soldiers we followed in, were they bait for us? Were they simply subject to the same possession? Why weren’t we affected when we entered?” Elaria said this to herself mostly, but loud enough that Carion could hear.

Carion stayed silent for a moment, then said, “They may have been primed somehow prior to entering. We weren’t primed, so we weren’t affected. If we stick around long enough, we may become so...” Carion’s voice trailed off, and his body started giving off social cues that he was done and wanted to be left alone.

Elaria sighed, and thought to herself, *You might be a little overwhelming, Elaria. Give him space. Small steps. The art of helping others is in the little things.*

“Well, thank you for your insight, Carion. I welcome it. I hope you will stay a little longer while we get sorted in Palmy.”

Carion grunted, and Elaria placed a hand on his shoulder. Although the steel of her gauntlet was hard and cold, Carion felt her warmth. She smiled, then walked a little faster to let Carion be alone once more. Carion remained just within arm’s reach.



CHAPTER 9



AS THEY MEET THE LOCALS

From the diary of Red Velvet Commander Ryne

Day 107 of the Third Age

A young paladin recently joined my ranks: Cecil. He claims to be on the pilgrimage, but I've been doing this far too long to know what he really means. Something happened, and this was a last resort to escape it all.

Few realize this whole pilgrimage thing is a personal journey rather than a free ticket to immortality. He is no different. No matter, Cecil has showed great strength and endurance during training. He will be joining me on my next scout just west of the Red Velvet Forest. I hope he stays long enough to learn a thing or two.

Healing comes with time.



They were getting close to Palmy. The sun set, and the shadows of the spires in the east continued to grow over the farming plains. Brilliant oranges and pinks coated the sky, turning the once green fields into a sea of warm colours. The party had been walking all day, sometimes in silence and at other times with mild chitchat. Hoots and Trit were out front. Since leaving the forest, they had been distracting themselves with nonsensical

stories and games. Being the youngest of the four, they had found comfort in each other's company. Elaria followed; being the tallest, she could easily look over top of them. She was pondering what the next step would entail, talking to the high court, royalty, hoping to be part of it all and be a protector like she had always dreamed of being—like she had always trained to be. Carion trailed at the back, looking up at his surroundings every once in a while. It was difficult for anyone to read his face; years of training to hide his intentions had left him with a very blank and meaningless default expression. Still, for the first time in a long time, he felt what he might interpret as joy, in its mildest form, at being welcomed and comfortable travelling with the other three. Even if it was silent, it was the calm he felt drawn to. Maybe a chance to change.

The town limits had been coming into view for some time and details could now be made out as they approached. There wasn't a wall surrounding the town, nor any large defences in place, but there was a sea of tents and makeshift camps scattered and clumped close to the houses on the outskirts. Much like those refugees in Cospid, these people looked haggard, comforting each other or doing work, tending to various jobs like gathering food or unloading carts. As the four continued along the road, more people became visible and began taking notice of their presence, and were not welcoming. Faces of concern, faces of doubt, faces of anger—people were turning away, running, or staring them down as they continued along the road that led into the main square, which sat in the southern portion of the town.

The town centre was relatively featureless, but at the moment, it was coated in carts and wagons in various states of repair, with various loads: food, people, and weapons. The main building surrounded the square on three sides: the north contained a few steps to a set of large red doors, the main entrance; the west and east ends had large over-bridges, likely how they monitored the ins and outs of the cargo from surrounding farms; and the south was where the four had entered. For now though, it was in a state of disarray. If the mass of tents weren't evidence enough, the town was grossly overpopulated.

"Lively lot. You think they're possessed?" Hoots muttered.

"I mean ... they aren't just attacking us on sight," Trit answered.

Hoots nodded. "No red eyes either."

"Hoots, hush, we are outsiders to them. We just walked from their home, and we probably look very suspicious. Be glad they aren't lifeless husks like those in Alitiar," Elaria said, forcing herself not to have her hand on her hilt. All her training had made her very aware that being surrounded was not ideal, but these people didn't need more threats of violence. Trit gulped loudly. As the four more cautiously approached the town square, several groups of people were following them, aggressive in their walk and stances.

The four huddled closer together, looking around nervously as the crowds grew and drew closer. Carion looked around briefly but simply continued, matching the pace of the others. The rest were becoming more panicked as the people drew closer, eyes wide and angry. Suddenly they stopped. The crowds were large enough that there was no longer space to move forward. They were completely surrounded. Quiet murmurs could be heard but nothing completely audible ... or pleasant. Guards in dirty purple armour stepped out of the crowd, the farm folk parting to let them through. The guards came from all sides and held out their spears in the direction of the quartet.

"Drop your weapons, wands, and component pouches. Defiance will cost your life," a deep booming voice said. The four turned to see a dark-complexioned man who stood amongst the guards and soldiers with spears drawn. He himself did not draw a weapon, but a massive two-handed sword protruded from his back. He boasted thick plate armour, dwarfing all around him as he stood tall and proud. Scratches and dents of battles long gone were carved into his armour, and his face was weathered, pockmarked, and battered. This man had seen a fair few fights and lived to talk about them. His face was serious, with high, strong cheekbones, a thick broad brow, and cauliflower ears; his hair was short and black with sprinklings of white. His armour bore similar purple and blue as the others they had seen in Alitiar, but the sigil of a purple rose was engraved deeply into both of his shoulder blades. Elaria recognized this attire; he too, was a paladin. Carion spied another sigil on the armour, a much older one. An attempt to remove it had been made, but there was still evidence of it. Carion kept trying to make it out as the paladin spoke.

"We saw you leave the thick forest of Asteron. Whoever you are, drop

all you have. NOW.” His voice cracked the air; it shook his own soldiers in their boots. Elaria looked at him intently and unbuckled the straps to her sheath, removing it and the sword it contained, and holding them out. A soldier came forward and took it. She also passed her shield but more reluctantly. Trit passed out a small dagger.

“Take his lute,” the dark paladin said. Trit sighed and passed it also, after wrestling with the idea for a fleeting moment. Another soldier held his hands out to Hoots, and she pulled her pockets inside out, revealing nothing but lint. She shrugged, pouting.

“Got nothing, sorry!” she exclaimed.

“Shackle her,” the dark paladin said. “I know a brawler when I see one.”

Am I that obvious?! “Oh, come on!” Hoots wailed, and before she could continue to complain, shackles were thrust around her wrists.

“Hold on, she’s royalty. She is with me, and we are here to deliver her safe passage.” Elaria turned, urging the soldier to stop. Hoots’ eyes widened with realization, and she looked back at Carion, who gave her no sympathy, then at Elaria, sorrow stricken.

“You didn’t remind her to tell Elaria, did you, ‘Carion?’”

No. You distracted my mind on purpose.

*“You let me distract you. I just want to know why.
It doesn’t benefit you, so ... you didn’t bother fighting it.
You really hate the idea that you could selflessly
help someone so much that you’d distract
yourself on purpose?”*

...

“Come now, ‘Carion,’ I know you.”

“Elaria, listen,” Hoots began. “I should have told you earlier—”

“Silence! All of you! Our council will determine why you are here.” The dark paladin’s authoritative tone silenced them. Elaria looked back at Hoots with concern and confusion. Hoots, looking more worried, was only

in view for another moment before soldiers led each of them off. Another soldier approached Carion; as he did, Carion stared him down, making the soldier nervous. The soldier approached more slowly and more cautiously. Carion, not really caring, took his component pouch from its strap and dropped it into the soldier's hand. The man looked at it briefly and became aware that Carion was a magic user.

"Anything else? Wand, staff, an orb?" The soldier also tried to sound authoritative, but it came off feeble. Carion's eyed him again and stayed silent.

"Gag him. I won't take chances with magic users," the dark paladin said, losing patience.

"Remember the last time you were gagged?"

I do.

"Remember the time you were disarmed?"

I DO!

... Thud...

"I know you remember the way you sewed that wand into your arm.

Who could forget that?!"

The soldier behind him grabbed out a cloth gag and approached. Carion lost his own patience and pulled his robe up, exposing his left forearm. He lifted it up high for all to see. The dark oak wand was finely stitched into his very skin. Years of growth had made the wand part of his arm. The skin covered parts of it completely, but the flesh was still angry with discolouration and reddening. As he lifted his arm, the wand started to glow blue, and small cracks of lightning could be heard around it. The soldiers stood back, starting to draw their weapons. The dark paladin did the same, grimacing and readying himself.

"Cecil, stop!" An elderly voice echoed from the steps. Light footsteps were heard, and a frail old man came into view through the crowd. Cecil turned to him, still in a fighting stance.

“He takes the pilgrimage; I will not have you cut down a Mysrik initiate in our square! Regardless of our own turmoil, he will not suffer it. Our traditions will always remain.” A mage walked towards Carion, wearing a white robe and a white turban with a purple jewel inset at the front. The rest of the robe was mostly devoid of decorations, but it was wrapped around him as one piece of fabric. It was eggshell white and unstained, even at the bottom, which barely hovered above the ground.

“I can sense him.” The mage touched the purple jewel. “He begins his pilgrimage and ... and he must remain on this path to enter Mysrik.... Yes, it seems so. And so, he is my personal guest, and you will treat him as such.” He then moved to Carion’s side. “I am Archmage Ivar. Please follow. You and your companions may come in, but we must ask you to remain unarmed, and we will not force you, particularly, to be subject to gagging.” Ivar eyed the two guards, who backed away immediately, their heads lowered.

“This way.” Ivar lifted his arm, robes still almost reaching the ground. Carion went in the direction he pointed, the others following close behind. They were led up the stone stairs and into the main building. It was large with a pointed, red-tiled roof. The red doors were opened by two men as they walked up. The main hall had a crimson carpet leading to another set of stairs and to a balcony that surrounded and overlooked the main room. To the sides were long tables, and they were surrounded by several dozen people of various states, authorities, dress, and races, all either eating or looking over documents. It was crowded, and several doors to the sides were closed, but the ones that were open showed more rooms full of people. Following Cecil the dark paladin, and Ivar, the four went up the stairs and through the door just to their right, which was opened as they approached.

This room was another hall, although much smaller. Once a meeting room, it had been made into a makeshift throne room. Furniture could be seen stacked and moved to the sides. At the far end, two guards stood to the sides of a large chair, not a traditional throne but the biggest and most grand chair Palmy had to offer. Two other guards stood at the entrance. The four entered the room, following Ivar and Cecil. Ivar put his hand up to the four as they reached the middle of the room, indicating they should

stop. They all did and presented themselves in a small line facing the large chair. Ivar and Cecil then stood on either side of it.

In the chair sat a woman, well into her third decade, with a light-yellow skin tone and slightly pointed ears, much like Trit's and Elaria's. Her face was round and her features small. She had brown eyes and long sandy hair. She wore an ornate purple and white coat, which covered her violet dress, covered in stitched roses. Her hands lay on the armrests of the large red velvet chair. She looked a little uncomfortable and struggled not to shift to try and be more at ease, instead staying still with a straight back and her chin up, as symmetrical as she could be. The four stood in the middle of the room, shuffling a bit till they stood in a line facing Ivar, Cecil, and the woman. The woman studied them briefly and then spoke.

"I am Princess Maria Kai'sion. You were seen leaving Asteron Forest, on the same road we did a few days ago, except we weren't strolling like you four. We were running for our lives. Hundreds were slaughtered in their sleep as they woke that morning, or they were later killed defending our city. Alitiar is now occupied by the forces of Valoon from the east." Those last words were spat out venomously. "You are accused of being spies for the redsand army; my people saw you walking this way earlier this morning and made me aware. I would rather leave you to a fate decided by those angry refugees outside, as I've got other matters to attend to, but I've been advised to hear you out."

The princess looked unimpressed towards Ivar on her right. "So be brief, explain yourselves, or entertain me. Either/or." Maria waved her hand haphazardly towards the group. She finally decided to readjust herself so she could be comfortable while she watched and listened. Elaria turned to Trit and Hoots on her right; Hoots was leaning forward, her eyes wide with a mortified look on her face. She didn't even register Elaria looking her way. Trit noticed and simply shrugged nervously at Elaria. Elaria looked left. Carion just stood motionless and expressionless; he seemed to be more interested in the floor.

"Oh come, you know what this is. Save them the trouble, 'Carion'."

Shut up. You know how I operate. Let's see how this plays out.

“Your grace, my name is Elaria Palamecia. I am a paladin of the Eight Winds.” Once Elaria started, an urge to continue surged through her. “I came across a companion on the ferry, a royal. I present Hilda Oostmullen, daught—”

“She can introduce herself,” Maria said, cutting her off and leaning toward Cecil. “The *Eight Winds*?”

“A small group, very small, and *very* skilled fighters. They commit themselves to an area, usually defined by a governing body, and swear to protect all within it as warriors of justice. That is how their pledge begins,” Cecil explained with his smooth, deep voice. Maria gave a satisfied nod.

“Oh. I see! Wait, are you a pledge breaker?” Maria asked, turning back to Elaria. “Most paladins that come here aren’t honourable, usually seeking Mysrik themselves.”

Elaria immediately shook her head. “No, of course not,” she said sternly.

“So, you are here to pledge yourself to these lands?” Maria asked.

Elaria nodded quickly. “Yes, it’s the final part of our training, which generally continues until our death. The pursuit of justice is unending. Not many survive this part for long.”

“Oh? And why not?” Maria pressed.

“We are trained to be unbiased, which eventually angers many in the area we commit to. We may start our pledge with one governing body, but we do not adhere to it. The people come first.”

“So, you *chose* our lands. With what’s happening, we could do with someone like you, someone committed.” Maria gave her a little smile and continued. “I liked that answer, very good, as long as you vouch for it, Cecil?”

Cecil eyed Elaria several times, from head to toe, the room remaining quiet as he did so. “I do.”

“Right, who wants to go next?” Maria looked at the other three with mild excitement. “Elaria, you were introducing your companion. Did you have something to show as proof of the royalty of your companion?” Maria asked with fading patience. Elaria looked down, taking out the letter Hoots had given her earlier and holding it aloft.

“Elaria, *please!* No, let me explain!” Hoots begged.

“Elaria, *yes*, give us the letter!” Maria waved a soldier forward to retrieve

it. He did so with no resistance; Elaria was confused at Hoots' reaction and at the fact that she felt unable to stop herself from handing the letter over. The soldier took it and brought it back to Maria. She scanned the letter, her eyes darting from line to line swiftly. She then looked up towards Hoots and passed it to Ivar, who held it delicately. He inspected it thoroughly, holding it by the corners at various angles, and then gave off a soft throaty chuckle.

"This'll be a quick history lesson to make my point," Maria began. "Two dwarf clans were first to these lands: pale dwarfs in the west, and golden dwarfs to the east. A big event happened, and now there're no more golden dwarfs." Maria threw her hands around to describe these events. "Nine families came to these shores in hopes of new beginnings: seven gnome families, one dragon-kin clan, and a human family. The dragon-kin stayed; they live as hermits out on Dizstrum—well, I guess *lived*. And the human family," Maria motioned to herself, "the Kai'sions stayed, although a little elf has been thrown in recently. *Thanks, Mum*." Maria flicked her pointed ears. "And three gnome families stayed. Eventually, those gnome families whittled down to one due to the lack of profitable resources out east." A more serious tone developed. "*One* family. And that family's name..." Maria started tapping her arm rests like a drum roll, "is not this one!" She pointed to the letter Ivar was holding.

"It is very well done; I can see how this would have got through checks..." Ivar folded it crudely and shoved it down his other sleeve.

"This forgery will get you no further," Maria said with contempt.

"Forgery?!" Elaria, now wide-eyed, turned sharply to Hoots, who was almost grovelling.

"I'm-I'm so sorry, Elaria. I should have told you earlier, but ... I'm so sorry." Hoots hung her head heavily in shame. Elaria swung back round to the others, mouth agape.

"The Oostmullen family left these lands generations ago, settling back onto the mainland. It was this seal that probably got it through initial checks. Ivar, be sure to inform the ferry's wizard."

"Yes, ma'am," Ivar quickly answered.

"This seal is from that one family that stayed, the glass tinkerers, the Oswellgarbs, their seal being that of a kiln. Your family, the Oostmullen—a

seal of twine, if I'm not mistaken—have no influence in these lands. You might be part of the lineage, but royalty? You are not. Also, Thunderrock? That domain is not of the Oostmullen family; in fact, I haven't heard of the Oostmullen family since their departure from Mu-Ural. Bold of you to fake this, but foolish. Elaria, were you unaware of her actions?" Maria asked.

"I ... I was," Elaria answered, still in disbelief and processing.

"Pretending to be someone of that high power and demanding pardon? That could be considered treason in these lands," Maria announced.

Hoots continued to hang her head, starting to hold back tears. "I just wanted passage. I just wanted to escape—"

"Escape from what?" Maria asked, more sympathetically.

"I am the seventeenth in my family. *Seventeenth*. I am a ghost, a nobody. I woke up one day a *sorcerer*." At that word, the soldiers shuffled nervously, and Maria gripped her seat a little tighter. "Magic poured out of my hands and ... I hurt people. I hurt my family. I couldn't find anyone to help me to deal with it, so I ran. I ran as far as I could, and I just kept running. I got lost ... lost in the swamp." Hoots' head stayed low, just staring at the floorboards.

"A clan of lizard-kin took me in ... and trained me." Hoots clenched her fists. "Trained me to focus, helped me with my mind, and even my magic. When I got back to town, it was like no one noticed, no one cared... Nobody said or asked a thing."

The room fell silent, and Hoots continued. "They'd replaced me at my job, my bed was gone, my belongings pawned off. I could have died and not a soul would've cared. No one wanted to be associated with me, only the scavengers that found me. So, yeah, I paid for a forged letter. I knew this name was attached to this land, so I used it. I got out." Hoots then looked up at Elaria, and tears started pouring out. "I didn't think anyone would care for me if I wasn't important ... if I wasn't someone with a name."

Elaria looked at her in disbelief. "Hoots..." she said softly.

"We will take all of this into consideration, and a decision will be made. We want to hear from the others first," Maria said plainly. She then looked to Trit and Carion.

"I am Trit. I don't have a last name, but sometimes it's 'the bard.'" Trit waved his hands up weirdly and bowed awkwardly. No one said a thing; no one was sure how to respond. "I am here because I think Elaria is my sister."

"What?!" Elaria turned to Trit, with absolute shock on her face.

"What?!" Trit said, immediately throwing his hands to his mouth.

"Why would you think that?! Why would you say that?!" Elaria wailed. Trit opened his hands up, shaking as he did.

"Your birthmark is from my earliest memory; it's etched into my lute. *Why did I say that?!*" Trit looked down, unable to regain his own senses.

"That's enough!" Carion said loudly, looking right at Ivar. Everyone looked to Carion.

"Enough of what?" Maria asked. Carion looked around the room, at the furniture pushed to the sides of the room, the distance they all were from each other, the distance the guards stood from them, how they were positioned in the middle of the room...

"My name," Carion started, "is ... is ... is *not* Carion." Everyone looked at him in confusion. Carion struggled to get the words out, or hold them in. He took a step to the left. "My name is ... *not* Carion." The word 'not' still struggled against his lips. He took another step to the left.

"What are you doing?" Ivar asked, pretending to be confused by his actions.

"My name is... *not* Carion." Carion continued to repeat this to himself as he took several steps left. He reached a few steps from the piled furniture.

"My name..." Carion sighed in relief, "*is* Carion." The three companions still looked at him, baffled. Trit still had his hands firmly over his mouth, not prepared to say anything else.

"They believed you three *far* too easily," Carion said. "The floorboards are infused with a truth circle. Forcing us to say any truth we believe." Carion's eyes never left Ivar, who looked at him with an annoyed expression.

"Do you have something to hide, *Carion*? Why would you be so averse to the truth?" Maria asked abruptly.

"Carion is who I am now, but I have other names, and *titles*. I know things that wouldn't just make your skin crawl or your blood boil. No. The things I've seen, the things I've *done*, you'd gouge your own ears out in an

attempt to unhear it all. So, you want *truth*?" Carion looked Cecil right in the eyes.

*"I knew you'd pick up on that hideous attempt
to hide that sigil! Good job, 'Carion',"*

Cecil was taken aback a little by how quickly his focus turned to him.

"You were a paladin at Greyrock. While positioned there, you were all convinced the commoners from the nearby towns had slowly gone mad, disease ridden, and their minds were nothing but rot. You all thought they were coming to kill you one night, but they were looking for safety and were all as sane as they come. *So many people*, all clambering for safety. But you paladins of Greyrock were not gracious hosts. You turned people away and hid behind your walls, convinced that they were the danger. A necromancer came in unchallenged and harvested oh so many souls that night. A seed of doubt was planted in all your minds leading up to it. It took planning; it took finesse. Honestly, it took a while. But oh, was it worth it. We couldn't have you paladins gallivanting around."

Cecil started to breathe heavily, and his skin heated up with anger.

... Thud...

"Now," Carion continued, "I heard many of you fell on your swords the following morning. I recognized your characteristic plate armour, the grey eagle still visible on your back, try to hide it with a rose all you want. I bet that wound is still *fresh*. You were escaping just like *so many* of us do on these isles." Cecil went a little white having to recall the terrors of that night.

"How do you know these things?" he asked.

... Thud...

"I never showed my face, my name was never uttered, but who do you think lit those fires and planted those seeds?" Carion asked. Cecil became visibly upset; Maria turned and noticed.

"That's enough!" she yelled.

“That necromancer did not act alone,” Carion added.

“Enough!” Maria yelled once more.

Carion took a large step to the right, back into the truth circle. “You want to know why I don’t like to be forced to tell the truth? Why I think *you* won’t like it?” He looked hard at Cecil.

... THUD ...

“Because *it was me*,” Carion said softly behind gritted teeth. “That necromancer paid well, and on that weeklong venture, I earned the title of *The Scourge of Greyrock*.”

Cecil approached, beginning to slowly draw his sword.

“Cecil, that’s enough!” Maria stood, the chair creaking backward as she did. Cecil stopped immediately, looking at her.

“Your grace,” he said, returning to his position, breathing heavily, and nostrils flaring.

“I have nightmares about Carion,” Trit yelled out quickly, before realizing he was still compelled to tell the truth. He held his hands to his mouth even tighter.

Got anything else you want to get off your chest? Trit struggled to keep his thoughts internal. *How about that fact you really don’t like beer, but it’s just what everyone seems to drink?!*

“Do not use a truth circle on me, for you won’t like what comes out.” Carion remained in the centre of the room and sighed heavily. “But I am here because I seek Mysrik. I desire immortality. My previous life is my own, and I wish to *keep it that way*,” he said. Ivar reluctantly smiled and nodded.

“Tell us what you all have done in Alitiar. We will make a decision about your fates,” Maria said, still standing. Her voice was less authoritative now. There was no need for any bloodshed or bickering.

The four recounted their travel from Cospid to Alitiar and to Palmy. None of them felt forced to tell the truth; they all said it out loud on their own accord—they all wanted to. Carion only answered briefly or when necessary. During the recounting, Hoots’ shackles were removed, and she

revealed the broach she had gotten off the body at the castle's front gates. Maria held it close to her chest, squeezing it tightly in her hand.

"Guards, take them outside. We'll call you in when we're done deliberating." Maria's head hung over the broach in her hand, her voice much softer. The two guards escorted the four out to the hallway and spaced them from each other and against the wall. Time passed. The four kept silent. Slowly, Trit and Hoots slumped onto the floor, but the other two stood steadfast.

"Hoots, listen," Elaria said.

"Look, drop it, okay? Yeah, I lied. I know the only reason you would've taken me in was because of that letter. I should've just burnt it on the ship. That way I could be alone here." Hoots curled up on the floor.

"Hoots," Elaria struggled to find the exact words, but she finally forced something out. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" Hoots said, holding tears back. "That I'm a nobody? No special lineage or name? Just a stupid gnome running away? Running from people that didn't care I existed?!"

"Why didn't you tell me you were trained by lizard-kin?" Elaria asked. Hoots sniffed.

"Wh ... what?"

"Yeah!" Trit interjected. "Lizard-kin are hardy and *hate* people usually. You got *trained* by some? That's awesome! And probably a first..." Hoots looked over at him. He was smiling while picking at his fingernails crudely.

Hoots looked back to Elaria. "You guys ... you don't care that I'm..."

Before Hoots could continue, Elaria spoke up. "You are right. I took the offer to escort you here. I won't lie to you; I did think helping a royal would make it easier to get a respected position here. But this explains *so much*! Honestly, this is such a relief. You can be yourself, no more lies!"

"What do you mean?" Hoots asked.

Trippled jumped in again. "I mean, you go spelunking in caves and traverse sieged cities. That's not what royalty does! This is just ... way more you!"

Hoots smiled a little. "To tell you the truth, I didn't really do all that much stuff back in the marshlands. Here though ... it felt better ... felt more—"

"More *you*," Elaria said, finishing her sentence.

Hoots smiled at Elaria. "Thank you. As for the lizard-kin, they taught me in their sprawling den. They taught me to control my magic. I used to clean their weapons as practice to make them look new, and they taught me how to calm my mind. They were strangers, but they thought they should help me rather than kill me. I mean, I say *they*, but it was really just this one. The one that found me in the swamp; he was a druid, and he was very kind..." Hoots' voice trailed off as she briefly recalled a simpler time. Then something occurred to her.

"Hey, you really think she's your sister?" she asked, turning to Trit.

"Yes, what's that about?" Elaria added.

Trit went wide-eyed. "Oh ... ah ... yeah. It's the ... the birthmark."

"Birthmark? Oh, this on my face? That's—" Elaria was interrupted by the door opening up, and Cecil stepping out.

"We have made a decision. Come," Cecil said before signalling to the other guards, who promptly left. Hoots and Trit pushed themselves back up the wall, Hoots wiping her face with her short sleeve. The four entered the room once more and stood in a row as they had done before. Ivar, Cecil, and Maria all seemed to have returned to their respective positions. Maria still held the broach in her hand, and she held it up.

"This ... this was my brother's. It was Kain's. I have one too." Maria showed her own broach, which was sitting just out of sight behind some folds in her robe. Maria stood, took the steps down from the chair, and walked to the four companions. She stopped for a moment before taking a large purposeful step towards them.

"I am sorry about this truth circle. It's just easier and quicker. And I'm sorry about my attitude. This has all happened so suddenly, and I couldn't be bothered with another bureaucratic meeting. So now, I'll be honest with you. No lies." She gestured to the fact that she was within the truth circle herself.

"Trit," Maria said.

"Oh, ah, yeah?" Trit fumbled.

"You are clearly a travelling bard. You are free to go, wander these lands, gather stories and songs. I'd ask you to stay out of trouble, but..." Maria gestured vaguely around herself, indicating the larger situation they were

in. Trit nodded. "I can suggest the Velvet Forest to the south where my cousin lives; it is absolutely beautiful. But you do what you want."

"Th-thank you," Trit said nervously. Maria walked over to Carion next, where her quick turn let out a waft of perfume, reminiscent of freshly picked daisies.

"Carion, or the one currently called Carion." He had been silent for some time, but now raised his head a little. "This land, my home, is where many people make the pilgrimage. But most do not make it. Some die, yes, but most ... well, they find themselves here. This land is about rebirth, change, and new beginnings. They all come here wanting to leave the troubles they once had behind, and they do, but not in the way they expect. I'm just glad you four have found the spirit of this land, despite the troubles we are having. Go on your pilgrimage; do what you believe you must do to earn your place in Mysrik. But I don't want to see you again if you are going to cause distress. And keep your past stories to yourself. Ivar, as the archmage and our mortal observer of the pilgrimage takers, tells me your own pilgrimage has started. So, continue on it."

Carion gave her a single nod and stayed silent.

Ivan cleared his throat, then spoke up. "You've clearly managed to attain some powerful components. I had a look at your pouch." He pulled Carion's component pouch from behind him. "There're residues and evidence of magical components I've only read about. I mean, pixie spleen? Isn't that used for—"

"Curses." Carion could see that Ivar was a little uncomfortable with it. "What you see has expired. I don't plan on re-stocking that."

"And am I getting this right? Frost giant heart?"

"Yes, soaked in the bile of chimera for sixty days. For weather-based spells. Again, I don't plan on getting that component back while I am here. Or I guess ... ever again."

"That one you used to teleport in Alitiar? I've never heard of it."

"That ... that was my own design. One that was supposed to be useable by anyone. As we've described, there were complaints about nausea, from tall people."

Ivar raised his eyebrows. "You are a powerful wizard indeed. You must have had a brilliant teacher."

“Self-taught. Not many schools or tutors were open to disgraced druids.”

“Wow, that... You are a first! You will be a fine addition to Mysrik. I’m sure you will be welcomed with open arms!” Ivar tapped the purple jewel on his turban. “The power of Mysrik flows to you. I must implore you to continue on this journey you’ve started.”

Carion nodded. “I am getting exceedingly low on other common components though. If my pilgrimage requires more travel, I may need more.”

“We have very little here in Palmy; we don’t even have some of these things in Alitiar, but I’ll see what we can spare for your travels,” Ivar said. Maria nodded in thanks to Ivar.

“Hoots.” Maria approached the dwarf, whose eyes were still red, and her cheeks still puffy. “I know running is hard, even when running from such a toxic environment. This change, it is for the better; trust me.” Maria gestured towards Cecil. “He ran too. He ran from all the wrong he felt he had caused. But this land, it changed him too. All it took was a new place and time to rethink, to find a new purpose, a *better purpose*, one he didn’t realize was even an option. Once suicidal, he is now part of the royal guard, and ... he is my best friend.”

Maria crouched down to Hoots’ eye level. “Many people come to these lands, escaping things, worse things than you’ve mentioned.” She looked over at Carion briefly. “That doesn’t make it any more hurtful; that doesn’t make it any more difficult to overcome.” Hoots stayed silent, trying to hold back tears once again. “You just have to be better than past you, be better than those who wronged you.” Hoots looked up at Maria, a little more hopeful now.

Maria continued. “Second chances don’t change who we are, but maybe they give us the opportunity to show who we *really* are. You went into Alitiar, dragged this lot with you, got a nasty scar as a trophy, and made it out alive! I think that Hoots was there the whole time, but here you have the opportunity to *be* that Hoots. Someone courageous and brave.” Hoots looked up, her eyes still watery, but a smile grew. Maria smiled back.

“Elaria, a paladin of the Eight Winds.” Maria moved and stood at attention in front of Elaria, who mimicked her posture. “Cecil described your branch as reckless and oblivious, incapable of seeing the bigger picture, and protecting only who you deem worthy.” Elaria’s shoulders fell a little.

“Prove him wrong,” Maria said, and Elaria perked back up. “You’ll pledge yourself not just to those in Alitiar but the pale dwarfs to the north, the Velvet Forest to the south, and to *all* the people of Ma-Ural. This includes the east. I’d suggest Dizstrum, but I fear there are no dragon-kin left. But this also means those in Valoon, if I’m not mistaken.”

Elaria slowly nodded, her eyes darting down.

“I’m not sure what your sect would say about possessed maniacs.”

Elaria chuckled briefly. “The judgement is my own; as long as I am true to my pledge, it works. Based on what I saw, I would not be right to uphold the ideals of this possession wizard, and so it wouldn’t really work with the ideals of the Eight Winds. Unless there are others in Valoon who remain untouched. Those I could represent as the people of Valoon.”

“Then yes, please, be the protector for all,” Maria said enthusiastically. “Be the paladin of the Ma-Ural we need, not the one *I* need. Those you saw in Alitiar, they need your help too.”

“Yes! Of course!” Elaria exclaimed.

“Good,” Maria said, stepping back. “Both my brothers, Kain and Gareth... I guess they’re both dead now, dead from defending the western lands. This makes me the only Kai’sion alive for the first time since my ancestors landed here. I don’t want to rule. I hate it. I’m the youngest. I used to just go into the streets and do whatever; my brothers would deal with all the politics and conflict. Me?” Maria shook her head. “This isn’t me, but I have to be. This responsibility is thrust upon me, and I would hate to see these people lose their homes and livelihood because I couldn’t step up. That man you saw in Alitiar, it sounds like that was our advisor who came from the east: Kor-Thiliath. He had convinced those in the eastern city of Valoon to join his side, but considering what we’ve witnessed, *convinced* might not be the correct term. He went rogue, wanting to take a key for himself; determined to take it for his own, he was consumed by it in the end.”

“All this for a key?” Trit asked.

“Yes, the dragon-kin clan have one, and we have one, in the castle at Alitiar. They return to the vault they were taken from if either were ever used. With either key, one could open the tower of Mysrik, which contains all the power, influence, and likenesses of mages who have taken the

pilgrimage. If a mage is accepted into Mysrik, they are stripped of magic possessions and influences, which are stored as latent arcane energy in a hidden tower to the south, which acts as a gigantic storage container.”

Trit looked at the others as she said this. *No one is going to speak up? Did no one see the tower? Only I saw that tower from the boat huh? Okay, cool ... I'll keep that to myself.*

“Kor-Thiliath killed all the dragons and dragon-kin on Dizstrum, trying to take their key. He thankfully failed, but not without the death of all on Dizstrum. We ... we *heard* their screams from here. It was like a whole race screamed in unison before a frightful silence. We call this night The Screaming Night, and it is not one we will forget. Gareth was mute after that, and left with his best soldiers. We all thought it was to stop Kor-Thiliath on his return, but since neither returned, we presumed them both dead. But three years later, it seems Kor *has* returned, and he seeks the key in Alitiar. When a key is used, it returns to the vault it came from, it was gone when Gareth left and had returned days after. Ivar managed to magically lock the castle, but it is only a matter of time...” Maria took a moment, overwhelmed by all the responsibilities on her plate.

“Alitiar is under siege,” she continued, “and the magic lock on the castle will only stop Kor-Thiliath for so long. You were there. You saw what was going on. And so, I ask for your help, Elaria.”

“Of course, your majesty,” Elaria blurted out.

“Just call me Maria, please. I get enough of that from Ivar. The best soldiers I had have died or were subjected to a worse fate while getting people out during the takeover. At first it was only soldiers. That’s how the chaos started, but now everybody seems to succumb to it upon approach... That group that chased you in, they were good people, but it is clear that we are all primed for this possession. We have no idea what we are dealing with or how it works exactly, if it is spreading, or how this ‘priming’ fits in. This *frightens* me.”

Maria paused for a moment. “I know what I said earlier. You are free to go, but you four are *incredible*. How you all happened to come together is something only the fates would know. We can’t get close to Alitiar right now. But not you four. None of you were affected, and none of you are primed for whatever Kor is planning. You are the variable he couldn’t plan

for. You are fresh to these lands, and I think that comes with advantages. If you are all willing, I would ask you to join us. I want to take back Alitiar before Kor-Thiliath reaches the key. I think you four would be perfect for what we have planned.”

Trit pointed to himself. “E-Even me?”

Maria smiled warmly. “Of course! Every group needs someone like you. A kind, innocent soul sheds some light on trying times.”

“Yeah, but I can’t shoot fire, or use magical items, or even swing a sword!” Trit exclaimed.

“Not everything is solved in that way, Trit. I think you are needed in this group to provide those other options,” Maria explained.

Trit shrugged and nodded. “Plus, how else would you lot get nighttime entertainment?” Trit leaned over and nudged Hoots who looked at him kindly.

“I would be glad—we would be glad to lend our hand in the matter,” Elaria said, gesturing to the four. Trit and Hoots nodded. Carion did not respond.

“Kor-Thiliath could strike here at any moment. I need people. I need soldiers. I need allies. I have Cecil, but the people need more. Word has already spread to the western towns, but the pale dwarfs of the north remain silent. This is where I’d like you four to go, to the northern land, for I fear something similar to Alitiar has happened to them. We lost contact with them a week before the attack, and anyone I’ve sent ... hasn’t returned. Based on what I’ve heard, you four are perfect to investigate and recruit the pale dwarfs to our cause.” Maria held her head up high. “Oh, do you need to do a paladin ... thingy... Elaria?”

“Her pledge?” Cecil added.

“Pledge! Yes, do your paladin pledge, Elaria!” Maria exclaimed.

Elaria nodded. “I’ll need something from this land, something that confirms that my pledge is from here and from your stance in these lands.” Maria looked down at her closed hand. She opened it and examined Kain’s broach. Maria pulled her own off and showed it to Elaria.

“Will this do?” Maria asked.

“It will be consumed in the process of solidifying my pledge,” Elaria said.

“That’s okay.” Maria passed it to Elaria. Maria giggled to suppress

the tears and clapped her hands. The lack of tension allowed her to act more naturally.

“Good, good!” Maria then walked back to the chair, where she sat and readjusted herself to look royal and professional once more. She looked to Ivar, who mouthed some words to her, and Maria started repeating them out loud.

“Kneel and recite your creed before us. Declare an oath of devotion to Ma-Ural and become a paladin of these lands, to all who dwell here,” Maria said, clutching the armrests. Elaria approached. She grabbed her own necklace, which lay under her armour, and opened it flat in her palm. It was an open compass, like an irregular snowflake, all eight points decorated in ornate golden symbols, each one unique. Elaria then knelt in front of Maria.

“Wait, wait, how can *we* trust *you*?” Trit stepped forward, hands out defensively, suddenly nervous about the whole thing.

Maria leaned to one side to see Trit. “Remember? I was in the truth circle, like ... that whole time!”

“She’s fine, Trit,” Carion spoke up.

“Oh good, I trust you,” Trit spoke again. “Oh hey! I *do* trust you! I’m in the circle. Oh that’s nice—”

“Trit?” Carion said bluntly.

“Yes, *face of my nightmares*?” Trit unwillingly asked.

“Shut it,” Carion snapped. Trit clamped his mouth shut. Elaria turned back towards the throne and began her pledge.

“The people and lands of Ma-Ural, through the Kai’sions, I pledge myself to you as a paladin of the Eight Winds.” Elaria took in a large breath. “As the Eight Winds, I come as one.” The room fell silent, and the compass medallion glowed slightly.

“If I die, let there be blood on my shield.” The symbol representing south glowed.

“If I die, let Elysium’s doors be open.” South-west glowed.

“If I die, let the land be safe from those I slay.” West glowed.

“If I die, let my battle cry be heard afar.” North-west glowed.

“If I die, let me be beside my brothers and sisters.” North glowed.

“If I die, let me do so standing strong.” North-east.

“If I die, let all those know I defended others.” East.

“If I die, let my body rest, for my spirit lives on.” And finally, the south-east symbol glowed. The light was intense enough to almost fill the entire room.

“For as the Eight Winds, *I come as one.*” Elaria stood, shoulders back and proud. It was a pledge she had memorized so long ago, and she was finally able to say it for real. She felt stronger. She felt powerful. She felt *right*. The others, except Carion, smiled proudly with her.

“That could have gone worse!” Trit exclaimed, putting down four flagons of frothy ale on the table. The four had retreated to the local tavern. Golden wood lined the entire place, making it look like a large woodland cabin, but it was large enough for over half a dozen tables. Several people were also in the tavern, where the name ‘Stormward Stallion’ hung over the bar’s taps. The glow of the fireplace filled the room, and people chatted away happily. Some looked like hardy farmers, still in their work clothes, and others dishevelled refugees from Alitiar, but they all shared smiles and drinks together. Despite being on the brink of a civil war, the tavern felt like a warm, cosy, and safe place away from the pain of the world. After a discussion with Maria, the four felt they had earned a rest for the evening.

“Oh, you are telling me,” Hoots said, grabbing a flagon with both hands. The drink was as large as her head, and she had a sinister grin on her face as she eyed it. Elaria nodded with an agreeing smile, grabbing her own flagon.

“I mean, I almost got arrested for treason!” Hoots said.

“They probably would have just sent you to the gallows for it,” Elaria said nonchalantly.

“What?!” Hoots exclaimed, “I almost died?!”

Elaria giggled. “But you didn’t! We get to keep traveling!” Elaria slapped her on the back. “Good thing I didn’t actually carry you all this way, or I would have actually resented you.”

“Now we are actual adventurers!” Trit said. “The four—” Trit stopped himself when he saw that Carion was without a drink. He was staring off into the distance.

Elaria turned to him. “You going to join us going north?”

“Yeah, are you? Can you handle that?”

Carion blinked into awareness and turned to the group, all staring at him with eager eyes. Carion grabbed the remaining drink. He sighed loudly and lifted the flagon.

“Apparently I’m on the right path already... This is the way.”

Carion held his drink aloft and the three brought their drinks in and contacted them merrily. Each threw back the ale, Elaria and Carion taking small gulps whereas Trit threw it back, taking half of it in at once. Hoots just managed to tip her flagon, spilling a little as she did. Trit slammed his flagon down, a large grin on his face. He wiped away the ale on his upper lip and got up on his chair, one foot planted on the table. He put his hands on his hips and puffed out his chest.

“*Four unlikely adventurers—*”

“Unlikely?” Hoots said, scrunching up her face. Trit’s chest deflated.

“Ah ... yeah?”

“She’s a paladin, pretty *likely* to get involved,” Hoots said, pointing to Elaria.

“Yeah, and she literally jumps into trouble willingly,” Elaria said, pointing to Hoots, and then Carion. “And I’m pretty sure he’s done this sort of thing before. So ... not really *unlikely*.”

“Guys! You can’t ruin the opening; it is supposed to be extreme!” Trit said with a fist in the air.

“Okay, okay, sorry,” Hoots said. “Continue with your opening.”

Trit puffed his chest again. “*Four unlikely adventurers, from tragic backgrounds, band together to—*”

“Tragic?” Hoots asked.

“Well, yeah. I’m an orphan. That’s *tragic*, you know ... an unknown family. All good stories have an orphan in them,” Trit said, deflated again. Hoots sighed.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t make it tragic, you dork.”

“Oh, it makes it a *little* tragic,” Trit said. Hoots and Elaria shook their heads.

“You are pretty well put together really,” Elaria said.

“Oh, thank you. Oh, no wait, that makes this way less exciting. I can’t be the *pretty good traveling bard*. That’s really average,” Trit said, disappointed.

“Umm, *pretty good*, huh?” Elaria said from behind her flagon. Trit eyed her, and she giggled a little.

“Okay, anyway, you think *I’m* tragic?” Hoot asked, putting her flagon back upright.

“Well, I mean...” Trit said awkwardly. Hoots started nodding.

“No, I know, it *is* pretty tragic: never accepted, ran from home, trained by lizard-kin. Not the worst backstory. I’m good with it.”

“Yes!” Trit said, and his voice deepening as he continued. “*One, trained by lizard-kin with fists of steel!*” Hoots smiled and nodded. “*One, a paladin of the land, seeking to prove to herself that she can be a protector of justice!*” Trit said, pointing at Elaria, who nodded with a grin. “*Another, an aggressively average bard with no exciting history,*” Trit said, presenting himself. “*And another who...*” Trit pointed to Carion. They looked to him, unsure of what he was thinking about the performance.

With a straight face, Carion finished his introduction: “Enjoys long walks by the fjord.”

The other three burst into laughter. Ale burst forth from Hoots’ nose, and Elaria coughed and spluttered. Trit fell to the floor in a fit.

They really don’t care who I was? Do they?

“Or they elect to ignore it. You have your uses after all. How long do you think can you keep this up before more of the real you leaks out?”

Long enough for me to get to Mysrik.

“Then it’ll just be me and you.”

For eternity.

“Yes... eternity. Won’t it be beautiful...?”

They collected themselves, taking a breather and more large sips of ale. Hoots and Trit began talking about all the times Trit had been kicked out

of taverns, and Hoots regaled them with her own tales of fighting an entire ship's worth of seaman. Elaria turned to Carion.

"I'm glad you are coming, though. Who knew being foreign would actually be helpful?"

"Possession on that scale would have taken time. Makes sense everyone here is now susceptible, and we aren't," Carion said, his eyes peering down into his drink as he watched the bubbles pop and dissipate. "And paladin of the land ... nice for you."

"Yeah... Yeah, it is nice, isn't it? I just want to say, whatever you've done before, we'll just take you as you are now, if that's okay with you. Just don't share too many *ear-gouging* stories," Elaria said.

"Probably for the best." Carion took a sip of his drink.

"I've got a favour I'd like to ask. Consider it as sort of payment for protection while we travel?" Elaria said. Carion raised an eyebrow at her.

"Hey, I'm in high demand now. You get quality when traveling with the new protector of the land!" Elaria said with a smile.



CHAPTER 10



AS THEY RIDE FURTHER NORTH

From the diary of Red Velvet Commander Ryne

Day 500 of the Third Age

I return from a trip to Alitiar. My feelings are torn between joy, at having seen my cousins once more, and sadness, as I must leave them behind. My duties are here in the Red Velvet Forest, and that goes beyond anything else.

Maria, at sixteen, has begun her journey to nobility; soon she will have as much influence as Kain and Gareth. Maria! Of all people! She was up to my knee but years ago! Or maybe it just felt that way... So young she is, but so full of life. A true resident of Ma-Ural, I don't think I know anyone else who is more passionate about this land.

I had the pleasure of talking to an associate professor about how we run things in the Red Velvet Forest. He was will be visiting in the next week.

Day 816 of the Third Age

Never before have I seen a pupil of mine grow so much. Cecil is truly the best that has come to my door. I send him off today. He will become one of the commanders of Alitiar, and a protector to my beloved cousin Maria. I could not think of anyone better. Once a broken man, haunted by deeds of the past, he leaves a new man with

a new purpose. The pilgrimage be damned, a man like him is needed amongst the mortals. I am glad he is here to protect us, especially young Maria.

Day 16 of the Fourth Age

While tracking a particularly quick shadow through the Red Velvet Forest, the once still night was abruptly changed, the leaves shook, then the trees, then the ground. I had to drop to the earth in fear of falling uncontrollably. My ears were filled with a terrible and painful shriek. It was as if the very night sky screamed in agony. As quickly as it came, it was gone, and the still night returned. Even though it was brief, I could never forget such a sound.

I still wake up sometimes as my mind wanders to that moment. I am sending out messages throughout Ma-Ural to question this 'screaming night' and its origin.

I fear the worst.



The morning sun arrived and the town of Palmy came to life. Farmers were already coming to town with their goods, and merchants and townsfolk were already setting up the daily market. There was tension in the air; it lingered around every conversation and every thought. The streets were busy but not just with the normal hassle of a farming town; they were heavily littered with the refugees of those who had come from Alitiar. Everyone was doing their best, but no one was comfortable. Ivar was with a few mages who were conducting cleansing spells on those who had lined up just out in the courtyard. They hadn't found out exactly how the possessions were happening, so they were using all the spells they could think of to remedy it. Princess Maria walked out of the central building, Cecil on to one side of her and Elaria and Hoots on the other. They talked about the task at hand. Everyone who passed nearby gave a bow to the princess, some deeper than others, as some of the townsfolk were focused on other things or had their hands full.

Maria talked to Hoots and Elaria as they left the central building and made their way to the stables outside the main square. “So, yes, the pale dwarfs have been in these lands far longer than any of the other families of Ma-Ural. The dragon-kin of Dizstrum are technically the newest, but they are also the most reclusive. You have to be *very* careful with the pale dwarfs; they value tradition and their ways more than anything else. We have a good relationship, as our ancestors got along, but that doesn’t mean we should test it. So be respectful as much as you can. Something may seem weird to you, but it may mean the world to them.”

Cecil moved ahead of the three and into the stables. Maria looked down at the mud and loosened dirt beneath them, which squelched and took form around her feet. She breathed in heavily before looking back up at Hoots and Elaria, her big brown eyes gleaming with both concern and hope.

“The pale dwarfs have been our allies for as long as my family have been on Ma-Ural. Like I said, we haven’t heard from them, and anyone I’ve sent hasn’t returned, but you four ... you went into Alitiar and made it out alive,” she said with a sorrowful smile.

“Only by the skin of our teeth,” Hoots muttered.

Elaria nodded. “And mostly due to Carion’s efforts.”

“Yes, I am aware,” Maria said. “Keep an eye on him. Ivar said he is currently on the path to Mysrik and that his pilgrimage has begun. We get many of his type here.”

“His type?” Elaria seemed a little taken back.

Maria continued. “Lost, trying to find his way. This is all new to him, helping people I mean. So, keep an eye on him; he may revert back to his old ways. Hopefully he is able to be an ally until we get to the bottom of Kor-Thiliath’s plot.”

Both Elaria and Hoots nodded.

“As for the pale dwarfs, you four may be the only ones who can see what has happened. And I hate to ask, especially if they’ve suffered as we have, but plead with them. We need their help more than ever. I mean, look at us.” Maria motioned to the townsfolk going about their days. “We aren’t fighters. What few warriors we had fought for us to escape, and perished so we could live. I’ve sent word to the towns of the west, including my cousin

in the Velvet Forest further south, but this won't be enough. We shouldn't have to live in fear that the redsand army may one day trample us in the night. The dwarfs in the north have fighters—not many, but one pale dwarf is worth a hundred Alitiar soldiers.”

“That good, huh?” Hoots scoffed.

“Oh yes, you don't survive the tundra and permafrost without getting a bit hardy, but the creatures that roam that area are brutal and savage; that's what has made them brilliant warriors. We need all we can get if we plan to retake Alitiar. Kor-Thiliath cannot get into that vault. Otherwise, those like my brothers would have died ... died for nothing...” Maria's voice trailed off, as she tried to hold back her emotions. Hoots looked up to Elaria, concern on her face. She wanted to speak up, but for once, she was trying to be respectful. She had essentially been given a second chance by Maria. Elaria nodded in recognition.

“Princess, may I speak freely?” Elaria asked politely. Maria rubbed her eyes and smiled warmly at her; little dimples formed on her cheeks as she did.

“I told you to call me, Maria, and you are always free to do so. More questions?”

“Why aren't you sending your people north? Hoots is a good fighter, and I have extensive training. We could stay here and train a militia while someone more suited goes to the pale dwarfs.” Elaria was cautious in questioning Maria.

“I want my best local fighters, like Cecil, to train people here. I need you four north. It seems strangers in these lands can travel around much more easily without being possessed. Whatever has primed the rest of us has already affected us, so we're all scared about even leaving Palmy.”

“So, how do you plan on taking back Alitiar, if you'll all get possessed when getting close?” Elaria questioned.

“Well, thanks to you four, all being new here, we've gained some insight. Clearly it is affecting us here already. Is it in the food? The water? All the mages I have are investigating it now. We'll find out how he's doing it, plus I'm gathering the leaders here in the west to discuss how to approach it. That's for me to worry about.”

“Why did Kor-Thiliath want the key in the first place? Why did he go

rogue?” Elaria asked. Cecil passed the reins of two horses to Elaria, who opened her hand as he approached.

“Well, there had always been tension between us in the west and the east. I always thought it may have been jealousy; we have all the riches here, despite being quite a small landmass. When my family arrived ages ago, they were blessed with this area from the head of Mysrik, but those in the east did not get the same welcome and were more or less not permitted to live there; they just did anyway. We try not to boast our position, but it isn’t always seen that way.” Maria seemed saddened. Cecil moved to her side and took over.

“The dragon-kin of Dizstrum host dragons often. These dragons aren’t always well behaved, and raids on the coastal towns have become more and more common. This fuelled Kor-Thiliath’s interest in the key to the Mysrik tower, joining the council as a means of quelling the dragons—we formed the council in an attempt to discuss issues between the west and east. Kor saw it as a show of strength and dominion over those in Dizstrum. No one favoured him, but he soon gained followers in the east.”

Maria nodded. “Only my brother Gareth heard him out; he was always so good at listening. He would have been a great king. But one night, Kor-Thiliath snapped— a heated argument between him and Gareth possibly. We aren’t certain. The Screaming Night followed, and well, it has just snowballed from there. More tensions and less contact. We can’t take chances with what he could do with the power locked up in that tower.”

“Oh! Here, take this,” Maria added. “It is a symbol of my people, my family, and it might be useful with the dwarfs.” Maria revealed the brooch Hoots had given her from Kain. Hoots held out her hand, and Maria squeezed it tightly and looked Hoots in the eyes. Her smile hid the sadness for the loss of her brothers. She handed the brooch over.

“Good luck!” Maria turned to leave with Cecil. “And be swift!”

Elaria and Hoots looked at each other. Another quest at hand, one that held a lot of weight. Elaria shoved Hoots playfully, and they both smiled as they turned towards the horses.

Meanwhile, Carion was wandering through the morning market, carefully spying the produce and items for sale. He had his arms behind his back

and leaned forward as he walked. Suddenly he spied a small cart parked up to one side; several herbs and spices were neatly laid out on an angled wooden grid that faced the crowd. Each little square had a different herb or spice on display. Carion approached it quickly.

“Hello, sir!” the eager young man said from behind the small cart, smiling brightly at Carion.

Carion ignored him, his eyes darting quickly over the display.

“Is there something you are looking for, sir?” the young man asked. He had short plain hair and a few freckles dotted across his wide face.

“Do you have any mince-weed?” Carion asked, his eyes not lifting up.

“Mince ... weed? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it be—”

“Silene?”

“Umm...”

“White drop?”

“Ahh...”

Carion sighed. “Oh, what did they call it ... bulb grass?”

“Bulb grass? We feed that to the pigs.”

“You what? Go get me as much as you can,” Carion demanded.

“I’d have to leave the cart an—”

“How much do you make in a day?”

“What?”

Carion reached into his robe and pulled out several gold coins.

“I’ll give you one now, three upon you’re return. Go.” Carion tossed him the coin and the young man hesitated initially but then sprinted off. Carion retreated into his cloak and was about to retreat into his mind once more.

“Oh, there you are! They said you’d gone into the market.” Trit bounded toward Carion from the crowd. “Whatcha looking for?”

“Supplies. As I said, I am low on components. Seems I still am. There is very little here,” Carion said sharply.

“Ah well, that Ivar guy got me an old component pouch. Someone had left it behind recently. Thought you’d find use of it.” Trit presented a rugged black-leather satchel.

“Excellent,” Carion said, reaching out and snatching it from Trit.

Carion placed the satchel on the cart and plunged his hand inside, rummaging around. Trit watched with a tilted head; it almost looked as though

Carion had put his hand in the satchel impossibly deep, as if his hand was in a container that was much larger than what was presented. Carion then put his head into the bag. He then pulled out a small vial of yellow powder, sealed with a cork.

“Hold this.”

Trit came to his side as Carion started pulling various components out and handing them to him. The vial, a piece of marble, a rock-carving hammer, an orange peel, a single playing card, and small wilted leaf.

“What spell do you do with an orange peel?” Trit asked, picking the orange peel up and scrunching his face.

Carion lifted his head out of the bag and closed it.

“It’s used for skin infections. Some of these components are very situational, but this is better than nothing. This sulphur, though, this at least allows me to produce some fire spells. And this whisperleaf...”

“Are you up for this? You lost a bit of blood yesterday, ‘Carion.’”

“I’ll need to regrow it, but it’ll require some druid magic...”

“How many times can you use druid magic a day? Just ... curious.”

Carion considered the question for a moment.

About five times per day or so before I lose enough blood to pass out.

*“You are only willing to do it three times though. Let’s be honest here.
Got to save the others, just in case...”*

“A few times, I’d rather not, but...” He studied the wilted leaf. “This can be *very* potent if prepared properly” Carion leaned down and placed the leaf in a small hole in the dirt he created using his fingernails. Trit watched intently, holding the other components carefully in his hand. Carion concentrated on the leaf; it was discoloured and was turning hard, but he thought about the life it had once had, reaching out to it mentally. He thought about all the resources that leaf had once had, all the sunlight it once experienced. Carion felt it all. His hands glowed a dark green; then the glow migrated to his fingertips. Carion fluttered his fingers around the leaf, allowing the green glow to drip off and penetrated the leaf. It gained new

life then, it's colour returned, and the leaf thickened and swelled up with moisture and nutrients. The leaf began to grow, and soon it was a shoot, then several leaves, then a small bush, then a large bush. Carion stood now as the bush grew, expanding enough that the cart nearby was pushed back. People began watching Carion perform. He was now standing upright with his hands at his side. He then started plucking the large leaves.

"Ah ... doesn't that make you bleed a bunch?" Trit asked, looking over at Carion's face. "At least that's what Hoots was saying."

Carion moved his cheek muscles around, as if he were chewing something, then bared his teeth. They were covered in blood. Carion leaned to one side and spat out large chunks of blood. Onlookers gasped and remarked in disgust.

"Doesn't that, hurt? But also ... why?" Trit asked, also disgusted.

"Where do you think druid magic comes from?"

"Ah ... like nature and stuff?"

"And where do you think it comes from for a disgraced druid?"

"You?"

Carion was moving his tongue around his closed mouth, nodding to the components Trit still held in his hand. "Yes. Now, put those in my pouch."

Carion presented his open pouch to Trit, who looked in, wanting to see how these pouches worked. *Are they just endless? I kinda want one...*

Trit put all the components in, including several of the leaves Carion harvested. Trit was trying to feel the inside to see if he could get anything out. *Why didn't I look into the other one?!*

The cart owner came back, rushing from the crowds, carrying a bushel of long blades of thick grass, with smaller leaflets on the sides. He stopped and looked quizzically at the bush that was now obscuring his cart. Carion walked up to him, snatched the bushel, and placed several gold coins in his hand. The young man ignored him mostly, and just looked confused at his cart. Carion began walking off towards the main square, the crowd parting as he walked through. Trit waved nervously at the young man and jogged after Carion, who had retreated into his cloak once more.

Alright, cool, that's all I had to do, right? Oh wait!

"Oh yeah, there was this other thing Ivar gave me to give you," Trit said, thrusting his hand into his back pocket. He leaned back for a moment,

his tongue sticking out in concentration as he tried to find what he had put back there. Finally, he presented a small shard of jagged ice to Carion, whose eyes widened.

“Where did you get *that*?” Carion asked, moving to pluck it from Trit’s palm. Trit closed his hand and pulled it away. Carion’s pupils constricted as he stared at Trit.

Shit, he’s frightening. “Okay so, I’m t-trying this thing called *facing my fears*,” Trit stuttered. Carion’s mouth opened, about to speak but initially stunned.

“You know I could kill you,” he said, his eyes unblinking.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that for a second.”

“I could kill you in many ways.”

“Yes, I think you could, but listen—”

“I’d sell your hide for a hot meal.”

“My hide? Oh gross.”

“Your eyes, if they hadn’t burst, would go for ten gold pieces each.”

“Oh really? Ten gold?”

“But half-elf liver is a delicacy in—”

“Okay, I get it. You are very creepy and just the worst, but listen! I want to try something.”

“Try something?”

“Yeah, it’ll be real quick, and then you can have this ice thingy. You know it feels warm, right?”

“Yes, it should. That’s crystallized spring water from the elemental plane of water. It doesn’t melt on the natural plane. There’s powerful spells I could do with that.”

“So, one thing, just ... help me out. You may even enjoy it.”

I should just humour him.

“I think you could get twelve for those eyes.

You could always kill him later.”

No, I believe this fool has a use; he just doesn’t know it yet.

*“Just admit that you like people for once.
I hate being your only ‘friend’.”*



As Elaria and Hoots prepared their horses, Trit came by on a black stallion. Maria looked at it, impressed, then looked at Trit, who was puffing his chest out as much as he could. He then spoke as formally as possible as he rode by Cecil and Maria.

“*Good morrow to thee, m’lady,*” he said. Cecil scoffed a little, but Maria giggled behind her hand and continued on her way. Trit approached Hoots and Elaria, who were confused by how Trit had managed to score such an animal.

“I call him *Shadowmere*.” Trit gave the black stallion a swift jab to the side with his boot. The horse kicked up violently, and Trit fell off and landed on his side in the mud. The horse then began to shrink. Horse features disappeared, replaced by more humanoid ones, and then clothing and robes sprouted out of thin air. Within a few blinks, Carion stood up, after being on all fours. He brushed himself off and wrapped his dark green cloak around himself tightly.

“You ruined it. Call me *Shadowmere* or kick me one more time, and I will reduce you to ash,” Carion said bluntly to Trit, who threw his arms up and smiled from the ground. Hoots laughed with him, and Elaria smiled.

“That was the last time you’ll convince me to be a horse,” said Carion, wresting the small ice shard from Trit’s back pocket. Trit giggled as Carion stomped away from him and grabbed reins from Elaria.

“I knew you could be a horse!” Trit exclaimed from the ground. “You are a druid!”

“You happy you faced your fears now?” Carion said scornfully to Trit as he got up on his assigned horse.

“You? Oh no, I’m still deadly frightened of you,” Trit explained, getting up from the dirt, brushing off the mud that stuck to him. “I’ve just never ridden a horse before.”

“You’ve never ridden a horse?” Hoots asked.

Trit shook his head. "Nah, never really got the chance. Was scared of them, but now! Oh, no worries! Thought I'd try it out, before setting off today, with someone I trust."

Carion tried to ignore Trit.

"He said he trusts you."

Shut it.

"It's because he doesn't know you."

Shut.

"You've killed for less."

It.

"So, how'd you convince Carion to turn into a horse AND let you ride him? Because, I have some ideas," Hoots asked excitedly. Trit smiled with triumph.

Carion spied some guards pointing and gesturing towards him. "We should leave now anyway; I've caused enough commotion."

"But you *are* coming with us?" Hoots asked. Carion nodded.

"This is my path to immortality. Apparently. Hoots, with me," Carion said, shuffling forward to allow room on his horse. "Trit!" Carion got Trit's attention. "Go with Elaria. You'll have lots of time to talk to your long-lost sister as we ride north." Carion turned towards the northern road. Trit clenched his teeth, his eyes widening as Carion almost gave him a smile as payback.

"Why you gotta do me dirty like that?!" Trit called after him.

"You kicked me," Carion hollered back. Elaria reached her hand down to Trit.

"Come on, we do have to talk about that, you know. Can't avoid it forever," Elaria said as she almost effortlessly lifted Trit in front of her onto the horse.

"Yeah ... I know." Trit slumped down in front of Elaria as she took the reins and they rode towards Carion and Hoots, going for the northern road.

Palmy lay behind them. To their left and right, lush farmland stretched into the distance. Several farmers with their carts passed by or went down one of the various roads spreading out from the main one. They were told a forest began after several miles of farmland to the west, and following the forest would be a quiet fishing hamlet, followed by the vast and expansive ocean. The tall mountain spires still erupted from the horizon to their right. In front of them was a large range of mountains, with practically no foothills, just a harsh and treacherous winding path carved between jagged peaks. Capped between and on top of the mountains was snow of the purest white. They were heading north and up, which meant cold temperatures and ice awaited.

After an hour or so, the farmland stopped and rolling plains surrounded them. Dotted forests became full forests, and they once again found themselves within one as they continued their approach to the snow-capped spires, between which their destination, the northern tundra, lay.

"We can't avoid talking about this forever, Trit," Elaria said.

"Huh?" Trit asked, pretending like he didn't know what she meant.

"The scenery is beautiful and all, but we can talk. That truth circle was a little inappropriate, but that doesn't mean the truth didn't come out—at least what we believe to be the truth."

"Yeah, I know. I didn't really want to tell you that way..." Trit was usually much more talkative. He didn't have much memory of his family or anything relating to them; he liked the idea that he meant more to someone, somewhere. But being in limbo, not knowing the complete truth, might be more comfortable than knowing a painful one.

"It's why you followed us initially..." Elaria said to prompt further conversation.

"Yeah ... but I feel like, if you thought it was true, you'd be more excited or say something about it. You've been just as quiet."

"Look, Trit, I was sent to the Eight Winds paladins when I was very young. I was there for, wow, twenty-five years, but I barely remember my own parents. I was told they spent everything they had to get me there, so I devoted myself and became the paladin I am. I didn't seek them out afterwards. I think they knew I would make a life for myself without them, but there is something I do know..."

Trit looked back at her. He wanted to look her in the eyes as best as he could. "I ... I didn't have a younger brother, or sister. It was just me, my high elf father, and human mother, probably shunned from their own families for it too... You and I are both half-elves, rejected from most civilized places, and I got my fair share of beatings, believe me. There were very few days that would go by where I wasn't reminded of it. But my parents? They didn't have any more children. They couldn't. Not after me..."

Trit looked forward again, saddened by the notion that he was truly alone, and more importantly, abandoned in the world.

"My earliest memory was seeing that birthmark," he said. "I was in the streets, cold and afraid, and all I remember is looking up and seeing that half of a face being rushed by and out of sight... I don't own many possessions, but the ones I do have? I like to put that mark on them, like my lute here." Trit rotated his lute, which he held in front of him, and on the other side was a large mark that looked like an archipelago. Elaria saw it and couldn't help but press her hand to her face.

"It looks just like it. Wow, that is incredible..."

"Yeah, I know. It is kind of creepy," Trit added. Elaria was transfixed by it for a few moments before Trit reversed the lute and held it tightly once more. "I like traveling, but I always gave the excuse that I was looking for my long-lost sibling, the one with that symbol." Trit stared off into the distance.

"That doesn't mean we can't be brother and sister," Elaria reassured Trit. Trit looked back to her, hopeful once more. "The people you experience life with, and the experiences you have together, can shape a family more than the circumstances of your birth ever could. The fact you travel with Hoots and me shows that you are more of a sibling to us than any we could have. Just remember all those you've had a pleasant memory with. Are they not more important to your life story than any blood relative who left you on the street, forgotten? Of course they are. You can make your own family, so give it time, and maybe I can be your sister."

Trit smiled. "Yeah... Yeah, you're right, *sis*." Trit winked, and leaned back onto her for a moment. They giggled together, spirits brightening once more.

"It is a mystery though; how strangely similar my mark is to your

memory. Perhaps we can figure that out together,” Elaria continued. “Also, this is actually a burn from the kitchen at the paladin school, not a birthmark. I think I was ... like ... six? Maybe?”

“Okay, well that ruins some of the mystery behind it,” Trit said playfully.

“Any chance we get, we’ll ask about it. Alright? You have my word,” Elaria added. Trit held his lute and smiled to himself.

“Well, tell me a tale, Trit. What does Trit the bard get up to on his way across the natural plane?” Elaria asked joyfully.

Trit lit up. “Oh, let me tell you about the donkey, three gnomes, and a barrel of ball bearings.”

“Okay, okay, okay, I got my question for the day!” Hoots exclaimed excitedly.

“Hmm...” Carion barely remarked on the notion. The two had been travelling in silence for some time in front of Elaria and Trit. Hoots was pointing out everything she saw, talking to Carion as though he were talking back and generally giddy with excitement. Carion was pondering many things, specifically what Elaria had said last night. Carion planned to continue travelling with them, mostly for protection, as he was now worried that some fey knew he was in the isles.

“I got to plan them out! I only get one a day! Okay, so ... back in the forest in Alitiar, you said that there were worse things after you than fey creatures.”

“Is that your question?” Carion barked.

“No that was a statement. My question is, what else could be after you?”

“Wolves,” Carion quickly answered.

Hoots jabbed him with her elbow. “A real answer!”

Carion stayed silent for several moments.

“Are you really not going to answer?” Hoots asked impatiently.

“The answer is more complicated than you expect. My *job* involved traveling to various planes, both upper and lower. It attracted attention, so yes, many creatures could be after me, much worse than the *fey*.”

Hoots pondered for a moment. “Other-planar creatures sound way more powerful than fey. Why don’t they all just smite you now?”

Carion remained silent.

“Oh gotcha, a question for another day, yeah?”

Carion looked to the back of her scruffy head and decided to throw her a bone.

“I was able to erase the thought of me from all the minds of this dimension, which includes all planes beyond this one. The only issue is that, if they knew me before, or knew my real name, their memories of me would return if that true name is ever spoken aloud again.”

“Oh wow... That must’ve been hard to do,” Hoots remarked.

Carion looked off into the distance for a moment, “You have no idea.”

“So, I may have known you before that memory wipe? I would just need to know your name to remember it all ... ”

“Only I know my true name now,”

“You probably won’t tell me that.”

“No, I will not. I left that behind when I got here.”

“Wait, so the fey recognize you?” Hoots was really pushing her questions today.

“Well, no, but the fey are ... well ... the *fey*. They probably felt my magic and sensed me as hostile. Hopefully the specifics are lost on them for now.”

“Ooooooooooh! Cool, cool, cool!”

“Satisfied?” Carion questioned.

“NEVER! But now I know just what I’ll be asking you for the next week!”

“Hmm...” Carion grunted and returned to silence as Hoots’ mind raced with possible queries, her curiosity and imagination overflowing at the prospect. Carion’s past life was clearly interesting to her, but he knew that the less specific he was, the better. It was better for everyone that they didn’t know exactly *who* he was, or *what* he knew.



A glistening pearlescent mace raised above his head, dripping with blood and brain matter. Fire and magical energy were flowing all around as the soft gurgle of a blood-filled mouth tried to scream. A face covered with anger, fear, remorse, then sadness...

... *Thud Thud THUD* ...

Carion woke up abruptly with a shake and shortened breath. All his hair was standing on end, and goosebumps covered his arms. The tweets of birds and the soft morning sun now filled his senses. He sat up. It didn't take long before he was fully awake; too many times he'd had to be ready to go in a moment's notice, and that had made him immune to a peaceful sleep. Elaria, not yet in her full armour, tended to the remains of a small campfire they had set up the evening prior. She looked over at Carion and gave a big, friendly smile. Carion stood and brushed himself off.

"That's another night you woke up from," she said to him, "Keep it up." She leaned towards him and whispered, "So, you off to do it?"

Carion nodded.

"Good. Have fun, but don't be too loud," Elaria said before getting up, and slowly getting her things in order.

Carion walked over to Hoots, who was sprawled unevenly on her bedroll. He kicked her hard in the side. Hoots let out a wail of pain and woke with an irritable look.

"Follow me. Now," Carion said, walking into the light forest.

"Wha ... What...?" Hoots asked, one eye still closed.

"I'm not repeating myself. Come," Carion said, walking off. Hoots looked over at Elaria, who was petting the bridge of her horse's nose. Elaria looked back at the dishevelled Hoots and nodded supportively. Hoots got up and stumbled after him. He hadn't gone far. There was a small stream nearby within a light clearing. The water was cool and fresh as it trickled down from the towering mountains that overhung their small camp. It was far enough away that they were out of sight of Elaria and the still-sleeping Trit.

"Erghh... Why are we out here? I could be sleeping for a few more minutes." Hoots was still slumped and dragged her feet. Carion stood upright with his hands behind his back. Hoots stood several metres back.

"What spells do you know?" Carion asked bluntly.

"Huh?"

"You are a sorcerer, correct?" Carion continued.

"Err... Yeah? At least that's what I was told. And it's what you seem to know." Hoots was beginning to wake up now.

"Besides me, who told you?"

“My parents did.”

“I’ll ask again, and this time I want an answer where you don’t lie,” Carion said, unimpressed.

“How’d you—”

“It was part of my job. Right now, it is important for what I am going to teach you.”

“Teach?” Hoots perked up more. Carion realized what he’d said and awaited her wakening mind to connect the dots. “Elaria is making you teach me, isn’t she? Ha! That’s why she is letting you come with us!” Hoots remarked excitedly.

Carion made no visible response, but said, “I also want those I travel with to be able to protect themselves. So, who told you that you were a sorcerer?”

Hoots was about to answer but hesitated a little. She had never actually told anyone before, at least not with the level of detail she assumed he wanted. She closed her mouth before responding with more confidence.

“It was the lizard-kin clan outside my hometown. My parents *knew* but ignored it.”

“Do you know *why* you are a sorcerer?” Carion asked.

“What ... what do you mean? I just told you. Lizard-kin told me I was a sorcerer! That doesn’t bother you? That’s ... *weird*, isn’t it?” Carion gave her a sharp gaze.

He knew about the lizard-kin, tribes of humanoids with the appearance of lizards. They rarely exposed themselves to society and were often seen as violent or barbaric, probably because their territory would get invaded by unwanted visitors. Nobody talked to them, and no one wanted to acknowledge them. Carion had heard that their ancestry was similar to the dragon-kin but had diverged centuries ago; their language was still similar. It was a little strange that Hoots wasn’t just spared by a lizard-kin tribe but actually taught by them.

Weird, sure, he thought to himself, *but no sorcerer is the same.*

“Oh, you’d know best, wouldn’t you?”

“Why would it bother me? I don’t care *who* told you; I just want you to be honest. It is atypical, but it doesn’t matter. Now, how do sorcerers *become* sorcerers?”

“It just happens?” Hoots said, less confidently.

“And why?”

“Argh! It just happens!” Hoots raised her voice in confusion. Carion looked at her harshly. The stare said more than his words could, and it was telling her to shut up.

“A druid, like myself ... where do my magic abilities come from?” Carion questioned.

“Like nature and stuff?”

“The fey grant individuals power over nature and the forces that hold them. And warlocks?”

“Doesn’t some otherworldly entity give them magic or something?”

“Yes. And a wizard?” Carion continued to quiz her.

“They are just really smart, so they learn all the right stuff. Gotta use all those components to make the magic work.”

“Good, and a paladin?”

“They are limited, but it’s like a promise, like powerful dedication gives them a little kick! Well, that’s what El was telling me. Now that she did her pledge, she said she can power up her sword even more!” Hoots kicked the air playfully.

“And a sorcerer?”

“Like I said, just happens!” Hoots said, raising her voice once more.

“So, no one gives it to you, nor do you earn it. The magic you use is just ... you.” Carion pointed to Hoots. Hoots thought on this for a moment; Carion knew that was the answer, and he was making sure she understood it.

“The spells you know, no one tells you, nor do you read about them. So how do you learn spells?” Carion continued.

“It ... It just happens?”

Carion, who was pacing, stopped and looked at her. She looked to him for approval. Carion nodded and then continued to pace. Hoots smiled a little.

“You are a sorcerer. It happens at random. When a mortal soul enters

the natural plane, some latent magic force from beyond reality attaches itself to it, because it craves something that only you can give it.”

“And what’s that?”

“Life. Mortality. Magic can only exist through mages, and the magic in you can only exist *with* you. It is volatile and unpredictable, but it *craves* life. It is also why you are so reluctant to die; you were more prepared to relive your first fire experience, in Alitiar, than to succumb to death. Still, I had to force it out; otherwise, we would have perished. You need to release some of this magic often, otherwise it builds up and—”

“Erupts?”

“Yes. No one knows they are a sorcerer until their first event. Clearly, yours was fire.”

“Yes” Hoots lowered her head.

“You didn’t understand it. You have the capacity for many spells; you just don’t know which ones you actually know. Or better put, which ones exist within you already. With practice, you can learn more, and learn to control the more powerful ones too,” Carion explained.

“Wait. How’d you know I knew that wind spell?”

“I didn’t. I made a calculated judgement about what kind of sorcerer you are. I was testing you,” Carion said bluntly. Hoots scrunched her face up in confusion. “Remember when we met? I read you like a book. It was part of my *job* to read people; their personality gives insight into what kind of spells they know. This is particularly important when dealing with a sorcerer like yourself.”

“So, because you had an idea of what kind of person I was, you knew what spells I might be able to do?”

“Yes, someone on the run, someone by themselves, someone who likes to play tricks. I deduced you knew, or at least had the capacity to know, certain spells. You are, predictably, unpredictable.”

Hoots looked at her hands, rotating them around. She was thinking about how many spells she might know without knowing they existed within her.

He continued. “It isn’t known whether the spells come first and dictate the personality, or the other way around, but they are connected. Correlated.” Carion took a large breath in, holding it briefly before

exhaling. "You are what I'd call an elemental sorcerer."

"Oooh... *Elemental*... Meaning?"

"You can figure it out"

"My magic has to do with the elements?"

"There's subclasses to help quantify sorcerer magic, but magic doesn't always adhere to the rules we make for it. Not all your spells are elemental based, like that magic hand you produced for Elaria, but the powerful spells will be elemental, hence your first event."

"So, there's like heaps of sorcerers, right? All with different flavours and such?!" Hoots bellowed with excitement.

"How many wizards do you think there are?"

"What? Umm ... like hundreds?"

"There are thousands, and there're many schools for them. What about paladins?"

"Thousands?"

"Hundreds, less common but still prevalent. What about warlocks?"

"Stop testing, just spit out whatever you—"

"How many warlocks?" Carion interrupted, as Hoots began stomping in frustration. She threw her arms up.

"Like ten!"

"Hundreds. How many sorcerers?"

"Ten!?" Hoots spat in frustration.

"You are not special but extremely uncommon. I, personally, have only ever dealt with sixteen."

"Dealt with?" Hoots retreated a bit.

"Sorcerers don't flaunt themselves, because they can be exceedingly dangerous. *You* can be exceedingly dangerous."

"What did you mean by 'dealt with'?" Hoots pushed. Carion looked right at her, and Hoots jumped back.

"She needs to know, 'Carion.' She needs to know you."

No, she doesn't.

"Oh yes, she does! How else is she going to realize why people may cower at the word 'sorcerer'?"

...

"Tough love."

Tough love.

"What do you think I meant by 'dealt'? I've *killed* sixteen sorcerers. There are three types of sorcerers that I was contracted to kill: necromancers, phase shifters, and elementalists like you. *You are dangerous.* That torrent of fire you unleashed pales in comparison to what you could dish out."

Hoots stepped backwards; her mouth agape. *I didn't want any of this!* She took another step away from him.

"But..." He held up one finger. Hoots stopped backing up. "That is when you are not trained or disciplined. A necromancer can control the forces of life. This could be used to exploit death *or* heal others. An elementalist can learn to control the untamed forces that fuel our plane; a raging bush fire may create death on a large scale, but a fire is also used for cooking, for keeping warm... It's related to the warmth of life."

Hoots stood tall.

"An arcane, symbiotic parasite gave you this power, but *you* can choose what you do with it. So, we can go over some basic spells and you can practice with me for as long as I'm around. Every morning."

Hoots nodded slowly at first but then more enthusiastically.

"What spells do you know that tire you out?" Carion asked.

"Not many, honestly. The Ethereal Hand, Earth Mould—we did that one together—and Whisp, I think it's called. That just makes lights. I guess that wind one you got out of me, and ... well, I don't know the common word for it. The lizard-kin mostly used dragon-speak. But I could pull up fire and shoot it out. I couldn't control it though. I hurt everyone nearby when I used it."

"You can't control it, because powerful spells—ones that have high impact on our plane—either require components, for wizards like me, or a focus. What you need is an arcane focus."

"Oh, an arcane focus, like that wand in your arm!" Hoots pointed to the blue wand stitched into Carion's forearm. Carion lifted his arm up and peered at it for a moment.

“Not exactly,” Carion answered sternly. Hoots looked down. “But close.” Hoots lifted her head back up again with a little smile.

“With an arcane focus, you can control those more powerful spells. When I was *dealing* with a sorcerer, the first thing I’d do to gain the upper hand was to separate them from their arcane focus. Arcane foci can be difficult to obtain. Often, they are special to you. For you, it might be something that ‘calls’ to you. Often arcane foci are, as you said, wands, which is an arbitrary concept, but crystals, orbs, or anything that *feels like you can channel magic through it*, will work,” Carion explained.

Hoots began to look around the clearing, hoping this focus would just yell at her when she spied it.

“What about this rock?” Hoots bent down and grabbed a small pebble near her feet. She lifted it up to her face.

“Did this rock call out to you?” Carion asked.

“Yeah, didn’t you hear it? ‘*Aaah! Take me! I’ve been so lonely!*’” Hoots moved the rock around as if it was talking and moving, and giggled at her own actions. Then she looked at Carion, but he was unimpressed. She rolled her eyes and threw the rock back onto the ground.

Shrugging, she threw her arms up. “Well, how will I know?”

“You are looking out for one. You feel a call, and you know it when you feel it. Be sure to listen, and before you ask, no, it won’t be something actually yelling at you. For now, we’ll stick to simpler spells. I want to see if you know the Fire-Spray spell. It is similar to any fire spell, but smaller. I use a small amount of sulphur for it.”

“Okay!” Hoots said, excited. Carion approached her and turned towards the small creek to her left. She didn’t realize what he was up to right away but then awkwardly shuffled to his side.

“Hold your hands out, thumbs together,” Carion said, placing his thumbs together and stretching his hands out wide in front of him. Hoots adjusted her stance and mirrored Carion as best as she could. Carion looked at her, releasing his hands and grabbing her arms tightly.

“Unless you want to ignite everything at your feet, hold them far out and spread those hands. Spread them wide. There you go. Now this will shoot flames out about five meters in front of you. So, hold this stance.” Carion returned to his own stance.

“As you hold this stance, think about what you want to do, like when we cast Earth Mould. Feel the heat from your hands, and feel how you are a conduit for this heat. Let it bottle up inside you but know your hands are the release valve. Feel it... Feel the heat... Feel it on your hands... fingertips, thumb, palm... *Focus on them*,” Carion said more softly.

Hoots took in a few deep breaths. She did exactly as Carion said, and she began to feel a burning sensation all over her hands. She felt as though she was sweating but no sweat formed on her brow. She didn’t know what to do. She didn’t feel comfortable, but the burning was too strong. She turned her hands and looked at them, expecting to see blisters and burns.

“NO!” Carion grabbed her hands and rotated them back so they were facing away from her. “Use it! Use the heat! Release it all. Use your verbal cue—it is different for everyone, but if you truly know the spell, the mantra will come to you. It isn’t in any language; it’ll feel and sound like gibberish. But it is yours—your mantra for this spell. You can hear it now. I know you can, so release it! Do it!” Carion gave her these instructions quickly. Hoots felt the word in her head. No one, not even her inner monologue, was saying it, and she had no idea how it sounded or how it was spelt.

Can I even pronounce it?

The heat was getting to be too much, so she just blurted out whatever she could. It fell out of her mouth like vomit:

“Squaladeshq!”

At that, orange flames erupted from her hands. A five-meter cone of flame was propelled out in front of her. The heat was intense, but it felt right; it felt welcoming. Hoots smiled a little in the glow. As quickly as it began, the flames diminished. Hoots maintained her stance. For a moment, she didn’t breathe, but she started again after a few seconds, still in her stance.

“You can relax now,” Carion muttered. Hoots loosened up and looked at Carion to see if he was proud or showed any gratification from teaching her something, but he was still his emotionless self. “I want you to do that every day. Every morning. As well as your other spells. Practice them.”

Hoots nodded, still catching her breath. She looked down at her hands. No scorch marks or anything, just her pale skin. Untouched.

“You need to know these spells off by heart. If you put a big show on like

that every time you cast a spell, everyone will know what you are doing. You know what happens when we get in trouble with bandits, and they know you cast spells?”

“No. What?”

“They’ll kill you first. You’ll be painting a target on yourself, because you are capable of very powerful things. You are skilled enough to perform a few spells together, as you demonstrated with Elaria. So, you want the motions, the verbal component, all of it to be as subtle and quick as possible. That slight edge can mean the difference between you catching them all on fire or being an archer’s pincushion.” At that, barely moving, Carion rotated one foot towards the creek, whispered a word so quietly the wind could have taken it away, lifted his hands ever so slightly, with only a sprinkle of sulphur coating them, and fire erupted out in a cone. He kept eye contact with Hoots the whole time. Hoots, in shock, opened her mouth in disbelief. The flames whistled loudly.

“Lesson finished. I’m hungry.” Carion extinguished his spell with a flick of the wrist and turned back, heading towards the camp.

“Wait. You only said a nice thing about two of the sorcerers, necromancers *and* elementalists, but not the other one. What was it again? And why no positives about them?”

“Phase shifters.”

“Yeah.”

“Because there’s no redeeming properties about phase shifters. They’re all pricks.”

Oh, there’s a story there! Hoots thought.

“They don’t need arcane foci, which makes them harder to pick out. They are incredibly annoying to *deal* with.”

“How did you deal with sorcerers without foci?”

“Cut off both hands.” With that, Carion headed back to the camp. Hoots stayed in the clearing for just a moment. The lizard-kin had taught her a few things about this, as much as they could and were willing to share. She was skilled enough to cast those small spells she mentioned, but she’d never had the confidence to even attempt controlling a damaging or truly aggressive spell like this.

This'll make mornings a little more exciting! Just don't get in Carion's bad books.

From the other side of the stream, hidden in the bushes, invisible eyes watched the two carefully, dissipating as Hoots left the clearing and returned to the camp.

CHAPTER 11

AS THEY TRAVERSE THE MOUNTAIN PASS

Lost Personal anthropological notes (4 of 18)

Notes to prepare for my journey north, most gathered from locals who make trips on the main roads. Always trust a local's advice!

Most of the mountains here are spires, jagged and unclimbable rocky towers that dot the ocean around the southern area of the western land. The mountains continue inland, snaking their way around the western lands to the north, creating a perilous range, like a spine (I believe that is what they call this geographical feature) on the eastern side of the western lands.

Deeper north, these spires continue, and collect to make a raised area. This is the land of the pale dwarfs (reminder: pack warm clothing). Connecting the lower lands of Alitiar to this northern tundra, encased in mountains, is a steep and treacherous path that winds harshly up between two of these spires. It is on this road that all the goods from the ore-rich northern land are transported down and continue to Cospid. The journey from the pale dwarfs' town of Loft to Palmy is two full days, a ride to the base of the path followed by a hard-upwards trek for the second day. The pale dwarfs prefer to not use horses (a combination of short stature, cold terrain, and a path that's terribly dangerous when transporting goods).

The dwarfs have two major mines: One is about two-thirds up the mountain path, and the other, a sacred mine, is near the town (apparently, I won't be able to visit this one, but I'll find out for sure later). There are several paths deeper into the permafrost, but these are seldom used. I've been to a few mines before, but I am curious about how these may differ to those on the mainland, especially when it comes to mythril.

~ Associate Professor Lucky Montana



The foursome were making slow progress. The switchback path was harsh and unforgiving, making their travels slow. They had decided to switch up riders, with Elaria and Hoots on one horse and Carion reluctantly riding with Trit on the other, but after a while, the path was too perilous to ride, so the four walked up with the two horses. The road was well worn and wasn't too difficult for the horses when navigated single file, but there was barely enough room for someone to dismount. Hoots and Elaria were chatty most of the morning up, but as the path got more difficult, concentration and concern were at the forefront of their minds, and so an understandable silence fell, at least for a time. As they got further up, the wind began to get stronger and stronger. These warm winds sailed over the tops of the spires and swiftly blew into the lands around Alitiar.

"What a beautiful view," Hoots said out loud as the horse she and Elaria were walking with continued on the straight portion of the switchback. Elaria, who had been completely focused on not going over the edge, glanced over at the view. From this point, they could see Alitiar and much of the western lands. The sun was lower in the sky to the east and subtly emanating from the tops of the mountains, but the plains still remained lit. Lush green covered the entire landscape, and the size of the plots of farmland they'd passed the day before could now be seen. Palmy was visible, but it was dwarfed by the magnificent castle of Alitiar, which sprouted up to pierce the sky, seeming like an immature mountain itself. The purple roofs were an unlit beacon and complimented the surrounding colours, highlighting the simplicity of the land before them. At this height, they

were above the tallest tower, and for a brief moment, as the warm breeze came down on Elaria and Hoots, they felt peaceful as they soaked in the outstanding view together.

Trit, still relatively petrified of Carion, stayed silent for most of the trip up. Carion was also quiet. He was watching his feet plod, one after another, his pupils not straying from the rocky ground as they continued. Thoughts and scenes had been plaguing his mind ever since they'd left their camp that morning. Running around in his skull were thoughts that could be his own, and others that were not. Carion felt his head pounding and his heartbeat pumping loudly. With each beat, his vision faded in and out. He wasn't prepared to show this; he just retreated away from reality as much as he could, but kept being ripped back.

One foot after another... left... right... left...

"Which 'scene' should I play out in your mind next?"

Right... left... right...

"You never liked kids..."

Left... right... left...

"It wasn't the idea of kids..."

Right... left... right...

"It was how awfully they'd scream."

Left... right... left...

"It was that certain pitch that always got to you."

Right... left... right...

"That's why you'd often go for the neck."

Left... right... left...

“Do you remember your first?”

Right... left... right...

“Oh you do! Who could have forgotten that night!”

Left... right... left...

“That night you wanted their screams...”

RIGHT... LEFT... RIGHT...

*“Nothing brings parents running more scared than when their broods’
screams pierce the night.”*

LEFT... RIGHT... LEFT...

“Then came the fire...”

Carion scrunched up his face, stopping briefly and closing his eyes hard. His head pounded hard, and his skin felt as though it were stretching. As the wind picked up a little, the soft breeze blew Trit’s mop of hair about, catching Carion’s eye.

“You saw that right, ‘Carion’?”

... yes

“Trit,” Carion said, getting his attention.

“Hmm? Oh, what’s up?” Trit answered with some confusion. Carion never initiated a conversation, especially not with him.

“You are a half-elf, correct?”

“Ah ... yeah?”

“What kind?”

“Well, I lived most of my early days on the streets of—”

“What kind of *elf*?”

Trit stopped for a second, blinking wildly for a moment as he pondered the question, one he had never really thought about before.

"I ... I don't really know; I don't have gills." He chuckled nervously. "So, we can rule out sea elf..."

"You'd recognize that chestnut hair anywhere ... even just that small amount."

I know.

"What colour were his eyes?"

... Brown.

"... I've never had a knack for hunting or whatever rangers get up to, so I don't think I'm a wood elf..."

"Were they just brown?"

Don't do this; don't put these thoughts in there.

"... No, there was another colour in there, a glint of something else..."

Drop it.

"... then there's those elves who just live underground in large networks, but their skin is grey, so probably not that. Wait, don't they have poor eyesight? Nah, my eyesight is fine..."

"It was purple, wasn't it? It was just a hint!"

Stop. There was no purple in his eyes, don't put that idea in my head...

"You know who else had purple eyes?"

You've been looking for a reason to circle round to this all day.

"SHE had purple eyes."

"... I mean Maria was a half-elf too! But I think she said she was part high elf, so I could be that. They usually don't have half-elf kids, so maybe

that's why I was abandoned. Oh, hey did you see a tower from the boat? I think it was that Mysrik tower thing but I'm not sure, it felt weird to look at."

"She had purple eyes."

Don't.

"Before you burst them open!"

Please...

... Thud! ...

"What do you think Carion?" Trit spun to Carion whose eyes were darting pack and forth violently.

... Thud! ...

"Ah, come on! I bet you saw it too, right?" Trit jested.

THUD!

Carion suddenly grabbed Trit's mouth and held it shut, which muffled his words. The two looked forward to Elaria, who had stopped and seemed focused elsewhere; Hoots was looking around aimlessly. They were only just able to stand side by side with their horse. With a single finger, Elaria gave instructions to quiet down before she pointed upwards. Carion looked up, but he quickly deduced that he and Trit should get out of sight as best as they could, before they assessed the situation further. Hoping to reach the mountainside mine, named Earthheart, for a respite before pushing for Loft, expecting an arrival around midnight, the party now had to deal with some unforeseen circumstance.

"What did you see?" Hoots whispered to Elaria. She was trying to get as close to the mountainside as possible. Carion and Trit were doing the same, both looking over with the same question on their faces.

"I got a ... tingle" Elaria whispered.

“Ah, that’s probably just breakfast,” Trit said, brushing Carion’s hand away. “My stomach has been grumbling for a bit.”

“No, it was a sense like the one I had in Alitiar. It was fleeting, but I felt it again,” Elaria said, her eyes drifting off.

“We’ve been going for ages; shouldn’t we be near the mine by now?” Hoots muttered.

“Earthheart, yeah. I think the landing is just round this corner, which is why I’m worried. Even if that feeling was subtle, it could mean we are dealing with something like Alitiar.”

“Ah shit, the dwarfs might have their own brainwashing happening,” Trit remarked.

Elaria nodded. “Exactly. Carion, did you feel anything?”

Carion was blank, his pupils small.

“Purple eyes, chestnut hair, purple eyes, chestnut hair...”

“Carion? Hey, buddy, you good?” Trit said playfully.

“Did you feel anything?” Hoots added.

“N... No, no I was ... distracted,” Carion pressed his fingers to his temple.

Elaria looked on with concern. “I don’t think we should take chances, but if the mine is ... taken ... we have to investigate.”

“Right, yep, yep.” Hoots nodded. “Might be the dwarfs, but if it ain’t, it’s still worth a look.”

“Gotcha.” Trit nodded as well.

“Yes ... sure,” Carion added, blinking as he lifted his head. With a large breath in and a large breath out, Carion was focused once more. “I’m not picking up anything at the moment, but lay out the scenario. Worst-case, there are redsands up there, and they attack on sight. We aren’t sure exactly how many there could be, so we can’t say for sure if we’ll be outnumbered.”

“That’s ...bad. And the best-case scenario?” Trit asked, his eyes a little wider now.

“There’s no one there, and we’re on our way.” Carion shrugged. “But plan for the worst.” The others looked at each other for any sort of confirmation about what they should do.

“We *act* like we belong,” Hoots blurted out.

“What do you mean?” Trit asked.

“Well, if we act like we are meant to be here, not suspicious-like, they aren’t likely to think we are in the wrong place. We’ll do just like what you did back at the camp near Alitiar. That worked pretty well. I mean, until later, but still...”

“So ... like ... pretend we knew they were going to be there?” Trit said, trying to understand and nodding a little.

“Don’t act surprised, don’t even acknowledge them like it’s out of the ordinary. Just like passing by someone in the street. We may be able to use the whole brainwash thing to our advantage.” Hoots continued. “We are foreign here. If there are any enemies up there, they are only going to be suspicious of people that are actually from here, because people from here won’t expect to see them. We just act like this is all normal.”

Carion nodded. “Elaria, walk by the horses, and concentrate as we walk past to gauge anyone as we pass them, *if* there is anyone there. We can’t both focus on them.”

“What if there are redsands up there, and they’re the same as in Alitiar? What if there’s a lot of them?” Elaria asked, a little worried. That feeling she had flooded back for a brief moment.

“Oh, we’ve got the most powerful wizard *ever* for that!” Trit said, slapping Carion on the back with a confident smile. Carion barely reacted.

“Purple eyes, chestnut hair, purple eyes, chestnut hair...”

“We make for the track going further up?” Hoots suggested. “Maybe we’ll have some advantage with the higher ground.”

“Yes, alright,” Elaria said, straightening her back. “Let’s not linger too long and just get to it. If they are anything like those in the camp outside Alitiar, try to incapacitate them if they’re threatening. They could still be ... treated for this possession, but if they are the full-blown red-eyed husks, well ... we’ll do what we have to do.”

“Wait,” Trit said. “What’s our story?”

“We tell them ... some of the truth,” Hoots answered. “We are going to see the dwarfs, because we’re ... taking a census!”

“Oh ... alright,” Trit said, continuously nodding, but still just wrapping his head around it all.

The four began walking the path as it curved a little toward a large cavern. They came to a large landing, as Elaria had suspected. It was about fifteen metres long and twenty metres in depth, not large but the largest they had dealt with so far. The cavern entrance was almost ten metres in height and about three to four metres wide; it looked natural, like a large crack in the mountainside that had been fashioned or worn down. Three humanoids were at the entrance, all in redsand uniforms, similar to those seen in Alitiar. Two were standing on either side of the entrance, one leaning against the rock and the other leaning on a large worn halberd. The third was sitting on a small stool, taking a drink from a flagon. They were chatting and turned to one another, not initially aware of the four of them approaching. Only as both horses came fully around the bend, and started walking across the landing, did one of the redsands address the travellers. He flicked his head up in recognition.

Okay, nice. No red eyes, Trit thought to himself. *Also, not many of them. Also nice.*

“Hey, who are you lot?” the redsand guard yelled out, and the other two looked up. Hoots was leading one horse, with Elaria behind her trying to concentrate on her paladin senses. Trit was leading his horse with Carion next to him, whose head was down, his mind distant.

Hoots tried her best to sound as casual as possible as she answered. “Just going on up the mountain, lads,” she said with a little wave, not slowing down at all. The others took as little notice and kept going straight for the path that continued along the other side of the landing.

The sitting redsand soldier, a human, lowered his flagon and asked, “Ah ... why? Captain Salazar said they’re all accounted for.”

Trit quickly responded. “We, the four of us who are walking, are taking a census of the dwarfs that live up in the village—the village that is up high in the mountains,” Trit said robotically.

Nailed it.

The redsands looked at each other, exchanging similar speculative looks. The human stood, and together with the redsand who had answered first, an elf, advanced on the group. The third, a gnome, stayed behind.

“Who are you with that needs to take a census up here?” the human asked.

“Orders from Alitiar. Taking a census all over; good job for travelling foreigners, yeah?” Hoots said convincingly, gesturing for the others to continue walking up like it was nothing. The human continued walking forward with the elf, focusing on Trit.

“And you aren’t stopping here?” the human asked.

“They aren’t interested. We are just following orders. Who knows with those lot?” Hoots said, trying to get their attention as they continued towards Trit. The elf started looking at Carion.

“What about you, half-elf?” the human asked, now right in from of Trit, stopping him from moving. “What was it you were doing again?”

Trit gulped nervously. “We ... are just ... going up... Dwarf census?” Trit stumbled through his words as he became more flustered.

“What’s she doing?” the elf asked as he approached Carion, catching sight of Elaria, who had her eyes closed and was taking in some deep breaths as she focussed on the two guards.

“They ... they’re fine... We’re safe,” Elaria whispered. *Did I even feel it in the first place?*

Carion was acting as if he were in a trance.

“Purple eyes, chestnut hair, purple eyes, chestnut hair...”

Carion began to mutter the same words echoing in his head. The horses acted up a little, and the two guards turned away, allowing the group to continue a little farther up the path. The elf turned back to Carion. She eyed him up and down and then reacted.

“Hey, devil-blood! Look at us when we speak!” The elf took a step back and swung with the blunt end of her halberd. This flicked Carion across the face. She had accidentally put too much into it and caused Carion to bleed from his mouth. He spit it out onto the bare rocky ground, leaving his little trance and becoming conscious once more.

“How many times have you actually bled before?”

Five, including this one.

“And what happened once you did?”

...

Let loose, ‘Carion.’ Let loose. It’ll feel like old times.”

...

“Just a quick one, like old times...”

Before the human could react, fearing they were about to strike, Trit swung wildly, and with a loose hay maker, he struck the human on the side of the face. The human didn’t even flinch. Trit then made a silent scream and clutched his arm.

“AAAAooow! How do you do that without it hurting so much?!” Trit wailed at Hoots.

“Oh, it’s practice, but I think you want *this* kind of result,” Hoots said.

“Huh?” The human turned towards Hoots, but it was too late.

With light shuffle of her feet, she launched herself up, and with a quick blow to the side of the jaw, the human stumbled, losing consciousness briefly. The elf who had struck Carion realized her mistake then and looked innocently at Carion, who was clutching his mouth. With a wipe, Carion looked at his hand and saw his own deep red blood visible against his dark purple skin. Carion looked up at the elf then with unyielding rage. Teeth clenched, Carion reached out with his hand, not with the intent to grab the elf, however. His hand held out in front of him, Carion’s eyes glazed over, looking like grey clouds, and clenched his fist, squeezing the blood into his palm, his fingers straining as he did. In that instant, the elf spontaneously burst into deep-red hellfire.

Trit and Hoots saw this, their eyes filled with the bright light of the elf’s burning body. The human, disorientated, gave Trit and Hoots time to react to Carion. Elaria was still in a state of disbelief; she didn’t feel anything negative from these three guards, and she’d convinced herself she would have. The third redsand saw the attacks and darted quickly out of sight down into the cavern.

“Ah! He’s still awake! Put him out!” Trit squealed, pointing at the human, seeing him getting back up.

“Oh shoot, one more should do it then,” Hoots said, giving the human another jab to the face. The breaking of his nose was audible; his eyes rolled back, and he collapsed to the ground.

Carion advanced on the elf, hand still clenched. The elf continued to burn violently, her entire body engulfed and blackening, her screams muffled by the intense roar and the swift degradation of her body.

“Carion, stop! They aren’t like those husks!” Elaria yelled as the horses swiftly left the flat area and trotted down the path they’d come up. Elaria’s plea fell on deaf ears. Carion did not respond, his eyes still cloudy, blood trickling down his chin and into his thin black beard. Teeth gritted, he started leaning over the elf as she crumbled to her knees and then to the ground. The screaming had stopped, but the flames burnt bright, powerful and angry. Trit and Hoots looked on in horror as Carion murdered the elf right in front of them. Elaria now rushed to Carion’s side and shook him violently.

“Carion, no! This isn’t you anymore!” Elaria wept a little. Carion’s eyes blackened for a moment before returning to their regular state. The flames stopped, leaving the elf’s corpse beneath him. Carion, breathing heavily, stepped back and wiped his mouth.

“Oh, that felt goood!”

No... no, it didn’t... Oh why...

“I... I...” Carion stuttered, not really able to respond. Elaria put her hand on his shoulder, trying to comfort him, but found it hard, considering how quickly and heartlessly he had dealt with the situation. Carion had clearly done this without much of a second thought. A life of defending himself and dealing with a more violent crowd had made him terribly short fused. Several more redsand guards could be heard rushing towards the entrance to Earthheart from within. The bodies of their comrades lay at the feet of the group. Carion was still breathing heavily as the elf smouldered beneath him. Everyone but him became concerned and readied themselves for an encroaching fight, but Carion quickly turned to Elaria and Hoots.

“Lead them away; use the path,” Carion panted. Elaria, visibly confused, turned to Hoots, who shrugged, and the two made for the path leading further up. Trit was about to follow when Carion grabbed him and spun him around, holding his shoulders. Carion then pulled out the large leaves of the whisperleaf bush he’d grown the other morning at the market and shoved some into Trit’s mouth.

Through reddened, gritted teeth, panting manically, Carion hid directly behind Trit and whispered, “Eat this now, get captured, and whatever you do, try and perform for them.”

“What?!” Trit wailed through a mouth full of leaves. *How does it taste cold? That doesn’t make sense at all...*

“Throw your arms up and surrender,” Carion whispered.

“You have to be kidding!” Trit muffled.

“Part of a plan,” Carion answered. Just shy of a dozen guards were becoming visible in the entrance.

Trit turned to Carion behind him. “They’re just go—” There was nothing behind him. Confused, Trit spun violently around in circles.

“Wh... What...?” Trit said, confused as ever. Redsand guards came out, some with weapons drawn. Trit threw his arms up and gave them the most innocent look he could manage. The leading guard, whose armour had gold lining, spoke. He had olive skin and his short blond hair could be seen poking out from underneath his helmet.

“After the others!” the captain barked at his troops as he looked at Trit and turned up his nose in disgust. Six of the guards chased after Elaria and Hoots, who were visible just up the immediate path.

“Put this half-elf in chains.” He spat in front of Trit and turned back towards the tunnel. “We’ll interrogate him inside, or I’ll get bored. It is almost supper time after all.” Two guards crudely threw iron manacles on Trit.

“Interrogate?” Trit turned around again, desperately looking for Carion. “They are going to interrogate me! I am being taken inside!” Trit yelled out. He had no idea what Carion had planned, but he continued to look around for any clues. Two guards grabbed Trit aggressively by the arms and shoved him as they led him into Earthheart, following the captain.



CHAPTER 12




AS THEY MAKE A SCENE

Lost Personal anthropological notes (8 of 18)

After my eventful visit to the Red Velvet Forest and Commander Ryne, and a brief stop in Alitiar and Palmy as I head north, I have finally made it to Loft.

The pale dwarfs might be the most interesting group I have witnessed (so far). They are both barbaric and culturally driven. They have an interesting greeting where they 'slap' their forearms together in a cross in front of them, raising them up and exposing the underside of their arms. I believe this is a show of vulnerability, saying to the other, "Here is the soft tissue of my arms. We are friends. I mean no harm." I tried greeting them with this but received very little response. I think they see me as an outsider. I will be looking for a way to become accepted into this fascinating little society.

~ Associate Professor Lucky Montana



The tunnel into Earthheart was dimly lit, with torches on the walls and a few braziers lighting the way. The tunnel widened out quickly from a few metres up to twelve metres. The walls, initially dark brown and rough from the surface rock quickly became smooth and cream-coloured. These now marble-like walls had natural swirls and a subtle pattern of light brown

within them. The first brazier they passed had seating in an alcove and some knocked-over mugs. As they continued, the air became stiller, and warm. Trit could hear his own breath, a contrast to the breezy mountainside, and the cold, bitter taste of those leaves Carion had forced into his mouth was still lingering. The guard captain continued to lead him down the entrance hallway. Trit turned to see the entrance light disappear into the distance, and as he turned back, he realized that he was walking downwards; the ground, not as smooth as the walls but still immaculately patterned with the cream-coloured ore, was descending. The guards with Trit continued for a few minutes before they all entered a balcony overlooking the central mine. The balcony, also cream coloured, had thick stone railings. Trit was haphazardly thrown against them, and he then looked up and realized the great expanse that was before him, and all around him.

The central mine was an angled, circular hole that extended as far as anyone could see. The braziers could be seen lit all the way down. No bottom was visible as the lights coalesced into a single dim dot. In the centre of the hole, below where Trit was, there was a great wheel—some sort of pulley or winch system—with several dishevelled, worn, and short pale dwarfs pushing it round and round, their chains rattling. As they pushed, carts were brought up from the depths, their contents inspected nearby by more dwarfs, and moved into unseen rooms for further processing. Trit could spy many raw jewels, of all colours he could describe, within these carts being shuttled below.

On the sides of the hole were sprawling paths with various doorways with cart tracks within them, all conjoining and leading to the space below Trit, like the branches of a tree coalescing to the trunk. Several more dwarfs could be seen being whipped violently on these paths, some beaten until they were no longer moving. One guard could be seen kicking one over the edge of a path and into the slanted hole; the lifeless body slid down, picked up speed, and spun limply around until it was out of view. The magnificent engineering feat before him was being overshadowed by the gross mistreatment of these people. Trit had found the pale dwarfs and was witnessing their current fate.

Trit was spun around and abruptly patted down by two redsands. Finding nothing but a bit of pocket lint and a few copper pieces, the guard

brought out a dagger and approached him. Trit winced, but the dagger just sliced off the strap for his lute.

“Nothing valuable on him, just his lute.” The guard tossed it to the captain. The captain gave it a once-over, nodding a little, but ultimately looked a little disappointed. He tossed it to a nearby guard.

“Throw this junk with the others; we’ll sell it with the rest on the trip back to Valoon, if we can. You. Follow me,” the captain ordered. The two guards grabbed Trit once more, and he was escorted down a nearby hallway leading off the main tunnel.

The guard with the lute wandered down a separate path. He opened a wooden door to a stale room. The room was piled with various goods, both personal and valuable. He tossed the lute amongst them, the lute playing an off-key jitter as it landed and rolled down a pile of small chests, candles, and purple and blue Alitian armour. The guard shut the door and his footsteps could be heard disappearing off into the distance as he returned to his position.

Dark yellow eyes awakened from within the lute. Emerging from its central cavity, a jet-black mouse with a long tail sat up on its hind legs. It scouted the room with its yellow eyes, its nose twitching as it searched for scents. Quickly, the mouse bounded towards the door over the loose goods in the room. The door was wooden and had a small gap at the bottom. The mouse squeezed through it and into the hallway. It sniffed the air once more, allowing the right aroma to direct its next move. Bounding once more, the mouse headed to the left.

This hallway was only dimly lit, and the ground was rougher and more untamed than the entrance hall and the balcony Trit was led to. The mouse headed with purpose down the hall as it curved to the right. A brighter light emanated from the left as the hallway curved round further. Several alcoves were dotted along the hall, spaced equally apart, and acted as open windows to a large space below. The large space was a mess hall. Long tables ran parallel to the longest side. The mess hall was not full, but it was busy. Dwarfs and redsand guards were eating and drinking but not together. Two giant barrels, dispensing water from a tap, sat flush to one wall. A large label read, ‘Redsands’ on one and ‘Dwarfs’ on the other. The guards were acting friendly towards each other, laughing and breaking

bread. The dwarfs looked dishevelled, worn, beaten, and bruised. Their heads hung low and their spirits were lower. The smell of food floated up to the mouse as it continued to traverse, but it took no mind of it; it was already off and focused on something else.

Continuing along the upper halls, the mouse avoided anyone coming by, sticking to the shadows. Going down to the lower halls, the walls were comprised of the immaculate, white, marble-like stone, and the floors remained flawless, despite the tracking of dirt and foot traffic that continued. The mouse stuck out more in these halls, but it remained hidden as best it could. Anyone coming by was more interested in where they were going, or where they were taking their dwarven prisoners. At last, the mouse had arrived at its destination.

A hallway off to one side had a distinct smell, one that was unique, one that it was searching for. It wasn't one that was common, or one an average person could pick up on. Slaves gave off a specific scent in their sweat, one of despair and pain. This hall was lined with smaller rooms that were caged by iron bars. A guard walked down slowly, periodically slapping the bars with the hilt of his sword. He appeared bored and uninterested in the occupants of the cells. As soon as the mouse came into the hall of cells, it jumped into the first one it could access. The four occupants, all dwarfs in ragged clothes, noticed the mouse as it hugged the wall and made for the back of the cell.

"Ae! Bloody rodent," a dwarf said in a gruff voice. He kicked the ground nearby, but the mouse continued on its path towards the back.

"Oi, leave it be. At least 'e can leave," the dwarf at the back said, slouched over with his arms folded.

"Lemme grab 'im at least," the gruff dwarf said, and one of the pale dwarfs grabbed the tail of the mouse just as it had almost made it to the back wall.

"Oh, look at 'im, bet 'e just be a little scared," another dwarf exclaimed.

"Weird colour, innit?" the gruff dwarf remarked.

"Yeah, 'e is really black and—ah!" The dwarf dropped the rat, and it tumbled onto the floor. "Bloody bit me!"

"Yeah, now I'll 'it 'im." The gruff one advanced. As the two arguing dwarfs approached the mouse in the corner, the mouse grew quickly, more

humanoid features bloomed, and in a few seconds, Carion was crouched in the corner. His nose twitched for a moment as his whiskers receded. Carion noticed the metallic taste that came with blood in his mouth. The two dwarfs stepped back in disbelief, and the other two turned to see. Carion held his finger to his mouth as the guard hitting his hilt on the bars grew closer. Carion ducked behind one of the approaching dwarfs and grabbed the other to shield him from view. The other two clued in, stood up, and tried to look inconspicuous. The guard came by and looked in. He saw two dwarfs standing close together and two others facing different directions just staring off. The guard stopped briefly but ultimately was unfazed at the sight and continued into another adjacent hall with more cells. The steps slowly got quieter. The dwarfs didn't move initially but then slowly rotated to Carion. All four looked at him with great interest.

"Weird focking mouse, 'e is," the gruff dwarf spat.

"How many dwarfs and how many guards? Give me numbers," Carion asked, looking each dwarf in the eye but remaining crouched. Each dwarf had pale skin and tattoos all over their bodies; some were only partially covered, while others were covered completely. Their tattoos were all black and devoid of colour, but their details were stunning, depicting all matters of legends, lore, family crests, and language, all with similar styles of hard blocks and thick lines. Each dwarf had a different beard, braided in differing ways, lengths, and styles, although their upkeep was currently questionable, considering the circumstances. Although a similar height as gnomes, dwarfs were far stockier.

The one dwarf who had his arms crossed and wasn't involved with Carion initially, sported a thinning stripe of hair on his head, from front to back spoke up.

"There be about seventeen 'undred of us left: two 'undred up 'ere and the rest in the lowest mines," he said.

"And the guards?" Carion asked.

The one who had spoken, who seemed to be their unofficial leader, looked at the others briefly, gauging their thoughts. Carion got a decent look at their tattoos, his eyes narrowing at them for a moment.

Those are interesting...

"You'll have to ask about those later..."

"Less. Only 'bout four 'undred. They keep us separated or locked up as much as possible."

"I've had worse odds. Now being locked up, that's what I'm here to deal with. If I get you all together, you think you can take on those up here?" Carion muttered. All the dwarfs nodded.

"We're weak; they 'aven't let us sleep much."

"The numbers and surprise will help you gain an advantage. You'll act now," Carion said swiftly.

"You don't 'appen to 'ave weapons lodged in ya?" a dwarf asked.

"I've got enough magic to get a few conjured," Carion said, standing up a little. Carion was easily a foot and a half taller and towered over them. The dwarfs looked at each other silently for a moment, until one of the others spoke.

"Ya 'elping us break out?"

Carion, about to roll his eyes, answered. "Yes. What did you think I was doing here? Sightseeing?" He got back down on his hands and knees, grabbed a piece of marble from his component pouch, and etched a square, with elongated pointed shapes on opposite corners, into the earth at their feet. Carion grabbed the vial with yellow powder in it and popped the cork, tracing over the shape he had made on the ground. One of the dwarfs went to the iron bars, looking out for the guard, while the others watched closely.

"Shape stone... This could work..." the leader muttered. Carion nodded.

"Yes," he said as he continued making markings. "Are there any magic users amongst you?" The leader stopped for a moment, then answered.

"No. They killed the few we 'ad."

"Figured as much," Carion said nodding and tracing out more shapes into the stone floor.

The dwarf approached Carion, who didn't stir but looked up at him as he got close.

"What?" the dwarf asked, raising his voice a little.

Carion leaned back on his knees, inspecting and ensuring his work was completed adequately.

“Why would you figure that?” the dwarf at the iron bars asked. Carion put his hands on the shapes he made in the stone, and with a jerking lift and a quiet incantation, a perfectly sculpted stone war hammer was pulled from the ground itself, leaving a hammer-shaped hole in the ground. Carion caught it in mid-air and quickly tossed it to the leader, who caught it and inspected the craftsmanship.

“Because,” Carion said, repeating the action three more times before brushing himself off, “it’s what I would have done.” All the dwarfs looked at him; they didn’t want to trust Carion, but considering the circumstances, they didn’t have a choice.

“The guard is going to walk back this way. We will leave this cell, and you can free the rest,” Carion said, crouching close to the wall behind one of the dwarfs. “Try not to give anything away, and hide the weapons, dammit.”

The dwarfs looked at each other once more, seeking reassurance. The other three turned to the leader.

“Do as ’e says.” They grabbed the hay on the floor and covered the weapons. “Done this ’ere before, then?”

Carion looked up at him and didn’t answer.

“Ave ya a plan?”

Carion looked back down and stared blankly. “Plans for prison breaks never go down well. Better to not have one and improvise, the quicker the better. Don’t give the guards time to think. You outnumber them, so let’s use that to our advantage. Now, quiet, here they come.” Carion rubbed his hands a little, and the clay dust dissipated into the air.

The guard returned, peering in for just a moment, but didn’t see Carion crouched and well hidden behind two dwarfs who were trying to act calm once more. Another dwarf lay on the hammers, keeping them out of sight. The guard continued; the banging of his hilt could be heard as he continued down the hallway. Carion got up, covered his fingers in sulphur from his component pouch, flicked his fingers, and a single lonesome flame appeared on his index finger. He approached the iron bars and placed his hands on the keyhole and threw the small flame into it. Carion focused on the iron, on its integrity, its structure, its metallic nature. The lock began to glow red. Slowly it became redder and redder. He looked back at the armed dwarfs, gave them a slight nod, and then pushed the door open. The iron

lock melted away and slopped onto the floor in a red-hot heap, and the iron-barred door creaked open.

The guard, who was a few cells down, turned as Carion and the dwarfs exited the cell. They all locked eyes. The guard took a moment, as bored calm became fear, and then he turned to run, mouth agape and ready to yell. Carion sent out a thorn whip with an intricate flick of his wrist, and the leading dwarf charged with his little stubby legs, war hammer in hand. The whip caught the guard's wrist and pulled him a little closer, and the dwarf leapt twice his height with a running jump. As the guard was pulled a little closer, a soft yelp leaving his mouth, the war hammer contacted his skull. With a mighty swing, the stone war hammer popped open the guard's head like a fruit, and blood and brain matter erupted from within. Then his lifeless body slumped onto the floor just as the dwarf landed on his feet, unscathed but with bits of blood and flesh freshly scattered on his tattered clothes. The other dwarfs left the cell to see the scene and quickly turned their heads to see if anyone else was coming. It hadn't been particularly noisy, but they were only being cautious.

"Keys," Carion barked. The dwarf leader was already patting down and searching the headless guard.

"Ere, got 'em." He grabbed a ring with several keys on it.

"Unlock the cages. Who is currently in charge of your tribe?" Carion asked. The dwarfs looked amongst themselves again.

"Our leaders are scattered, but me and another in the cage just before the end are in charge. The other leaders are in the lowest mine," the dwarf leader said between panting breaths. He was obviously tired, and that sudden burst of energy had taken more than expected.

"Alright, free everyone you can and get them to rally your kin. It'll help. Chaos will be your guide. Work systematically through the halls; I imagine you know them best. Corner them, subdue them, escape," Carion said. A lone blood droplet rolled down his cheek from his eye. The dwarfs nodded and started unlocking the cells. Dozens of the cells were opened, and soon dwarfs were filling the hall. They hugged joyously but most slammed their forearms together in a cross pattern in front of them, the underside of their forearms facing forwards as a form of greeting and respect.

Carion watched the adjacent hall but didn't see anyone coming. The dwarf leader approached.

"Name's Yoseef. This 'ere be Loshe, our other clan leader."

The female dwarf was also covered in tattoos but had longer and finer hair. Her facial tattoos framed her face and covered her chin, and her bottom lip was completely black with ink. She looked tired, with large bags under her eyes and cracked, dry lips. Carion looked at them both but didn't give them much attention. He felt their eyes rest on the now dried blood on his cheek. Carion wiped it, flicking it away.

"We aren't leaving 'ere 'til we all are free and those redsand bastards are a bloody mess," Yoseef said, clenching his fists hard. "A few more may be in their mess 'all, but majority will be down in the mountain's 'eart. Only way down is the main shaft."

"So, secure the top entrance area, then head down," Carion said.

"You 'elping?" Yoseef barked. Carion sighed deeply, dried blood had collected under his fingernail.

*"The question is, how much are you willing to help?
How much of 'you' are you going to give to these strangers?"*

I don't think I'm willing to spill more blood today, mine or others...

"Oh, are you really upset about the guard earlier?"

...

"I'm only getting things rolling. I'm not getting involved. You are all out, and that's all I was willing to do. I'll stay on the sidelines for now." Carion leaned back against the wall and stared off blankly and uninterested down the adjacent hall from which he'd come. "Think I've done my share of bloodshed for the day as it is." The two dwarfs looked at each other.

"Well, thanks for ya 'elp, stranger," Yoseef said. Loshe motioned for the others to start following her as they took their leave cautiously into the halls, giving specific orders and dividing people into groups appropriately.

"What be ya name, in case we run into any other black mice in the future?" Yoseef stayed and asked Carion as the others slowly left. Carion

rolled his head towards Yoseef. “You can call me Carion”

“Aight, *Carion*, little bit of advice: Lotta these ’ere guards are pretty tame, but don’t let ’em contact their red gems. Few uh them carry one, and well, it turns them *crazy*. If they grab one, they become insanely strong but go out of control quickly. Different every time,” Yoseef explained.

Carion’s ears perked up at this; his eyes and attention turned back to Yoseef.

Gems? Are they doing this?

“Be honest, have you heard of gems that do this?”

Only once...

“You’ve seen this?” Carion asked quickly.

Yoseef nodded. “It’s what got most of us when they arrived up there in Loft. One of our own got in contact with one a day back; didn’t survive and was thrown in a cell back there. He screamed in agony and anger for ’ours. Right shit show in there.” Yoseef motioned towards the other end of the hallway.

“Ow’d ya know we were in ’ere?” Yoseef asked before he left.

“We didn’t. We got caught up in a ... disagreement out front. Just another stop on my pilgrimage, I guess,” Carion answered bluntly.

“Alright, well ... best a luck, Carion.” Yoseef started to leave.

“Wait, Yoseef.” Carion stood straight. “I’ve travelling with two half-elves and a gnome, Elaria, Trit, and Hoots. If you see them, they’ll be helpful as well. I think they’ll appreciate it if there’s no outright murder going on during this time. So, I meant what I said: Subdue them.”

Yoseef reluctantly nodded and continued on his way with the others. Carion looked up the other end of the hall with great interest. As the last of the dwarfs left the area, Carion made his way to the unopened cell. He reached the end of the hall where a cell sat unopened but unlocked. Carion pushed it open, and the iron door made a screech, hitting the stone wall lightly as it swung. The sight made even Carion uncomfortable. Lying in the corner was a dwarf, or what remained of one. His mouth was agape and stretched down to his chest, his teeth were all black and sharpened. These

sharp teeth had resulted in gashes all about the gums and lips. His eyes were sunk back, giving his head a hollow look. The body was disfigured and bent in unnatural ways, joints bending in opposite directions or twisted. The fingers were dark with blood and worn down to the bone, every single finger. The raw bone was etched and scratched aggressively. All over the walls was a single word that coated all surfaces of the cell: Udoroth.

Carion looked all around the cell, not daring to enter it. He then looked at the corpse of the fallen dwarf. Carion lifted his hand and flicked his fingers towards the corpse. It burst into a red flame and began turning to black ash. He rotated his other hand, and the rock and earth that were the cell shifted until all the scribblings of the word disappeared and were erased from view. The body burned quickly, and soon the black ash that was once a dwarf lay in a heap. The cell had now returned to its smooth and normal state. Carion then turned back down the hallway towards the dwarfs and left the area.

"You read that right, 'Carion'."

...

"If that's true, that means..."

It is only a coincidence, one that doesn't need to be echoed.

"In our line of work, have you ever believed in coincidences?"

...

*"That's what I thought. Like I said, run as far as you like;
the past always catches up."*



"Okay, I am being taken down this hallway now, and I am going to be interrogated," Trit said with an elevated voice.

"Shut it!" A redsand guard threw Trit against a wall. The guard captain was following close behind and had now caught up. He stood in front of

Trit, his hands behind his back. Trit looked around the hall hastily and nervously. The guard captain rubbed his eyes. Heavy bags sat under them, and his eyelids remained shut a few moments longer every time he blinked.

“Look, I’m going to be honest. We aren’t going to interrogate you,” the captain said.

“Why not? I could know tons of stuff you may want to know,” Trit said, and the captain sighed.

“Hey, we have our orders. If it’s a dwarf, it goes into the mine, otherwise anyone not a part of the redsands is killed.” He shrugged. Trit started to sweat.

Wait! What did Carion say?!

“Hold up though, I’m on the pilgrimage! I’m trying to find the eternal city of Mysrik! I am no threat to you!” Trit started to wail.

Perform? Perform!

“Yeah, that’s what a lot of them say.” The captain gestured for the others to follow.

“Ah well, I am actually a bard. You’ll need some entertainment, right? Heard it was supper time shortly,” Trit hastily bellowed.

“And?” the captain asked as they continued down the hall.

“I could only imagine there’s not a lot of entertainment up here, so ... how about I be the entertainment for you lot? Why be so quick to remove the only fun you’ve had in a while?”

The captain stopped for a moment in the hallway. “The last group claiming to come from Alitiar was entertaining enough,” he said, looking to one of his associates. The redsand smiled sinisterly.

Finally, the captain nodded. “We’ll see how he fares. Gather those who aren’t on patrol. Like the bard said, maybe we can get some entertainment.”

Trit gulped nervously.

With narrow paths, a sharp slope, and the high ground outside, Hoots and Elaria were making the redsand guards look like fools. With the features of the mountainous path on their side, the six redsand guards were only able to take on Elaria one by one. A light twang of thin wooden arrows could be heard against the hard rock as two redsands lower down the path shot arrows helplessly upwards; they failed to bother Elaria or Hoots due to the

sharp angle of the mountain path. Elaria was ignorant of many things, but fighting and sword play were not among them. The other four redsands were having to deal with her brutal blows and clever shield placement as Elaria bounced each strike they made off like it was harmless sparring. The guards took turns. One would string together a flurry of blows before another would spring from behind with more. But despite her huge armour, Elaria was quick, and her height also gave her excessive reach.

Elaria was deliberately not going for deadly blows; she wanted to wear them down enough to talk to them, even for just a moment. Both Hoots and Elaria noticed something as soon as they initiated combat: These guards were be wearing the same outfits, but they looked more civilized than those in Alitiar. Their eyes were normal, for one thing, and their demeanour was natural and *human* for another. They breathed heavily, they sweated, and they avoided blows, whereas those in Alitiar were far more mindless and had little regard for pain or fatigue.

Hoots, a little further up the path, got the attention of the archers. She was quick and nimble; her distractions were working, but the archers were never going to land a hit from this angle. More importantly, Hoots was gathering stones to throw down on the unsuspecting attackers, and this helped Elaria, as they were becoming increasingly distracted and tired. Elaria had stamina and was able to maintain focus through much worse, so she continued taking their onslaught. The duo began wearing down these guards, and the archers were running out of arrows. Elaria stayed true, not attacking any vitals but continuing to land precise blows regardless. Hoots looked over from the switchback overhead, throwing stones and rocks, keeping the others at bay and weary, but she too began to tire. As three of them became more removed, one guard became more persistent. He had a bushy beard that had once been well kept but appeared to have been recently neglected. He and Elaria were engaged in battle for so long that it got to the point where they were almost admiring each other's prowess.

"About time I had a good sparring partner!" the bearded guard said, swiping at Elaria.

"Oh, is that what we are calling it?!" Elaria exclaimed, throwing a cheeky vicious blow that made him stumble a little. Elaria let him get his footing back, and they both shared a playful look and a smile.

“What are we doing here?” The guard shrugged, backing off a little. Hoots stopped her engagement and listened. The other guards still had their weapons out but all stopped advancing so aggressively.

“You guys started it!” Hoots yelled from above. They all looked up at her, and she ducked back, a little embarrassed.

The guard frowned. “What are you lot doing out here anyway? You don’t sound like you’re from here; you aren’t dwarfs or farmers...” He seemed to be more reasonable now, but he still swayed his sword around while he talked. Elaria and Hoots looked at each other, trying to read what the other was thinking. Hoots shrugged and Elaria nodded.

“I’m Elaria, a paladin, and this is my companion Hoots. We were travelling north. The dwarfs of the north here have been out of contact, and we—”

“Contact with who?” a guard interjected.

Elaria, looking confused, continued. “Contact with those who your army kicked out of Alitiar?”

“Alitiar’s been ... abandoned for years, like almost ten years. They use it as a training ground.”

“Oh yeah, training? Heard it before,” Hoots mocked.

“No one lives down there anymore, just farmers and fey,” one of the other guards said. “Spies come up saying they’re on a pilgrimage now and then.”

Elaria and Hoots looked at each other, as confused as ever.

“What about the dwarfs?” Hoots said, lowering her voice. The guards looked at each other, unaware of what exactly to say.

“The dwarfs killed those in Alitiar,” one said.

“They ... like ... murdered them all. This operation here is just the last of them, which we use as labour,” the bushy-bearded guard explained.

“As slaves, you mean,” Elaria interjected. The bearded guard looked at her and spoke once again.

“For what they did, it could have been worse.”

Elaria and Hoots looked at each other again, even more confused. Elaria stood upright, releasing her stance. She started to sheathe her sword as a kind gesture. The guards started to do the same, save for one.

The bearded guard glanced at him, and then spoke up again. “My

captain. Well ... a little bit of bastard he is, but we can sort this out."

Elaria nodded slightly. "Let's get our other friends, the other two companions we were travelling with—"

The guard who didn't sheath his sword spoke up. "Why did you kill the others then?" Everyone looked to him. "We came out and those bodies were at your feet!" He pointed his sword to Hoots and Elaria.

"They got aggressive. We just wanted passage, and they attacked us first. It was self-defence. One is just unconscious," Elaria said putting her hands up, trying to look as innocent as possible.

"This isn't protocol. They are some disguised fey! You've said too much, Brennon!" The guard started scrambling around in his pockets.

"Chess, I am aware of what is protocol, but have you seen any of the fey up this high? Don't be foolish." The bearded guard, Brennon, turned to Chess. The startled guard, Chess, dropped his sword and clutched a small cloth bag. He looked to Brennon and then to Elaria and Hoots. He shook a little and started to sweat.

"Chess, don't do it; you know that's a one-way trip. You know what could happen with those thoughts." Brennon inched towards him, but the others were backing away. The two archers were just looking on, out of earshot.

"You are all traitors," Chess muttered.

"Noooo!" Brennon yelled, lunging forward. Chess inverted a small pouch and out dropped a palm-sized crimson gem that plummeted onto his hand. Brennon dove for him, throwing his whole body towards him, and they both fell backwards. The others tried to retain their footing on the small path. Brennon was trying to pry the gem from Chess's hand, but Chess started to shake violently, and his eyes rolled back into his head as his hands clamped shut.

"Oh, I am not sticking around for this!" The other guards tried to move away back down the path in a hurry. Chess convulsed uncontrollably, his skin starting to turn black. Brennon turned to Elaria and Hoots, and enough fear was in his eyes to force the hairs on the back of anyone's neck to stand on end.

"Run." As Brennon said this, Chess—or what had once been Chess—sat upright. His face had flattened, leaving an almost smooth and featureless mass where his head had once been. His skin was midnight black, and any

hair he had had dropped out and fallen lightly to the ground. An amorphous black blade erupted violently out of his chest then, piercing right through Brennon and out the other side. Blood splattered out towards Elaria, sprinkling her armour. Shock written clearly all over her face, Elaria drew her weapon once more.

The black mass that was once Chess rose. Brennon still hung on the blade protruding from his chest. Chess's fingers connected together and formed two black featureless blades. Single sharp objects protruded from the base of his feet, erupting from his boots. The mass used his "legs" to rip apart Brennon, and then the two halves of the body were thrown effortlessly aside. One slapped the mountainside, leaving a dark-red splattered stain, and the other was thrown downwards to the archers below. The head of Chess elongated upwards then and formed another blade. The black six-bladed creature expanded and broke out of the armour. Despite having no eyes and no features, Elaria felt it look at her as it turned.

With the bustling mess hall filling with guards and patrolmen, some more excited than others, Trit softly placed his shaky fingers upon a seasoned standing piano.

"Last chance for bets! How long? How good? The bets are up to you!" One of the redsands stood on a bench, calling out to the others, and on the table next to him was a growing pile of goods and gold. Other guards were flocking to him and were yelling various odds and conditions. The guards were all betting on either how long Trit could play for or how well he could play; his life was their game. Dozens of pale dwarfs were scattered along the back of the room, trying to phase out the inhumane nature of the game. Trit looked around; the guards were laughing and joking with each other.

"Alright! That's it! No more. We are getting started!" The guard captain stood next to the broker, and the room started to quiet down. Murmurs swept over the crowd, and all heads turned to Trit, who sat nervously and leaned over the ivories.

"Alright, half-breed. Play away," the captain grumbled. One of the redsands ran up to Trit.

"Two songs. I got you for two songs. If you stop then, I'll give you half

of the winnings!” His breath reeked of stale ale. A nearby guard pulled him away, and they both laughed and stumbled back to the edge of the crowd. The crowd quieted down completely, and even the few pale dwarfs at the far end turned their attention to Trit. Trit took in a large breath and tried to tune out all those in the room—their voices, the muffling, all of it started to fade. Like a white noise, it all became one, and then it became nothing. The sound of silence filled his mind, filled his body, all the way to his fingertips.

Do I even remember how to play the piano!? It's been so long... I wish they'd just let me go; I wish they just wanted to listen rather than this... I mean, Carion did say to perform for them, right?

Trit let his fingers take charge, and away they went. A beautiful melody filled the room. Mouths agape, whatever noise may still been lingering in the room stopped. No drinks reached lips, no food touched a fork, and no sound left the mouths of anyone else in the mess hall. Trit tickled the ivories, and the soft tune reached the far ends of the room and continued for several minutes.

Okay, cool, cool, just roll into the next song? Oh, I wish they'd just be my friends or something. The hell is Carion?

And away Trit went, from one melody to another. All attention was on Trit as he drew them away from all the uncertainties of the day. The worries of their lives drifted away, and they all just existed in this moment—this moment where Trit took them on a journey of musical freedom.

One song led to another, and the room remained still but brimmed with melodic brilliance.

Oh man, I'm better than I thought! Wish this cold taste would leave my mouth though. Eurgh...

For some time, no one was visibly keeping track of the time or number of songs. They were too distracted by Trit. So, he continued. Trit wasn't used to this instrument, and his hands were cramping and beginning to ache more and more. Trit finished off the song and softly placed his worn hands on the keys. He turned on the stool, which gave out an innocent squeak as he faced the audience to accept his fate. All were looking at him, surrounding him in a semicircle. He was expecting cheers or laughter, the exchange of gold amongst them, but there was only silence and blank looks.

“Ah ... that's it?” Trit announced, holding his hands as they ached.

There was no response from the guards. The pale dwarfs at the back of the room shuffled nervously.

“Are ... are you going to kill me now?” Trit asked.

The nearest guard answered, in a monotonous voice, “Did you want us to kill you?”

“Umm... no?” Trit said, confused.

Blank stares remained. Trit was confused beyond comprehension. They all looked empty. No one stirred. They weren’t reaching for their winnings; they weren’t even drinking. One redsand had lowered his flagon to his side, the drink dripping to the floor.

“You could let me go?” Trit suggested.

“Would you like us to let you go?” a redsand asked.

“... Yes?” Trit answered. A different guard came forward. He got out some keys and unshackled his ankles. Trit stood, bewildered by this response. They seemed hypnotized. Trit pointed to the pale dwarfs at the end of the room.

“Now ... let them go too.”

The guards went over, and one by one, the pale dwarfs in the room were unshackled. They looked equally as confused.

“Umm, you will not attack ANY dwarfs,” Trit commanded.

“Sounds good,” many of the guard’s answered, not all at once though, so it sounded like an uncoordinated echo.

“You ... you will give them your weapons.” Trit pointed to the dwarfs. The guards gave the pale dwarfs their weapons.

“And take off your armour!” Trit demanded. They all did so without question and then stayed motionless. The dwarfs stood around, unsure of how to deal with the situation. They had no idea who this random half-elf was.

“Now go about the mine and free all the dwarfs you can!” Trit hollered. The guards all started spreading out, going down various corridors and hallways adjacent to the mess hall. Trit smiled, looking mighty pleased with himself. He placed his hands on his hips and stood tall. How he had cheated death he did not know, but he was alive and currently in charge.

At least that weird taste in my mouth is gone.

As the six-bladed monstrosity began lunging towards Elaria, who had her shield out, ready for combat, a bright flame erupted and engulfed the creature. Without a mouth to scream, it flailed, and in doing so, toppled over the side of the path and down onto the fleeing guards.

Elaria looked up and saw Hoots in a stance with her hands outstretched and angled to where the creature had been.

“WHAT IS THAT?” Hoots yelled.

“I don’t know!” Elaria yelled back.

“He had the gem ... and then he went all black ... and... Oh! He ripped that guy in half!” Hoots said in disbelief.

“I know!” Elaria yelled. They both looked downwards; the flame around the creature had been extinguished, and it was “standing” once more. As quickly as it regained balance, it stabbed one of the fleeing guards, who was stumbling, trying to get away. The man’s scream was silenced by the gurgle of blood.

“We have to help them!” Elaria exclaimed.

“I mean ... do we?” Hoots started.

“Hoots!” Elaria scolded.

“Okay, okay! We have to get Trit and Carion anyway, right?!” Hoots began rushing to Elaria’s side. The two sprinted down the few switchbacks, ready to run into the muck that had begun below. Whatever this thing was, it was mindless and the embodiment of carnage. The other guards were trying to not be aggressive, but the creature, with its deep black blades, penetrated them, slicing limbs off with ease and throwing the bodies away and onto the rock below with little effort. Whatever parts weren’t thrown away haphazardly just melded into the black mass, becoming part of it, their bodies turning jet-black, and with hollow eyes, flailing as the creature did. The creature had made its way to the little landing where the entrance to Earthheart was and was currently absorbing the unconscious guard from earlier, whose screams as he awoke were being muffled by the oozing black skin enveloping him.

Elaria and Hoots had just gotten down to meet it. One guard was left, trying to parry the several black blades that were being thrust his way, but the creature was unyielding and showed little possibility of tiring. Just as Elaria and Hoots got to the same level, the creature stabbed the guard

through the shoulder, then threw the body behind itself, where it landed a few meters from Elaria, her weapon drawn. The creature had been assimilating all other bodies on the landing, and now their lifeless limbs began moving once more.

"That's just too many limbs," Hoots said, from Elaria's side. "I have parts of a plan, but I'm improvising. You'll have to do most of the leg work," Hoots continued.

"Ah ... okay?" Elaria shifted her feet a little as the creature began turning to her. Again, she could *feel* it looking at her, even without eyes, almost like it recognized her. Suddenly the creature sprang into action, scuttling fast towards the duo, several limbs being used to accelerate it, with two blades pointed right out in front and aimed at Elaria. Hoots stretched her hands out, and a little ditch was created a few meters away from them. The creature didn't notice and one of its limbs plunged in. Hoots then closed her hands together, and the limb was embedded into the earth in front of them. Flailing madly, the creature threw its blades towards the two but remained out of reach.

"That won't hold it for long! Do the slicing bit you're good at! I'll keep doing this while I can!" Hoots yelled and gestured to the grotesque figure thrashing around. Elaria jumped into action, her sword and shield at the ready. The two become a frightful duo, the creature's midnight blades creating vicious dents and scrapes against Elaria's steel. Any blow that got through, Elaria used her armour to deflect. Any chance Hoots got, she used her Earth-Mould spell to create openings in the earth and close them around a limb, allowing Elaria to get the upper hand, but the creature always thrashed free. Unlike the several guards she'd been taking on earlier, this foe was not letting up, each strike designed to cause immense pain or death. Elaria's armour and vitality would only be able to keep her going for a little longer; she grew more and more tired with each punishing blow and kink to her armour.

With a wicked swipe of her blade, Elaria whipped off part of one of the black-bladed limbs, sending it soaring over Hoots' head. The black blade remained stiff and clanged against the hard rock. Hoots turns to it and looked back at Elaria, who was now struggling to hold her own against the foul creature. Hoots grabbed the blade, expecting a surge of necrotic

or negative energy to rush over her. But nothing happened; it looked like a solid piece of sharpened obsidian. Hoots had an idea—a stupid idea, but it was her own.

She put the blade back down for a moment. Using the rocks and earth to mould the ground around her hand, protecting her from the sharp blade, Hoots picked it up again and smiled a little; now she had a weapon, one half as big as her. Hoots then went to the other side of the creature. Its limbs were focused on Elaria, and so Hoots was primed to go for the main “body” of the creature. With a lunge, Hoots pushed the makeshift blade through the black body, which was soft—much softer than the bladed limbs.

The creature gave out a hideous screech from the mouths of the partially absorbed guards, sounding like a banshee. Hoots let go of the blade, and the dirt dropped from her hand. Hoots backed away quickly as the blades all turned towards her, their points glistening in the dying sun of the day. Elaria now noticed what Hoots was up to and made a quick jab to the body, puncturing it brutally while it was distracted.

“Can you lift me up?!” Elaria shouted, deflecting a blow.

“What?! Like, physically?!” Hoots shouted back.

“Errrgh! No! Like ... push me up ... with the ground?!” Elaria asked between parries.

“Oh... Ah...” Hoots lined up and looked at the distance they had on the landing. “I’ll distract it! Get a running start!” Hoots said, not sure how she was going to distract it again. She saw a few more rocks at her feet, small pebbles of the sort you’d use to skip across a pond. Hoots grabbed them and looked at them. They weren’t interesting or more useful than the rest that scattered the mountain side.

“Oh man, wish these were like, magical or something, like fire rocks...” As Hoots said this to herself, she felt something like she had earlier that day, down by the creek with Carion. She wanted these stones to be magical, and something in her wanted to *make* them magical. Like a whisper, something had called to her. She felt compelled to juggle and flick them around her fingers, rubbing them on the soft skin between them. It was as if the same whisper got louder and louder. With an arcane word that tumbled out of her mouth uncontrollably, the stones moving around in her palms

became bright teal.

“Oh! Okay, that’s a thing I know, apparently!” Hoots looked up as Elaria continued taking on the onslaught of the bladed creature. Hoots placed one of the magical stones in her good hand, and with all the precision she could muster, threw it towards the creature. With a little luck, it hit the creature on the central body, just skimming the top. As it contacted it, a small bloom of magical dust erupted from it, causing a miniature explosion. The same screech radiated from the creature once again, as it turned back towards Hoots, blades refocusing.

“Okay! Distracted now!” Hoots yelled, getting another magical stone ready. “Time to back up, El!” Hoots said, backing up as well as the creature twitched erratically and started orientating on her. Hoots threw another stone, this time missing and exploding at the creature’s “feet.” The creature stopped for a moment and then suddenly stampeded towards her, full speed. Frightened, Hoots threw her last stone, which hit its mark. The creature stumbled a little but regained balance quickly and continued towards her, closing the distance fast. Elaria sprinted with all her might, and Hoots saw her gaining velocity. Hoots opened her hands, eyes focused on a single spot, trying to ignore the disgusting creature parading towards her.

“Launch!” Hoots yelled. Elaria hit her mark, and Hoots threw her fist up. The dirt and rock below Elaria’s leading foot rose several feet, launching her upwards ... soaring through the air towards the creature and Hoots. The creature ground to a halt and directed its blades upwards at the airborne Elaria. She saw this coming and prepared for it. She threw her shield downwards, blocking herself from its view. As she arced through the air, the blades of the creature thrust upwards, not knowing exactly where Elaria was. They punctured and pierced the shield, rendering it useless, but luckily Elaria was above it. With two hands on her sword, she careened over the distracted creature’s blades and threw her own forcefully downward. The sword easily passed right through the soft central body of the creature, right up to the hilt, which now stuck out, the sword remaining within the creature. In a fit of rage, the creature ripped the shield it had punctured apart, and the pieces flew off in all directions. Elaria flew overhead and landed just in front of Hoots, rolling to her side. The creature

still “stood,” sword penetrating it fully. It jittered and vibrated but began to redirect once again towards them.

“That was all I had...” Hoots whimpered in fear.

“Not all I had,” Elaria said. She rolled her fingers and then clenched her fist tightly. With that, her sword glowed with the intensity of a sun from within the creature. Hoots and Elaria shielded their eyes, and with a blinding light and a banshee scream, the creature disappeared, disintegrating into small white particles. The light receded, and Elaria’s sword fell harmlessly to the ground with an innocent clang. Both Hoots and Elaria breathed heavily with large sighs of relief. Elaria, still on the ground, lay back a little on her elbows, throwing her head back with her eyes closed. Hoots came to her side.

“Not short of awesome. What did you do?” Hoots asked between breaths.

“You aren’t the only ... only one with ... cool magic,” Elaria said, just getting her words out.

“That ... What? ... Explodes them?” Hoots asked, now sitting next to her.

“Yes ... well ... things not naturally from this plane are banished. Picked that up with my pledge... Hadn’t done it before ... heh... Glad it worked.”

“Oh, so that wasn’t from this plane at all...” Hoots realized. “Oh, sorry about the shield.”

Elaria threw her hand out. “Oh, it just ... weighed me down anyway. Good ... good teamwork.”

Hoots shrugged.

“Yeah, I know it.” They both laughed out loud together, their heart rates returning to normality once again. From the small pile of bodies the creature tore through, one seemed to not be quite dead.

Hoots and Elara looked at each other and stood up, a little worse for wear, making a few groans as they did. The duo made their way over to the dying redsand guard. It was not one they had talked to before, possibly one of the archers; it was hard to tell, since the bodies were covered in blood and sat in expansive puddles of liquid red. They pulled the guard out from under one of his dead comrades, blood dripping off him. It was unclear how much was or wasn’t his. Elaria leaned him against the mountainside a few metres away.

“Be as still as you can,” she said, trying to assess the injuries.

“It...” He coughed. “It was just ... protocol...” the archer sputtered out.

“Not exactly a good one,” Hoots said.

Elaria gave her a disappointed look. “Do you all turn into one of those things when you touch one of those ... gems?” Elaria asked.

“It’s... It’s different, different for each person.”

“Different how?” Elaria pressed. He shook his head.

“I don’t know. Just told to ... use them if we suspect any major threat ... or ... or threat of leaking information...”

“The leader, he was telling us what he knew,” Elaria remarked. The archer nodded. Elaria finally managed to lift his under armour and saw a wound that penetrated his whole body, from one side to another.

“This ... this is beyond my healing,” Elaria announced.

“Oh, that’s alright. I watched you two take that thing on. Save your strength.”

“Is there anything you are willing to tell us? We just want to understand.” Elaria kept her eyes on his hands in case there was another gem hidden on his person.

“I ... I don’t even know how I got here...” the archer said, looking off in the distance.

“Huh?” Hoots interjected.

“There’s no memory of a time before this, like I’ve always been here...”

“Were you here longer than the others we were fighting?” Elaria asked. He nodded and started to become visibly upset. He looked off into the distance, eyes racing, searching for a memory of family, or *anything* before this mountain, that he could escape to. Elaria saw this and tried her best to comfort him

“What about—” Elaria started.

“Promise me,” the archer said, grabbing Elaria’s arms. He looked right into her eyes. His appeared consumed by fear.

“Promise me you won’t let my brothers and sisters in there turn into one of those monsters. Promise me. The only thing I have are those people in there. We aren’t bad people. Please, we are only doing what we’re told. It’s the only thing I know, the only thing I have...” His grip on Elaria faded. Elaria held his other arm and looked deep into his light brown eyes.

"If my final thoughts are with my family, like yours are right now ... I'd die happy," Elaria said. That put a small smile on his face, even for the briefest of moments, but his eyes were barely open now. Elaria continued.

"I promise, I'll keep them safe." Elaria removed her eight-sided compass necklace and placed it on his chest. He was only just conscious. "May the Eight Winds guide you to the outer planes; may your family's souls find you..." The compass necklace glowed softly. Elaria waited a few moments as the archer's breath softened and then stopped. Both Elaria and Hoots took a moment of silence as the warm wind blew softly from above.

"He didn't have any memories," Hoots said, breaking the silence.

"They were fading away; he was becoming less and less of who he was and becoming..."

"Mindless ... like those husks..." Hoots finished Elaria's thoughts out loud.

"I fear whatever is happening to these redsands here eventually creates those 'husks' we dealt with in Alitiar. First, they are replaced with alternative memories, making them do things, then mindlessness... This isn't some straightforward possession of the sort Carion knows... It's like those that chased us into the city..."

"Trit said those guards he sang to in the camp didn't have memories of anything either. Oh! Trit!" Hoots realized and looked around frantically. "He was taken inside!"

"Along with Carion. Look, these redsands don't have to be our enemy," Elaria said, now standing. "There's still humanity in them, at least at the moment, so we may still be able to save them before they are completely turned."

"And we can't let anyone use those red gems. We got lucky with that one, but who knows how many there are," Hoots added.

Elaria nodded. "The horses still there?" Hoots ran across the landing to the path down the mountain. The two horses were still there, a little shaken but otherwise fine.

"Yep," Hoots yelled back.

"Good, let's get in there before Carion causes trouble." Elaria grabbed her sword and sheathed it, then turned to the entrance to Earthheart. "Looks like I've got a promise to keep."

Carion casually wandered the halls, getting a layout of the mine. The top area, or the upper halls, from what he could tell, were used mainly as living quarters. Many rooms were for sleeping, storage, eating, or dealing with the ore that had been brought up. The lower halls were simply storage, and the cells had been made recently. The dwarfs were going about the mine in groups, slowly but surely combing the place out, dealing with any soldier or guard however they saw fit, but there weren't many, and any that were around were sleeping or dealing with grunt work like inventory, so they were alone or generally defenceless.

Curious, Carion thought. Where are the rest of them?

Carion came around one of the curved hallways. Three dwarfs were going door to door, knocking them down, searching the rooms, and moving on to the next. Carion watched. These three dwarfs were looking a little frustrated, like they wanted to find someone. They clutched hammers and makeshift weapons tightly. As they left one of the rooms, they noticed Carion down the hall.

"Ey! Come 'ere!" one of them yelled, starting to run at him, weapon lifting.

"Oi, 'old up!" the one behind him said. "That's the one that freed all 'em in the cells! Carion, right?"

Carion nodded. "How's the prison break going?"

"Do you even care?"

"Pretty shite! No one's around! Reckon they're all in the mess 'all. Just scoutin' these last ones 'ere before we meet up to storm it shortly!" the leading one answered with gusto. Carion looked over them at all the open rooms.

"Anything interesting up here? Out of place?"

The dwarf who stopped the other earlier spoke up. "Oh yeah, we found a guard lookin' over the ground in the room about four doors down; didn't 'ave to take care of 'im. Room used to be for our religious kin."

"Didn't have to take care of him?" Carion asked, puzzled.

"Yeah, he just slit 'is own throat before we 'ad the chance. Pretty odd. Nothin' else too out of place though, ae?"

“Nah, just moved all our shite ’round! Going to take weeks before it’s back,” the other dwarf answered.

“Come out to the landin’ with us; mess ’all is on the other side,” the leading one said, ready to continue. Carion still peered over them to that room they had mentioned.

“I’ll be there shortly.” They took no more interest in Carion; the conversation felt more of a courtesy than anything else. The dwarfs continued behind Carion, knocking in doors of each room they came to. Carion made his way to the room they’d mentioned. It was dark and smelled stale. The room was mostly bare, save for a dead redsand on the floor. Blood had leaked out of him and pooled nearby. Although Carion was comfortable seeing in the dark, there was something sprawled on the floor that he wanted more detail of. With a bit of phosphorus from his component pouch, Carion ignited several small lantern-sized balls of light that danced around his hand. He blew softly and fluttered his fingers, and the dancing lights brightened and flew across to the corners of the room, lighting it up. When the magical light contacted the floor, something that was unseen became visible. Where the dead guard lay was a large circle that glowed purple when the dancing lights shone nearby. The circle contained magical runes and sigils in a large circular pattern. The pattern went around the circumference, and then a smaller circle was within it, with a similar pattern. This continued right into the centre. Carion took a step closer, and in doing so realized what kind of magic circle this was. His eyes widened a little.

“Oh, you know what that means?”

“Oh shit...”

“This way, lads!” Trit yelled, leading a whole battalion of redsand soldiers down the hallway from the mess hall. He was smiling widely.

Some of the soldiers whistled under their monotone voices.

“I like the bard.”

“Where are we going?”

“This is fun,” several muttered.

Trit appeared quite pleased with himself. They turned the corner to the landing where Trit had been initially, the entrance to the left, the balcony and the great cavern to the right. The ceiling was high and adequately lit. Strolling to the landing, Trit then saw a mass of people coming from the other side. The pale dwarfs had gathered and were heading straight toward them. Trit's happy demeanour did not fade, and he continued to approach them, the redsands still at his back.

"Hello!" Trit boasted, with a large friendly wave. The dwarfs did not reciprocate such a gesture.

"Who are ya?" the leading dwarf asked. Murmurs and such came from the mass of dwarfs, all about wanting to cause considerable pain to the redsands. None looked friendly, and they generally looked past Trit to his new "friends." Trit looked at the angry mob with a little more concern.

"Whoa whoa! Hey now, they're good! They just do what I say! See? Look. Say hi, guys!" Trit turned and smiled to his horde.

"Hello."

"Hey."

"I like the bard."

"Hi," the group all muttered. Trit stood there like a conductor.

"Ignore Gary," Trit said. "He's a little slow, but he likes me!" He turned, giving the dwarfs a playfully toothy smile. They were unmoved.

"Hey 'e's the one who played the music." A couple of dwarfs pushed through to the front.

"Yeah 'e's the one! They all started actin' dumb when 'e played the piano for 'em!" a few dwarfs claimed. The leading dwarf turned back, looking at the redsands, puzzled.

"Ah, ain't 'e the one Carion said 'e was with?" another asked. The leading dwarf looked him up and down. "You Trit, then?"

"That's me! Wait, Carion's here? He left me to deal with this lot!" Trit exclaimed.

"He's scoutin' the area 'imself. Look, Trit, those redsands 'ave killed many of us and enslaved the rest. We aren't lettin' 'em go, even if you made 'em all simple." Several dwarfs brandished weapons of all varieties, ready to charge. A clatter of feet came down from the entrance, attracting the

dwarfs' and Trit's attention. Coming down the entrance hall and erupting onto the scene, right in the centre of the two groups, were Hoots and Elaria.

"Trit!" Elaria exclaimed with a huge sigh of relief and a smile. Trit smiled back and waved happily.

"Oh look! Dwarfs!" Hoots announced from the other side. "Did all the hard work I see, Trit. They're all free, yeah? Oh look! Guards... What's going on?" Hoots turned, looking at both groups.

"Elaria and 'Oots, I presume?" the leading dwarf asked.

"That's us," Elaria answered. "You know of us?"

"Your associate, Carion, freed many of us," the dwarf answered.

"Oh good," Elaria said. "And these redsands?" Elaria pointed to the drone-like horde of redsands

"I have an explanation; it's just not a good explanation," Trit said, hands up a little in a 'calm down' gesture. "They were going to kill me—only after I had become exhausted from playing piano."

"You don't play piano," Hoots said.

"Yeah, I do! Hadn't played in a while, but apparently, I'm amazing! Or at least I remember how... Then afterwards, they were all, well ... like this," Trit said, motioning to the redsands. They all briefly looked up as Trit did so, followed by drooling smiles.

"Simple or not, they enslaved us!" Yoseef stepped out from the crowd, gritting his teeth.

"The guards out front said you were the ones who were behind the attack on Alitiar. Who says it isn't deserved?" Hoots bit at Yoseef and the crowd, coming to Trit's defence. The dwarfs advanced a little, tension building.

"So, who are ya goin' to believe?" Yoseef asked. Everyone looked at each other, Hoots and Elaria looking between the group of dwarfs and Trit.

"How many are in the lower mines?" Carion's voice silenced the crowd from as he emerged near the balcony. Everyone looked to him as he stood alone, looking over the edge towards the heart of the mountain. Slowly, he turned to the crowd, expression unchanging. Initially no one answered, all a little confused at the seemingly random question.

"A little over twelve 'undred," Yoseef answered.

"Then leave my companions alone if you want them alive," Carion said aggressively.

“You threatenin’ them?!” Yoseef yelled. His voice boomed throughout the upper halls. Carion ignored the empty threat.

“So what if I am?” Carion spat, the dwarfs were unmoved, and before they could answer back, Carion continued.

“In the back room, there’s an arcane circle.”

“And?!” the dwarf next to Yoseef spoke abruptly. Yoseef turned to quiet him.

“It’s on a timer. If there isn’t a response at the allocated time, whoever has tabs on this place will know, and we have no idea who that is or what’s waiting on the other side.”

“Why not break it then?!” someone asked.

“If either of them are broken before the timer runs out, they’ll blow this place to oblivion, those below included,” Carion added.

“Either of them?” the female dwarf next to Yoseef asked. Carion almost rolled his eyes and answered, turning more to the crowd now.

“You think they have only one arcane circle? Where do you think the other one is?” Carion pointed down to the bottom of the mine.

“How do ya know?” a dwarf asked.

“It’s what ‘e would do,” Yoseef answered, looking right at Carion. Carion nodded.

“There’ll be another circle down there. Compromise either before the timer runs out, the whole place goes up, and *all* those down there will perish. They had someone looking after the circle up here, but they’re dead, so you have until the timer is up before a redsand army pours through. I used to monitor systems like this in a fire-realm prison ... a while ago.”

“How long have we got?” Elaria asked. Carion turned to her now.

“Just under three hours.”

More murmurs from the dwarfs. Everyone was looking at each other, coming up with ideas or theories amongst themselves. Carion walked over to Trit and his own group.

“How’d you do with the redsands?” he asked, inspecting the group. Many of them smiled brightly, mimicking Trit.

“Oh well, yeah, they took me in, threw my lute somewhere, weren’t interested in talking much, and wanted to see how long I could play piano for. Didn’t know I could play that well, but yeah, I played along, thought

you may have a plan or something. But as soon as I turned around, they were like this!" Trit explained. Carion walked among them, looking them all up and down with curiosity.

"I turned into a mouse and hid in your lute. I freed many of the dwarfs before you, but you played your part perfectly," Carion explained.

"*This* was part of your plan?" Trit gestured to the redsands.

"What did you think those leaves of the whisperleaf bush were supposed to do?" he asked.

Trit shrugged, so Carion continued. "You worked a charm spell on them. Did the cold taste leave after you performed?"

"Ah yeah, it did actually."

"I had an idea that, if we were to meet any redsands, I'd get you to play something while the whisperleaf was in your system. If they were in fact 'primed' for possession, you could temporarily hijack it. Hence, they now listen to you," Carion explained. "I had a hunch it would work, and it was correct, as my hunches almost always are."

Trit threw his arms up. "What? How can I cast spells?! I'm not a wizard—"

"No, but your music grabs their attention. If you gain someone's attention under the influence of whisperleaf, which lasts a little under twenty minutes, you can briefly charm them."

"Well, you could have told me!"

"I was concerned you would have been overconfident. You needed to be authentic and actually scared."

"Ah ... right. Well, it worked!"

"Whatever is happening to these people is happening slowly, and Kor-Thiliath..."

"Really? You still think it's him?"

"... or something, takes over."

"Carion, I don't think this is just possession happening," Elaria interjected.

Carion looked over at her. "How so?"

“We had to deal with those outside. One touched a large red gem, and when he did, he turned into a monster.”

“Yeah, some big monstrosity, started sucking up the others, real nasty,” Hoots added.

“Whatever it was, it wasn’t from this plane,” Elaria said.

“How do you know?” Carion asked.

“I managed to banish it; that doesn’t work for creatures of the natural plane,” Elaria said.

Carion looked away, deep in thought for a moment.

They get primed, somehow; it strips them of their memories, replaces them with some basic ones, and eventually something comes and takes over, but...

*“But ... those red gems must open their minds up completely,
letting a lesser creature through...*

It’s the red gems. Prime them slowly, they are ‘his.’

Too quickly, and they are someone else’s.

They are exposed to the red gems, which primes them...

How were they exposed back in Alitiar?

There’s very few who could pull off possession of that level, possession through planes of existence!

And you just saw his name scrawled onto—”

No, it isn’t him...

“Is that really not going to be a possibility?”

No one can know.

“You know what could be doing this?” Elaria asked.

“...No,” Carion answered.

“The guy out front also said their memories were fading. They seemed convinced of another history... What do we believe?” Hoots asked.

“Fear is a good motivator. I believe that, as they get primed, they become fearful of everyone else, hence the dwarf slaves, hence the swift engagement you had outside. How else would they have convinced the entire east to invade?” Carion asked.

“How come the dwarfs aren’t affected? Why aren’t *they* primed?” Elaria asked.

Carion looked over to the dwarfs, and then walked over to one. “Those tattoos...” Carion said, grasping a dwarf’s arm.

“Hey!” the dwarf barked.

“Let ’im look,” Yoseef said. The dwarf calmed as Carion inspected the tattoos all over his body.

“This magic is old... Very old...” Carion muttered.

And not of this plane...

“Knew you’d recognize it at some point.”

It seems these dwarfs have knowledge I was not expecting.

Shrug it off. I’ll ask later.

“They protect us from many things,” Yoseef said. “Disease, curses, things goin’ bump in the night... It’s been a tradition since our ancestors arrived on Ma-Ural.”

As Carion looked over the dwarfs’ tattoos, Trit chatted with Hoots.

“Oh, I see it now...”

“Huh?” Hoots queried.

“Like, I’ve seen gnomes and dwarfs before, but now I see the differences when they’re side-by-side...”

“What are you getting at?”

“Well, you’re, like... You got big round eyes, round head, round ears...”

“Mmhhh...” Hoots was ready to get offended for whatever dribble Trit had to offer, as he leaned down to her level.

“But dwarfs ... they’re just thick.”

“Oh, shut up!” Laughing, she playfully shoved the grinning Trit who been purposely trying to get her to laugh.

Carion turned to Elaria. “These tattoos, it checks out. This old magic is protecting them enough that they aren’t being primed in the same way. But whatever history the *redsands* believe keeps them fearful of the dwarfs,” Carion explained. “Primed.”

“Now if you don’t mind,” Yoseef said, “these redsands have a date with the other end of my fist.” He started advancing towards Trit and his followers.

“You aren’t going to kill them. They aren’t fully possessed yet. Primed but not gone. I saw what they became back in Alitiar—these are not the soulless husks we saw. There is humanity left in these soldiers. They are convinced you were the ones that took Alitiar, and this is punishment for those crimes. It is what keeps them aggressive towards you. I am sorry for the loss you must be feeling, but your anger shouldn’t be with them,” Elaria said, trying to keep Yoseef and Loshe from charging at the redsands. “Princess Maria would now want us to allow it.”

Loshe frowned. “You imply Lady Maria sent ya?”

“Yes, she wanted us to come and check on Loft, considering they hadn’t heard from you for several weeks, even before the attack,” Hoots added.

“An’ ’ow do we know we can trust ya? This lot came at us in the night. So ’ow do we know this isn’t another ploy?” Yoseef said, looking up from his thick brow.

“Oh! I got a thing!” Hoots started patting her pockets down, eventually finding what she was looking for. She pulled out the broach she’d obtained from Kain back in Alitiar, regifted to them by Maria. She showed it to Loshe and Yoseef. Their expressions changed, and Yoseef appeared more sombre.

“So, ’e ... ’e is dead then?” Yoseef looked up at Elaria and then to Hoots. Their lack of a quick answer spoke for them. Before anyone else could speak, Yoseef started humming loudly, a deep hum. As he did, Loshe followed, and then the dwarfs nearby joined in. Soon the entire group was humming the same deep chord. They all lowered their heads and closed their eyes. The quartet looked on silently.

After about twenty seconds, the humming stopped. Yoseef looked back up to the two, calmer now.

“Kain... He was a good man ... a man we saw as one of our own. He was the only one in Alitiar we trusted to a fault. ’E wouldn’t ’ave died easily,

so this means ... whatever is 'appenin' in Alitiar is not a small conquest. This is *war*. We'll trust you ... for now. But we need to save the rest of our kin; there is no debate on that," he said sternly.

"*And* you won't be harming *them*. This isn't a slaughterhouse. Don't become what they believe you to be," Elaria said.

Yoseef gave out a heavy breath in frustration.

"Then what do we do with 'em?" he asked.

"Okay, that's the last of them! All tied up. Good job, fellas." Trit looked on as all the redsands sat along one of the curved hallways.

"Thank you."

"I like the bard."

"Comfy," several said playfully.

"Good, the charm will wear off shortly. The dwarfs will keep them in check. You and I will keep the dwarfs in check," Carion said, coming out of the arcane circle room, Yoseef and Loshe with him.

"I've dealt with arcane circles before; there is a catch we can exploit. It's one I've exploited before, but it requires some planning. When the timer expires with no one at either circle to reset it, wherever it is linked to will send everything they've got through to relocate the prisoners and kill those who don't follow. But if we 'occupy' a circle as the timer goes off, we stunt it, just that particular circle I mean. No one can come through, so it won't go off until the next timer cycle." Carion tugged the rope attached to a chain of redsands. "I've rigged this one up here. Just before the timer goes off, this'll pull the redsands through, occupying this circle and pulling them all through to wherever the origin is, possibly not the best fate for these redsands but I guarantee there'll be some confusion at the origin which can often help, it's better than killing them all I guess, more importantly the circle will be stunted for another cycle, which is three hours."

The four continued walking towards the balcony, a long line of redsands all tied up were sitting quietly along one side of the hallway.

"The biggest issue is the circle down at the bottom; we can't stunt both, as we can't guarantee I could set up the same system in time, so when the cycle's timer is finished, the bottom one will be open, and anything can come through. The circles have a failsafe though. The way it's *supposed* to

work, if one circle is destroyed—the sigils removed or tampered with—both will explode. It's set up to essentially destroy everything in the area. But ... if Yoseef manages to destroy the bottom circle at the *exact same time* that we *stunt* the top one, the top still gets a full cycle before its failsafe is tripped, and there will be about sixty seconds before the bottom one explodes, almost like a lit fuse. The top circle will have to be destroyed within the next timer cycle, getting the same sixty seconds before exploding, but that can happen after everyone is safely outside."

"So, just as the cycle's timer stops, the redsands are all going to get pulled through safely ... which will stunt this one?" Loshe asked, hoping to clarify her understanding as she looked at the long line of redsands. Carion nodded, and she continued. "And if someone destroys the circle down in the mine, erasing it or breaking the lines or whatever, at the exact right time, they'll have a minute to escape before it explodes?"

"Yes," Carion said, "the rope is enchanted, and as the last of it is pulled through up here, they will know the time is right to break the circle down there."

"But 'ow will we know when the last is pulled through?" Yoseef asked.

"While the redsands are being pulled through, both circles will give off a slight glow, showing that a link has been established to ... wherever. When the glow stops, it will mean it's time, and whoever's below will scratch and scrub the sigils away with whatever they can find, as best and as fast as they can. If they succeed, the top will be safe for a while, but whoever is at the bottom will have less than a minute to escape. If the bottom one stays intact, though, legions will pour through to take care of whatever happened. You really don't want that," Carion explained.

"How will we know if those below succeeded though?" Loshe asked, concerned.

"The lift. If they've done what needs to be done, that lift should get them all up in time, but if the lift isn't moving ... I'd assume they weren't successful and accept the worst. Everyone at the top will be fine, until the end of the next cycle at least, but those at the bottom will be lost to the explosion ... or to whatever comes through."

"Won't there be one of the redsands, a guardian, looking after the one at the bottom?" Loshe asked.

“Likely, yes. They’ll just have to be dealt with. I know it’s a lot to take in, but there is no other way. I cannot reset the circles. That can only be done by their specific guardians. And the redsand guardian up here is dead. This cannot be avoided. While it may be hard, it simply must be done. Like I said, I have the skills to stunt the top one, but nothing else. So Yoseef, you are going down?”

Loshe and Yoseef looked at each other, Yoseef then turned and gave Carion a single nod. Thoughts were racing in their minds and nervous energy pumped throughout their bodies.

“Exploiting magic is challenging, so these rules may seem complex, but if you, Yoseef, do what I’m asking, many could be saved,” Carion said, striding quickly to the balcony area. “You’ll at least have a *chance* to save them.”

“At one point you were awfully cold to the idea of ‘elpin’ us, but now you seem very committed. What changed?” Yoseef asked.

“My choices are my own” Carion said sharply.

Everyone was now reconvening at the large balcony.

“Not too tight?” Hoots asked Elaria.

“Oh, not too bad. Does it look good though?” Elaria now sported full redsand garb.

“At least you get armour! I have to look like a grubby prisoner!” Hoots said, now dressed in rags, with a dirty face. She got nasty looks from a few dwarfs looking on. Carion, Loshe, Trit and Yoseef came from around the corner. Yoseef was pointing to the other side of the balcony.

“The platform will extend out with a switch over here. They don’t use it often, and the next shift isn’t for ‘ours. The lift is magical in nature and accelerates rapidly in either direction.” He looked at Elaria in her redsand armour as he walked by. “Now, she’ll have to be rough with us, to be convincin.”

They all went to a small control panel in the corner. Yoseef flicked a switch, rotated a dial, and pulled a small lever on the panel. As he did, a large platform extended out from the balcony space. The platform was of the same material as the white marble-like walls of the interior of the upper halls. It extended out from underneath the balcony, and then small railings extended out along the edges.

"It 'as no weight limit; allows us to get as much ore as possible from the 'eart of the mountain," Yoseef said.

"Is it big enough to hold all the dwarfs down there?" Carion asked.

Yoseef nodded, unconvincingly.

"It'll 'ave to be." He looked over at Elaria. "If we have to make space, we can always throw off a few redsands," Yoseef said loudly, directing the comment it to Elaria, who was adjusting her helmet.

Elaria turned to him from the other side. "No one dies! Not even the redsands!" she yelled back.

Yoseef sighed heavily again. "Last thing: In case something goes wrong, *our* failsafe needs to be tripped as well."

"No. No, Yoseef. We can't initiate the purge switch!" Loshe started pleading.

"You 'eard Carion. If I fail to destroy the circle, they'll come through, and our kin will be subject to more of what we've already endured." He raised his voice, wanting to be heard. "To die in the 'eart of the mountain as part of the purge is a great 'onour, Loshe! Never to be shackled again!"

He didn't want to let any of his kin die, but he would never let anyone else take the mountain. Instead, it would be sealed up for no one to have but the pale dwarfs. With a few more switches flipped, and dials turned, a small hole opened up in the centre of the panel.

"Yoseef ... don't do this. The one who initiates the purge switch will be cursed if it isn't used shortly after. There's no turning back if it is implemented." Loshe whimpered a little. Many more dwarfs looked on, now becoming aware of what was about to happen. Yoseef ignored them all. He stared into the small black hole deeply for a moment.

"If I don't find the circle down there, if I can't break it at the right time, there's no 'ome I could go where I could settle my soul. I'm cursed either way. These mountains 'ere were a gift to us, and I'll let 'em fall on top of us before I see redsands or anyone else exploit 'em anymore. We aren't takin' chances, Loshe. *I* ain't takin' chances."

With that, Yoseef pushed his index finger into the hole. A sharp slicing noise could be heard. All the other dwarfs fell silent, and the quartet looked on with concern. Yoseef didn't even wince, his composure strong. He pulled his hand out of the hole, a bloody stump where most of his index

finger had been. Blood dripped down into the creases of his worn hand. Yoseef looked at it for a mere moment, then looked up as the hole shut and a long lever extended out from it.

“Need help with ... that?” Trit asked, looking at the blood, concerned. Yoseef shook his head, only once.

“No, this is a reminder of *my* decision, my curse to carry if the purge switch is not initiated. If my decision is true, it will seal itself, and the curse lifted” Yoseef said, gently placing his red hand to his side, and got back to business. “The platform will come back up with the controls at the base.”

“And who is going to pull the purge switch?!” Loshe wailed. “Knowing they’ll doom our kin willingly?! You included!”

“Im.” Yoseef pointed to Carion, standing by himself at the balcony, looking down at the abyss.

“Why would you trust him? He isn’t a dwarf! He isn’t one of our kin! Why trust the lives of so many in his hands?” Loshe asked, pleading with Yoseef. He shrugged off the comment.

“If I go down, I need someone who isn’t tied to us, someone who isn’t goin’ to delay our time because of emotional attachment. ‘E won’t care if we live or die; e’ll stick to the time. We either come back up with the rest or no one does.” Yoseef paused for a moment. “Carion ‘as no stakes in this, so ... when the glow stops, and the sixty seconds are up, you pull it. Regardless of what ‘appens, this mine returns to the mountains themselves.” Yoseef looked at Carion, the most serious and personal look he’d ever given anyone, knowing he was literally throwing the lives of his entire kin into his hands. Carion, expression unchanged, walked over and stood near the newly unlocked lever. Everyone stepped away from the area. Carion nodded in agreement.

“From the bottom up, the tunnel will collapse, returning the mountain to it’s solid state, purgin’ it of our presence” Yoseef said. “Regardless of what ‘appens, when it’s time—after the redsands ‘ave gone through that circle up ‘ere, and sixty seconds have passed—you pull that lever. Sixty seconds. No more. If I’ve failed, all of us down there die ... not killed by the redsands, not taken away somewhere to suffer even more; we all get out or we all die by your ‘and.” Yoseef sighed, looking at his finger as the blood flowing out of it slowed.

As the others were talking, Hoots tugged at Elaria's redsand armour.

"Hey, El?" Hoots mumbled.

Elaria was still adjusting her armour. It was far thinner than she was used to, and not made for her, so it was uncomfortable, but she was making do.

"What's up?"

"Why are we doing this?"

"Oh, ah... Well, I'm able to look like a redsand. The dwarfs are really worn out, and you can pull off looking like—"

"No, as in why are *we* doing *this*? We could just ditch it all." Hoots wasn't making eye contact. Elaria stopped playing around with adjustments and looked at her.

"Because it's the right thing to do, Hoots."

"Yeah, for you maybe, but why should I care?"

"You do care."

Hoots didn't answer.

"You do. I know you do... You're scared, aren't you?"

"Well, yeah. We could actually die, right?" Hoots looked into Elaria's eyes briefly.

"You hear this lot, right?" Elaria asked. "We go down, we save everyone we can, then up we come. We aren't going down there to die."

"You don't know that, El," Hoots said, kicking her shoe a little. Elaria reached into her chest armour and grabbed her necklace. Hoots watched as Elaria removed it, lifting it over her head.

"I wouldn't trust anyone else with what we have to do, you hear me? We just took care of one of those horrors outside. I think we can find some keys and unlock some prisoners; no problem."

Hoots remained silent but nodded slightly.

She's scared. Why wouldn't she be? I am asking a lot of her... "Take this" Elaria said, passing her the necklace with her compass medallion on it. Hoots was shocked but presented her hand. She felt the necklace collapse onto her palm. It was light, but she felt the weight of responsibility it held.

"How about you look after that? It's like my mini-pledge to you. I promise nothing will happen. We'll go down, and in about two hours, we'll be back up. Together."

Hoots looked at the medallion; it was so shiny it was almost white.

“Why?” Hoots asked.

“Because I need the most powerful sorcerer I know to trust me. We’ve got to have each other’s back. And I trust that you can keep that safe, like you can trust me to keep *you* safe.”

Hoots looked over the medallion for another few moments and then chuckled to herself.

“You won’t be able to make another pledge without me.” She laughed. “You are at my *mercy!*” Hoots said playfully, plunging the necklace into her pocket.

Elaria chuckled. “Yes. Now I really have to look after you, not like I had to before.” She then noticed Yoseef looking over at her and tuned in.

Yoseef looked over to Elaria, who had been standing with Hoots nearby.

“You leave whether I’m there or not,” he said to her. “If you have everyone, or even just some of my kin, you leave. The people come first.”

Elaria nodded unhappily.

Loshe ran to Yoseef, her eyes welling up with tears, and hit Yoseef on the chest several times, not hard enough to push him but more of an annoying strike of disapproval. Yoseef stood strong. He knew what he had asked of Carion, the decision his own. Loshe grabbed Yoseef’s arm and pulled it straight. She used her index finger and traced one of the sigils of the tattoos on his forearms, and as she did, the tattoo glowed blue.

“Then at least use the power of our ancestors to your advantage,” Loshe said, crying a little. Yoseef nodded once. Carion watched intently; this interested him greatly, but time was precious, so he butted in.

“You either die by the hands of the redsands coming through their arcane circle, their failsafe, or you perish from me pulling this purge switch, for your sake though I hope we’ll see you back up here in two hours.” Carion said, hand hovering near the lever. Yoseef nodded and motioned to Elaria, equipped in her redsand armour, and Hoots, stripped down to look like a prisoner. They met Yoseef and made for the large platform that would transport them down to the base of the mine. The three stepped onto the platform and stood together. Elaria looked back and saw Trit, who looked a little scared but mostly worried. Hoots looked over to Carion. He nodded

at her lightly, and Hoots gave him a confident nod. Carion had seen a few things in his time, and she felt his confidence in her, even if he would never say it out loud.

“Send us down,” Yoseef yelled, facing forward, not willing to look back at the mortified faces of his brethren. Loshe pulled the release lever, and the large platform abruptly but then smoothly descended, quickly gaining speed, rocketing down and making the hair fly up on their heads. Despite the speed at which they descended, it didn’t feel as though they were going to be thrown off, as if there was an unnatural force keeping them on the platform. The three tried to pump themselves up for what was to come, keeping composure and focusing on the task at hand. As the platform descended, the air slowly got thinner, the temperature rose subtly—feeling like uncomfortable summer heat—and the light got progressively dimmer. They passed halls and tunnels along the way, over and over as they continued down. The lack of life in the halls and the balconies truly depicted the cold and absolute loneliness anyone would feel during this trip. As they got closer to the base of the mine, the sounds of chipping and cracking got slowly louder as the sound of mining became more and more apparent.

Once it got close to the base of the shaft, the platform slowed to a smooth halt, and the whole thing clicked into place, the sound echoing around them. The three stood alone on the platform, knowing they had an impossible task in front of them. They had reached the heart of the mountain.

Elaria leaned down to Hoots’ ear and quietly said, “No matter what happens, I’ve got your back. Alright?”

CHAPTER 13

AS THEY REACH THE HEART

Lost Personal anthropological notes (9 of 18)

Turns out, I can never be accepted by the pale dwarfs. They only let certain individuals outside their kin become 'accepted' in their society. These individuals have included members of the Kai'sion family, but even then, it is limited. This saddens me, but it is their culture. I cannot compare my normality to theirs.

Despite this, they have been become very pleasant to talk to. I think I fascinate them as much as they fascinate me. I have far too many sketches of their tattoos to analyse. I even had to top up on parchment! They were happy to let me sketch as many as I wanted. There seems to be a magical component to their ink, as if they have an unforeseen practical use for each design. Some dwarfs have blank areas where previous tattoos are obviously missing. They must get used up somehow?

Several publications could be devoted to the artwork on the skins of these people. I will have to send these off next time I'm in Cospid, as I cannot carry all these sketches while roaming the eastern province.

I will be leaving Loft soon; I have grown a strong dislike for the cold anyway. I fear I will miss it though as I hear the desert of the east is stifling!

~ Associate Professor Lucky Montana



This was an unscheduled trip down, so thankfully no one was here to greet them. Three caverns, rocky and irregular in appearance, went off in differing directions.

"This is way different than the halls above, Yoseef," Hoots said quietly.

"It's as natural as the mountain gods deem it. Those 'igher 'alls are for us. 'Ere is where the gifts are given. No one is 'ere. We're lucky. Let's use it. You two know the plan?" Yoseef said in a gruff voice.

"Yes. You know these halls; you sneak around to find the circle and wait. We are to free the dwarfs down here, lead them to the lift, and then up," Elaria recited.

"Ya know, I ain't 'appy about leavin' my kin's lives to you two, but I 'ave no choice but to trust ya." Yoseef then looked at the other two, and with a powerful tone, said, "Remember, if you 'ave everyone, leave without me. Do not wait for me." Hoots and Elaria nodded, both with determination in their hearts. Yoseef broke out of the shackles he'd been wearing; they were already broken and mostly for show in case they were needed upon arrival. Then he darted off with a disturbing amount of grace, making only the slightest bit of sound with each step into the left-most tunnel.

Hoots looked up at Elaria and shrugged.

"Follow the plan?"

"Yes, we follow the plan. Down the middle tunnel, keep right, find the main mine," Elaria said. She seemed very focused.

"Then ... improvise," Hoots said.

Elaria gave her a stern look. "*Keys*, Hoots."

"Right, improvise with *keys*," Hoots said with a cheeky smile.

Elaria continued with her look.

"I'll be good!" Hoots said. "We got this! Just, you know, beat me up a little when there's people around," Hoots said.

"I'm not going to *beat you up*," Elaria said, puzzled.

"You got to act like them a little, so beat me up a little, push me around, spit on me, all that stuff. Improvise that!" Hoots said. She noticed that

Elaria was not quite getting it. She wasn't used to being dishonest in most circumstances.

"We won't be able to discuss things like this. Might look a little weird is all," Hoots remarked.

Elaria nodded in reluctant agreement. "Okay, but know I don't mean it, alright?"

"Yeah, we're good. We're good. Right, onwards!" Hoots said, then looked up at Elaria. "Actually, you should be leading, or at least directing."

"Oh, right," Elaria said, shoving Hoots lightly. Hoots stumbled only slightly.

"Yeah, you we've got to work on this whole *you being mean* business," Hoots said as they went down the central path.

Several odd shaped dice danced over a stone table. "come on three fives!" A redsand guard said as the last die came to rest, a five facing upwards. He threw his fists in the air enthusiastically.

"They have to be loaded, no way you are *that* lucky," another redsand guard said grabbing one of the dice to inspect it, another was writing down the scores and another leaned back with hands behind his head.

"That's enough to win, you get the pot" the scoring redsand said, putting the notepad down.

"I swear they roll differently down here" the leaning back one remarked, shaking his head.

"Nah, it's just high risk, high reward" the winner said, "that and, well, I'm too damn smart for you lot, all the statistics you know?"

"You? Smart? You'd burn water when boiling it"

The four redsands laughed together in a small dimly lit room. The room had one long table, and they only sat at one end. A few empty but dirty plates and bowls were littered nearby. This room was clearly made for taking breaks, while being deep in the mine. A soft hum of mining could be heard, but it was easily drowned out by their chatting. The air was still thick and warm.

Bursting into the room, standing tall, was the guard captain from the upper halls, his armour lined with gold, which was highlighted against the rough sand-like pattern of the redsand garb. The four card players

immediately jumped up and stood at attention, with wide eyes, their chairs screeching as they were pushed backwards.

"Everyone is called to the main chamber. Get over there. Now," the captain barked. The four shuffled noisily, adjusting themselves properly, tightening armour and grabbing their swords and gear. One of the guards turned to the captain.

"Sir, what brings you down here? Who's working the upper halls?"

"I said now!" the captain howled. His temper was hot, and a vein bulged in his forehead. He clenched his fists tightly. As they rush out into the narrow hallway, all dashing in a single direction, the captain grabbed the last one by the shoulder.

"Remind me, grunt," the guard turned hastily.

"Grunt? I mean, yes, Captain?"

"Where's the communication circle? I need to check in on something," the captain said, avoiding continuous eye contact.

"It ... it's back the way you came. Three doors down on your left. Captain, are you ok?" the guard asked.

"I'm fine," he barked. "Now go! I 'ave to round up more of the slackers," the captain said, shoving the guard away and turning back down the hallway. The four went on their way quickly. The captain walked away, trying to avoid looking over his shoulder. As the footsteps disappeared into the distance and down another hallway, the captain looked over his shoulder. Seeing nothing, he smiled. Slowly, he started shrinking. Hair sprouted and grew on his face and tattoos spread over his skin. Soon, Yoseef walked in the captain's place. He looked down at his arm and saw that the tattoo Loshe had traced was now gone, and just his pale skin remained, outlined by the surrounding black ink of the other tattoos.

Yoseef had been searching for a while; he knew these mines like the beard on his chin. So much of it was stripped of life; areas once used for day-to-day life at the bottom of Earthheart were now empty. Areas of respite or places to eat and prepare food were left to gather dust. Yoseef was careful and light footed, approaching every bend and door with finesse. He knew where to stand and where to look while remaining out of sight. He had no idea where exactly the arcane circle would be.

Carion had suggested somewhere quiet and out of the way, but there were so many small rooms and dormant mines that it may have taken Yoseef much longer to find it without help. Thankfully, he'd stumbled across the redsands taking a breather, a stroke of luck. Yoseef reached the door the other guards had mentioned. He placed an ear to it and concentrated, blocking out the noises all around. He heard soft footsteps behind the door, only one set. Looking at the base of the door, he failed to see any light emanating from within.

Good.

Yoseef planted his foot down firmly, and with a mighty heave, launched forward, bashing the door open. It swung and slammed against the adjacent wall. Inside, a lone redsand guard sat at a small table with a journal. He wasn't wearing typical attire, but commoner clothes instead, in the redsand colours. Religious artifacts and statues lay at the other end of the small room, broken and tossed crudely. In the centre of the room was the same arcane circle as he'd seen in the upper halls. Yoseef paid little mind to this. He launched towards the figure, who was surprised and barely had time to react before Yoseef was upon him. Several knives flew through the air at the redsand. One impaled him in the shoulder, and another pinned his hand to the stone wall behind him. Yoseef bound up onto the sitting guard's knees, and grabbing the man's head with one hand, pulled the knife from the redsand's hand with the other, throwing it to the floor, and then pulling the one from the man's shoulder. The guard clutched the wound, and was about to yell, but Yoseef threw him to the ground and placed a knife in the redsand's mouth.

"I was following orders," the redsand managed to spit out.

"See? That ... that's what makes us different," Yoseef said as he leaned down to the figure's ear. "I 'ave orders too, orders to let ya live, to take you back with us." The redsand seemed to relax a little, but Yoseef continued, "But like I said, we're different. I ain't followin' orders so easily." The redsand began whimpering.

"You lot killed my brethren in the dead of night. You killed us! You brought us to this sacred place, and you know what you lot did? Killed us some more, in a massacre, made us reap the mountain, *our sacred* mountain. The only reason we live in such peace is because we respect it. We

respect the mountains, and they respect us. But now? You broke that. You broke that trust. More importantly... You. Broke. Me.” The guard whimpered more loudly, tears beginning to form.

“I ... I don’t remember that... I ... I wasn’t there!” the guard dribbled out between sobs.

“Ah, ya see? Another difference. I’m glad there are differences. See, unlike you,” he leaned in, whispering, “*I’ll remember this.*”

With that, Yoseef took the blade from the man’s mouth, now grabbing both sides of his head. Slowly, Yoseef rotated the redsands’ head, blood from his still oozing finger marring the man’s skin. The man’s head naturally began resisting after ninety degrees, but Yoseef continued to rotate it, forcing it while looking forward with a menacing grimace. Creaking and cracking could be heard from the man’s neck and spine as the head turned forcibly, and the redsand whined in pain. The resistance suddenly stopped, and a large crack was heard. The redsand became limp, and Yoseef felt his struggle dissipate, his head easily rotating right around in Yoseef’s grasp. Yoseef went and grabbed the chair and placed it under the doorknob. Yoseef knelt next to the circle and watched it with unblinking eyes he was ready to scrub the circle at any moment. Yoseef’s knuckles remained clenched, his forehead wrinkled, and his upper lip taught, for this had not relieved him of the pain he felt for his people.

Hoots and Elaria reached the main tunnel where all the mining was taking place. The tunnel looked like a grand cavern. On both sides of it were lines of dwarfs, all chained together, spanning the entire length of the cavern. Several metres up on another ledge were another set of dwarfs, again, all chained together. There were about half a dozen ledges of that sort on each side. Walking amongst the dwarfs were several redsand guards. The dwarfs were chipping away at the rock and ore that was unearthed, and rich ore and gemstones could be seen glistening on the walls. Even in the dim light, it looked like a night sky, but the stars were all manner of colours. In the centre were several guards walking the length of the cavern, inspecting the dwarfs and keeping an eye on the whole operation. A few dwarfs were collecting the goods, going up and down the rows. A two-story roaring furnace provided the whole area with dim light, creating menacing shadows in the

shape of guards that spread across the cavern floor like ghouls. The most striking thing about this cavern was a great machine at the far end. It was a huge, towering drill that encompassed the back wall and vibrated the earth. The drill was burrowing deep into the earth, uncovering all the rich resources at the base of the mountain. Its sound was almost deafening.

As Elaria and Hoots wandered into view, they took a moment to soak in the situation. A redsand guard grabbed one of the dwarfs from a line-up. Two others unlocked their chains from the adjacent dwarfs before locking them back to each other. The dwarf kicked and screamed, but the three redsands were able to carry her with ease. Although she put up a fight, violently kicking and punching, she appeared weak, her screams of terror being cut short by her shortened breath. Several dwarfs stopped mining and looked on, gritting their teeth, creases of frustration visible through the mud and grime on their faces. But they did nothing; they were scared, so they returned to the rocks, and continued chipping away at them. The female dwarf was carried off, still kicking and screaming. The three redsands carried her to the large open furnace of the drill, which was up a few stairs from the ground. The flames licked at them as they approached. At the entrance to the furnace was a lone humanoid in redsands garb, facing the flames; his armour was plated with gold leaf, but it had faded and was now coated in soot and ash. He turned as they approach.

“Good, the machine hungers,” he said with a soft and sinister voice. He had a wide face, with stretched and parched lips, short black hair, and high cheekbones, all covered in a thin layer of grime. He brushed his fingers across the dwarf captive’s cheek, and black soot coated her already dirty face.

“This is a greater purpose than anything else you’ll accomplish,” he said. The dwarf looked at him with fearful eyes. The captain motioned towards the furnace, and the three carried the dwarf forward. With a heave, they threw her into the flames. As they did, a wail and a scream could be heard from within. The scream intensified, its pitch heightening, emanating from within the machine. The drill roared with the scream, and new life seemed to stream through it. With a violent rattle, the drill began to rotate faster and with more vigour. The flames burned brighter and hotter. The three

guards left swiftly down the stairs, but the captain stayed, his eyes dry from the intense heat, but wild, just like his smile.

“To harness a soul into pure energy,” the captain muttered to himself, as he watched the flame. “It is truly ... beautiful.” The recent scream seemed to continue on as a dull humming.

Hoots and Elaria looked on in horror, both resisting the urge to intervene.

“I think this is it,” Hoots whispered to Elaria as they continued to wander into the cavern. Both were trying not to look completely out of place, but they couldn’t help but look around in interest.

“Yes, this looks like it, and we need to get the key,” Elaria said.

“Just one? We’re going to need more than that! Look at them all,” Hoots said.

“Hey! You there!” A redsand guard had spotted them and was approaching. Elaria panicked a little and kicked Hoots, who barely moved.

“We weren’t expecting more. The next changeover isn’t for another few hours,” the guard said, now only a few meters away. No one else had bothered to approach them and weren’t looking on.

“Yes ... no, I understand, but this one ... this one has been quite troublesome. She is down early ... early for the next shift. Hopefully the extra hours are enough to tire her out,” Elaria managed to say, although a little awkwardly. Hoots bit her lip and said nothing. The redsand guard looked at Hoots.

“What? This one? Tiny thing giving you trouble? She doesn’t even have tattoos she’s so young,” he joked. Hoots moved to advance, but Elaria put her hand down to stop her. Hoots stopped and just kept trying to stay quiet.

“She is more than she looks; she bit the captain. So, where do you want to put her?” Elaria said.

“I’ll put her in the opening Captain Salazar just made,” the guard replied. The guard grabbed Hoots’ chains, and with his other hand, grabbed the keys from his belt.

There they are! Elaria reluctantly let go of Hoots, who was led off.

“Just patrol for a little. I know the captain up there is bit of a prick, so let some steam out down here, ae?” the guard said as he left. Elaria nodded nervously and started walking away, looking for a place to patrol where

there wasn't someone already around. Hoots looked back at Elaria. They shared a nod, and in that moment, both felt a little more confident. Hoots was led to the middle of the bottom row; the dwarfs seemed to work quicker when the guard approached. He grabbed a dwarf's chains, unlinked them with his key, attached Hoots to it, locked it back up, and repeated this on the other side. The two dwarfs she was chained to said and did nothing but accept the guard's grasp. They both got a look at Hoots though, and as they did, got a little confused.

"Chip away, brat," the redsand guard said, shoving Hoots into the wall. She stumbled over a pick. The guard walked away casually. Hoots grabbed the pick and started to use it as naturally as possible. For a few moments she just picked away, watching the others do so and trying to mimic them as well as possible. Suddenly, the dwarf to her left spoke up.

"You are no dwarf, lass," he said quietly. Hoots looked at him. He chipped away at the rock but continued to study her.

"No, I'm not. Yoseef and Loshe sent me. We are getting you all out," Hoots said. This got the attention of the dwarf to her right.

"Loshe?" she asked

"All of us?" the left one asked.

Hoots nodded while facing forward. "Yes, the guard that brought me is no redsand; she's a paladin. We need to get you all out now, as soon as possible. We are on a time limit; the failsafe will trip soon."

The two dwarfs stopped a moment and looked at each other. They knew what this meant, and it meant either death was coming soon, or liberation.

"And how's you suppose to get all of us out of 'ere?" the left dwarf asked, still chipping away.

"Keys. We need the keys," Hoots said, chipping away too.

"Only a few of them 'ave them, and that isn't a small task..." the right dwarf said.

"Yeah, I know. I'm working on something else though." As Hoots was chipping away, she noticed the ore and gemstones coming from the walls. She leant down, grabbed a handful, and inspected it. She felt something from them, something different, something...

Magical? The same whispers as the stones outside...

“What is it we’re mining down here?” Hoots asked, still looking at the ore in her hand.

“Oh, loads of stuff,” the left dwarf said. He looked over at her and what she had. “That, though, is mythril.”

“Mylthril? This is different from normal mythril though,” Hoots said.

“Yeah, it is, but that’s still what they call it,” the right one said.

“Cut the chatter!” a redsand guard said, shoving the right dwarf into the wall harshly enough to gash her forehead and draw blood from it. Hoots looked on for a moment but then started chipping away again. Hoots watched the guard move on, and when they were out of sight, she leaned down and grabbed a fistful of the raw mythril from the dirt. She looked at her shackles and the keyhole locking them.

“Are the keys all different?” Hoots asked. The right dwarf didn’t answer; she stayed tight-lipped after being bashed on the rocks. Hoots got a better look at her; she was elderly with a faded and clouded eye, and her hair was thin but covered in grime.

“There’s about five or six different ones I think,” the left dwarf said quickly. “If you’ve got a plan, do it soon. That drill was forged with death and feeds on souls, and that sorcerer Salazar ’as been feedin’ it more and more often.”

Hoots grabbed the lock of the left dwarf and shoved all the mythril and dirt into the lock, which was large and bulky enough to hold it. She grabbed more and did the same again until the lock was full of packed dirt and fine pieces of mythril.

“What are you...” the right dwarf said, but then looked on as Hoots made a waving pattern with her hands.

“I think the mythril is going to help with this. It is magical after all,” Hoots said. The dirt and ore in the keyhole vibrated a little, and as Hoots concentrated, the dirt inside could be seen moving, rotating. Suddenly, the whole thing clicked, and the shackles released from the left dwarf. He looked at her, surprised.

“Make it look like it is still on. Let’s get you all unshackled, then let’s make for the lift,” Hoots said, using Earth Mould to extract the dirt and ore from the lock. It didn’t retain its shape perfectly, but close enough that she was able to use it to unlock her own shackles. Luckily, they were crude

enough to be fooled by a near copy.

“Spread the word to load up all the locks like I did. I can then release them as I go past. This is going to get hectic, but hey, if it’s stupid and it works—”

“Then it ain’t stupid. All right, little one, let’s do it. If we are on a timer, I don’t think we ’ave a choice,” the left dwarf said. He nodded to the elderly dwarf on the right, who nodded back. As quickly as possible, the dwarfs started whispering to each other. Down the line the message went, and then up to the next row, and soon all the rows were in on it. Hoots could see the dwarfs, as sneakily as possible and when guards’ backs were turned, loading their key holes up with dirt and fine mythrill ore, sharing it amongst each other when possible.

“How we gettin’ the other side?” the right dwarf asked, still mining away. Hoots looked over her shoulder as she continued to keep up the facade that she was shackled.

“Yeah, not sure yet, but I didn’t come up with this plan right away, so let’s see what I come up with in a few minutes,” Hoots said with a smile.

“Oh, alright, so ... what’s the signal?” the right dwarf said, the left dwarf listening in.

“Well ... if I make a distraction by unlocking you all, I hope my friend can get the others on the other side unlocked. Maybe get the keys in the commotion.”

“Okay, we’ll ‘elp out. Let’s start the madness!” the left dwarf said eagerly. Hoots glanced about, making sure guards weren’t looking her way. Then she looked over her shoulders and spied Elaria, who was walking awkwardly nearby, avoiding everyone and fitting in poorly. She caught Hoots looking at her. Hoots mouthed the word “*distraction*” to her. Elaria nodded and then immediately yelled.

“Oh wow, look over here!” She pointed to the right side of the drill. Many of the redsand guards, if not all of them, looked to her and then to where she was pointing. Elaria noticed she had now created a figurative spotlight, her mouth agape, trying to find the words for the next sentence.

“What is it?” a nearby guard asked.

“Umm... Look! The drill has unearthed something! That there! That’s crazy! I for one am going to check it out!” Elaria then started marching

towards the drill, hoping many would follow.

Well, this might as well be it.

Hoots removed her shackles and started running, and as she did, the dwarfs held their shackle locks up. Each time Hoots passed one, she rotated her hand and the lock popped, releasing them. She ran all the way down to the other end of the cavern, darting between the dwarfs and the wall, staying out of sight as much as possible. So many eyes were on Elaria, and Hoots was so small, that they had a brief advantage. Hoots started to climb up the wall to the row of dwarfs above; a nearby dwarf hoisted her up.

“Go! Quickly!” the dwarf said. Hoots then ran the length of the cavern on the second row; thankfully the message had got around. A guard spotted her, but the unlocked dwarfs nearby quickly overwhelming him. She continued to the third level, and each lock popped open as the mythrill helped channel her spell.

The dwarfs kept still while she did this, pretending their shackles weren’t unlocked, or subduing and silencing any nearby guards who noticed. The time to make for the lift was coming. Elaria had managed to distract many guards, making wild accusations about what the drill was doing.

“There! You see it?” Elaria said, pointing at the large drill mechanism. Many kept murmuring about what she was seeing, some even claiming to see something, but no one was sure about what she was pointing out. To be fair, neither did Elaria. She watched a set of keys dangle from the waist of one of the guards. She slowly reached for it, still pointing at something in the gears as she inched closer and closer to the guard. Hoots got to the top row and had almost run the entire cavern twice more. She had almost got to the end before she was stopped. Suddenly she couldn’t move. She was still in a running pose, and she could still feel her breath filling and leaving her lungs but try as she might, her muscles would not budge. She was so close to the end of the row, dwarfs looked on with hope gleaming from their eyes. Captain Salazar held out his hand toward Hoots, concentrating on his own spell.

“And out of the corner of my eye I spy a little runaway. Guards! Retrieve her! Clearly this one wants to be *dessert*,” the captain said, and this time, all the guards were watching. Several of them went up the rows to Hoots. Luckily, the dwarfs were good at hiding their unlocked shackles and none

of the guards noticed. They grabbed Hoots by a scruff of hair and threw her down the rows. Hoots landed hard against the solid floor.

That'll bruise.

Elaria was confused and torn. She desperately wanted to come to Hoots' aid but struggled to know what to do and instead watched. Captain Salazar picked Hoots up by her hair, the roots of it on fire with pain.

"Another willing soul for my drill." Salazar's breath was warm as he whispered into Hoots' ear. "You should've run while you had the chance. Your soul will not escape the drill; it will fuel it. Trapped inside, you'll suffer by running it for as long as you can, a fate best suited for savages like yourself."

Hoots couldn't move. She was still and could only look on in terror. Elaria watched on. When she pushed past a guard, he looked back at her a little disgusted and pushed her back.

"Hey! I want a view of it too!"

Elaria retreated. *Just as planned.*

Elaria had taken the keys from him, and no one else had seen. She looked behind her at the bottom row of dwarfs on the side of the mine opposite to Hoots, then turned back around quickly; the nearby dwarfs looked on, a little terrified themselves. Elaria tossed the keys back to them. The jingling sound could be heard as they careened through the air and hit the ground in front of the dwarfs, who quickly picked them up. When they looked up again, they saw Elaria, who nodded with a satisfied smile. Elaria then looked back to Hoots but noticed all the redsand guards and Captain Salazar looking at her. She had made another spotlight for herself. Elaria looked around in a panic, then pointed to the top of the drill.

"Oh wow! Look up there! That is also just crazy!" she yelled, but none of the eyes looked away. "Oh, sod it." Elaria drew her sword; its metal danced in the dim light. She may not have been able to keep her amour, but she hadn't left her sword behind. Much like she had done with Trit on the walls of Alitiar, Elaria spoke her arcane word of power, infusing her sword with a crackling energy, and then thrust it into the ground. As it contacted the dirt, and as several guards started advancing, a ripple of thunderous radiant energy erupted from Elaria's sword. Ripples burst outwards and surrounded her like a dome, extending out fifteen meters. Almost all the

guards that were nearby were thrown backwards. Captain Salazar was unfazed by this, and once the ripple dissipated, he threw eldritch bolts of lightning toward Elaria. Both contacted her, and she took the full brunt of them, which pushed her back a few meters. Elaria looked up and saw several of the guards getting up; she also saw Captain Salazar's eyes. They were wild, like he was about to go into a frenzy. Elaria stepped to one side and grabbed one of the large, moving cogs on the side of the drill, which lifted her upwards.

Several guards moved toward her, but she was already several meters up. As she reached the apex of the wheel's turn, she pulled herself up and made for the top of the drill. Many guards followed suit, clambering up the side of the drill after her. Elaria stood on top of it, her footing uneasy, as the drill was curved. Her hair skimmed the top of the tunnel. Redsands came up behind her, and she readied for an attack.

"Listen to me. You are all sick. You are all brainwashed. I don't want to hurt you, and mostly, I don't want to kill you. None of you. Just come with us. We are freeing the dwarfs," Elaria said as politely as possible. None of the redsands took notice. Three of them had made it up, and now they also struggled to maintain their footing.

Elaria looked down at the dwarfs she had thrown the keys to.

"Hey! Bring them as captives! No one dies!" she shouted; they were all unlocking themselves. Many of them looked at her, almost disappointed, but they listened, grabbing the redsands who were either knocked out or stumbling from her blast, and pulling them along as they started making for the exit. It seemed like the whole left side of the tunnel started moving as their shackles were thrown down in a chorus of falling metal chains. In droves, the dwarfs headed for the exit. Any that were still shackled were being ushered along, while the keys were being passed around as quickly as possible. The dwarfs were moving as swiftly as their weakened bodies would let them. The sheer number of them overwhelmed many guards, who were overrun and carried helplessly along in the mass exodus.

This got the attention of Captain Salazar. Furiously, he brought back his arms, ready to launch more eldritch blasts at the crowd.

"Hey!" Hoots said from behind him. Salazar turned, sparks flying out of his hand as he charged the magical energy within it.

"I thought it was dessert time?" Hoots said, her back to the furnace, arms out in an inviting pose several meters away. Salazar's face filled with anger, and he launched the blasts directly at Hoots. She dodged them, cart-wheeling to one side. As she planted her back foot, ready to launch again, she felt like her front one had gotten stuck. Hoots looked down to see her foot and the bottom of her leg turning to stone. She looked over at Salazar and saw his hand outstretched toward her, a manic grin on his face.

"A powerful soul! You'll fuel my machine for weeks! Oh, how it hungers! How it will tear you apart piece by piece until all that is left is—" Salazar stumbled forward violently, tripping over Hoots' stone foot, and careening into the open furnace of the drill. Hoots looked up to see the two dwarfs she met earlier, just standing there.

"You pushed him?!" Hoots hollered, looking back to her foot. The stone flaked away and fell off her foot,

"Yeah! Told you we'd 'elp!" said the left one, now obviously a brutish and hairy dwarf.

"We said no killing!" Hoots yelled back. They both shrugged.

"Some aren't worth savin'." Hoots sighed before throwing her voice over the whole mine as best she could. "Make for the lift! Go!" She pointed to the exit, and the dwarfs both ran off. Captain Salazar's roars of pain echoed in the furnace of the drill. As his body began to degrade, and his skin boiled, the machine roared with the life it began to steal. Hoots maintained her footing as the machine rocked. Elaria and the guards on top did the same. Hoots looked into the furnace, to make sure he burned. As she peered in, she could see him struggle and convulse in pain. She didn't like the idea of burning a man alive; in fact, she and Elaria were doing everything they could to avoid the death of the redsands. But Salazar, Hoots thought, might be too far gone.

This is why people fear sorcerers...

Hoots was about to turn back, to help the dwarfs back to the lift, when she spied something within the flame. Although the furnace was lit with an intense orange, some red caught her eye—a distinct and solid red. Her head turned on a swivel, and she stared into the furnace, the hot air desiccating her eyes slightly. Captain Salazar held his red gem firmly in

his hands. The red of the gem brightened and spread, engulfing the entire furnace. The drill began to shake more violently.

“Elaria!” Hoots shouted. “We have a problem!” Some of the redsands lost their footing and fell down the side of the drill. It wasn’t high enough to kill someone, but injury was almost certain.

“What kind of problem?!” Elaria yelled back. The shaking and vibrations of the drill grew stronger.

“You know that black spike creature?” Hoots hollered.

“Yes?” Elaria said, starting to piece together the coming issue. One of the redsands came at her despite the excessive shaking. Elaria started defending herself, but they were both struggling to hold steady.

“Let’s just say I think you should jump off now,” Hoots said, starting to back up as the red light intensified.

“Jump?!” Elaria asked, tripping the guard. He slid safely off the cylindrical body of the drill. The red light became blinding, and Hoots leapt off the platform and onto the rock.

“Yes! Jump!” Hoots yelled at the top of her lungs as the machine roared and creaked with violent shaking. Elaria turned to see the remaining redsand guards sliding off to either side. They then started running for the exit, helping the injured along the way. Elaria took a few steps and leapt off the drill towards Hoots. She braced for impact, knowing it was about to be a rough landing, but Hoots quickly, and temporarily, turned the portion of rock Elaria was about to land on into sand. Elaria landed on the soft sand nearby with Hoots’ arms still outstretched to ensure her Earth-Mould spell had in fact worked.

Both Hoots and Elaria turned to see the gigantic drill convulsing and changing. It reared upwards unnaturally, and the screams of a thousand trapped souls screeched out, echoing from within. The massive wheels and cogs along the sides rotated away from the main body, and then extend outwards. Several pipes and valves wrapped together into a mechanical limb with the wheels splitting a part to make other appendages. The furnace creaked open wider, and large metallic shards extended from the top and pierced the flames.

“Time to go,” Elaria said, looking around, seeing that everyone had left. “Time to go!”

Hoots nodded. "Yeah, yeah, that's good."

A light purple glow emanated from the arcane circle and immediately the rope was tugged violently. The whole line-up of redsands, all roped together, were pulled through an invisible ethereal portal hanging above the circle, disappearing from sight. Loshe watched as the redsands skidded across the floor, helplessly careening into the arcane-circle room from the hall. Loshe began to sweat.

The light purple glow gave the room Yoseef sat in an ominous radiance. He was at full alert and grasped one of his knives, holding it over the circle. He was ready.

The last redsand was yanked through the circle at the top, and the purple glow diminished. At that moment, Yoseef began scratching out the circle at the bottom with his knife, when he was done, he waited a moment, anticipating something sinister. But there was nothing, just the light hum of the mine. Yoseef ran to the door, kicked the chair away, and bolted down the hall. He was resigned to dying down here, but not if he could avoid it.

"Wait, what about Yoseef?" Elaria asked frantically.

"He'll meet us there. We're getting close for time, anyway. We have to go!" Hoots yelled, pointing to the drill. The furnace had become a gaping and furious mouth, and the wheel and gear appendages were now pushing upwards and supporting the whole thing on all fours. Hoots and Elaria turned tail and ran, and then sprinted. The drill had turned into a demonic monstrosity, large, mechanical, and burning with the energy of the souls that fed it.

The duo headed toward the lift, skidding around a corner, legs moving so quickly they were almost tripping over each other. The dwarfs were piling onto the lift, some dragging redsands with them, packing on tightly, not just shoulder to shoulder but pressed up so forcefully there was practically no space between them at all. Yoseef had arrived and was ushering everyone, pushing them on. So many were on the lift that some were sitting on each other's shoulders.

“Start the lift, Yoseef!” Elaria yelled.

“Start it! Go! Go! Go!” Hoots also yelled.

As the duo careened down the tunnel and made for the lift, with everyone looking on, the monstrosity started crashing around the corner. Rubble went flying and a deafening roar bellowed from the furnace mouth. Amidst screams of terror. Yoseef’s eyes widened and he jumped down from the lift to the controls, kicking the lever. The lift began ascending.

Hoots and Elaria caught up as it was about two metres up. Several dwarfs threw their hands down to grab them both. Elaria managed to hold on, and Hoots grabbed Elaria’s shoe as the lift began gaining speed, at a seemingly unnatural acceleration. Hoots looked down to see the monstrosity beginning to stomp up the shaft after them.

Trit paced back and forth, and Loshe stood close by, looking down at the long tunnel intensely.

“It is time,” Carion announced.

“They’re coming! Just a few more minutes!” Loshe yelled back at Carion, who shook his head.

The lift burst into life, chains rattling, and the winch wheel beneath the balcony shifted. Loshe looked down at it.

“They’re coming!” Loshe yelled out.

Carion looked over at her. “They’ve had their sixty seconds; it is time.”

Loshe stormed over to Carion. “They are coming, the lift ascends!”

“Remind me, do dwarfs have vision that can see thousands of metres? NO! You can’t! You don’t know it’s them. You don’t know what is coming up that lift! You don’t know if the circle down there detonated already! It. Is. Time!” Carion said, with demonic anger. He did not like his position challenged. Carion locked eyes with Loshe and flipped the switch, and with that, a fuse-like mechanism sparked into life and its small light hustled down the central tunnel with abnormal speed.

The monstrosity stampeded upwards after the lift, throwing pieces of adjacent balconies and halls around recklessly while also ascending with great speed. A small light was seen passing by, disappearing into the distance, and once it was out of view, a large explosion was heard. A massive

burst of light could be seen, and hellfire was observed from the base of the tunnel. The burning inferno started making its way from the base towards the monstrosity, and now both were gaining on the dwarf-filled lift.

"The failsafe has been lit!" a dwarf in the crowd yelled.

"We aren't going fast enough!"

"It's gaining!" more dwarfs shouted.

The monstrosity, with its fearsome furnace mouth, was just metres away and snapping violently at the lift. The heat was felt by all, and an intense fire, burning red-hot, scorched the faces looking down. Hoots and Elaria looked on in a panic at the explosion drawing in close, the monstrosity nipping at their heels.

"Could you do that banish thing?!" Hoots yelled at Elaria, having finally been pulled up onto the lift by the others.

She shook her head. "No! Got nothing left in me!"

"Okay, then I have an idea!" Hoots said.

"Should ... should we go?" Trit asked.

Carion glanced at him. "Go if you want."

Trit looked back at him. "... I'll wait."

Carion watched as the central tunnel grew progressively brighter. "Come on, you two," he muttered.

"Lift me up higher!" Hoots started climbing on a nearby dwarf, who helped her up, pushing to give her a bit more room in the cramped conditions. Standing on the shoulders of two dwarfs, Hoots looked down at the monstrosity and the front wave of the explosion.

"It just comes to you," Hoots muttered to herself. "The spells you know ... they are inside you. You know them; you just don't *know* them ... yet..." Her hair and loose, ragged clothing were being blown around in the wind caused by the fires of the furnace. Hoots looks down at her hands.

"We need thrust; we need acceleration... We need something that *pushes* us.... Fire Spray won't be enough..." Hoots could feel the heat from the furnace. It was almost welcoming, but she could also hear the screams of all the souls within, their pain and suffering as they continued to burn even after their bodies were ash. She felt them. She felt every single one.

The emotions flooded her, but suddenly there was a whisper amongst the screams, an encouraging cry, a plea, a motivational holler. Soon it spread, and the screams of pain grew quieter and the chants of courage grew. The souls that were once screaming as if no one could hear them felt someone listen, someone willing to help, someone like Hoots. She knew what to do now.

“Okay, here we go. Elaria! I’m going to do something stupid!”

“What’s new?!” Elaria yelled back.

“I’m going to need you to push that thing back! Just for a moment!”

“What?!” Elaria said.

“Yeah, you heard me!” Hoots said. “Just wait for my mark!”

Elaria looked at the monstrosity. *Push it?!*

“Could you lot catch me?” Elaria asked the surrounding dwarfs.

Many shrugged or tilted their heads, confused.

“Good enough,” she muttered.

Hoots reached out to the monstrosity, focusing on the heat from the furnace. She closed her eyes and reached out with her hands, reaching for the flames. She was far away and would never be able to physically grasp the flames, but she began reaching out to the essence of the fire itself. She started to feel its heat, and it was intense. Hoots felt how penetrating it was: she felt how overwhelming it was, but she started to embrace it, like in the lesson Carion had given her the other morning. She let it engulf her very being, and it was comforting. The heat was welcoming. Hoots opened her eyes. Hands outstretched, she pulled all the fire from the furnace, like pulling a rope in tug-o-war. With all she was, and all she could be, she pulled the fire out and collected it, compressing it into her hand like an orb. Suddenly, the furnace had been extinguished, and the monstrosity weakened.

“Now!” Hoots yelled. Elaria heard her and leapt down to the monstrosity from the lift, and in a moment of free fall, saw only its gaping metal maw before her. She positioned herself so that her feet were leading. With a mighty double kick, Elaria pushed herself and all her strength onto the top of the furnace, which was the monstrosity’s forehead. Weakened by Hoots, the force was sufficient to rock it enough to loosen its footing, and it started to fall backwards. Once the impact had been absorbed, Elaria pushed off,

but she had lost momentum, and for a moment, stayed suspended between the falling creature, the ascending lift, and a mighty explosion. She started to fall toward the bottom of the tunnel, but just as she began to accept her fate, watching Hoots sail away with the dwarfs, several dwarfs linked their arms together and formed a chain, then threw themselves towards her, the last one reaching out his arm. She grabbed it, and they started swinging wildly beneath the lift, narrowly missing its mechanisms. The monstrosity tumbled and wailed helplessly into the front wave explosion, which continued to gain on the lift.

Hoots was barely containing the fire in her hands, which shook aggressively, then pushed the concentrated fire energy down the shaft in a beam of intense flame. She started to topple backward, as the intense thrust was too much to handle, but felt the dwarfs tighten their grips, holding her upright, as though they were erecting a flagpole. They braced her as she acted as an arcane thruster, holding onto her so that she could control it. The fire that erupted from her hands accelerated the lift, which began ascending at an even greater rate. Hoots' eyes were heavy. She felt her mind weaken; her body deteriorated. This was taking more out of her than expected, but the explosion was still a present danger, and so she forced herself to continue. Elaria and the chain of dwarfs flew around like a flag in the wind, as the lift soared upwards, just barely out of range of the pursuing explosion, though its flames were tickling Elaria's feet. Soon though, the tunnel expanded outwards, and the lift reached the top of Earthheart, slowing slightly. The acceleration had been powerful, and the lift crashed just below the balcony where Carion and Trit stood. The magical deceleration was only just strong enough to halt it in one piece.

The dwarfs were jolted up and thrown everywhere. The explosion stopped just below them, where rock and rubble now began collapsing, blocking the entire tunnel where they had once been. Dwarfs lay everywhere, along with several captured redsands, groaning and moaning, but alive.

"Elaria!" Trit yelled out, looking over the edge of the broken lift. "Elaria!" With Carion at his side, scanning the mass of people, Trit was looking frantically for any sign of them. For a terrifyingly long moment, there was nothing, and then...

“Did I ever tell you ... I was afraid of heights?” It was Elaria’s voice. Trit’s eyes found her quickly, as several dwarfs started to find their footing. Trit smiled in relief.

“...Because I wasn’t,” Elaria said, helping several dwarfs up, “but I am now.”

Trit laughed, releasing all his tension and panic.

Carion didn’t move, his eyes continuing to search until he found what he was looking for. Hoots was barely visible, covered in debris. Carion sprang over to her, gracefully leaping over the boulders, rock, and dwarfs. He threw the debris aside carelessly to uncover the unconscious sorcerer. He pried her loose and laid her as flat as possible. Elaria and Trit had caught on and started running over to them. Hoots was barely breathing, and her pulse was slow.



CHAPTER 14



AS THEY MEET THE FROZEN NORTH

Lost Personal anthropological notes (12 of 18)

As I traversed the hamlets and quaint villages of the eastern province, I came across an abandoned and scorched village; this was the aftermath of a dragon raid I had heard about.

It is truly a devastating sight. A local told me that dozens were killed at this particular event, either burnt or eaten on sight. These dragons clearly have no mercy. I am told it doesn't happen often but still...

These towns don't deserve this; they are like any other place I have visited on my journey, just people trying to live peacefully.

Despite the legends and the history that say gnomes lived in the east, it is immensely diverse, full of people from all over! It appears that some come this way in search of Mysrik on their pilgrimage and find this warm and beautiful shoreline to be their new home. I could see myself writing my thesis on these shores, but the pages I write on are flammable after all and not dragon proof.

I've seen the wings of these beasts tickle the horizon towards Dizstrum, the largest island in the eastern province, and sometimes dozens of them at a time. Clearly the island of Dizstrum is a popular destination for dragons from all over the natural plane. The popularity must attract even the ... let's say, non-sympathetic dragons to these lands, hence the raids. A shame.

Dizstrum has only ever been welcoming to dragon-kin. I wished to see how they lived among such fearsome beasts of the sky, and have tried to get some of the residences along this coast to take me to Dizstrum on their vessels, but all have rejected me (my funding for this trip did not allow for bribes).

I fear my thesis will feel incomplete due to this. King Gareth warned me that I was unlikely to ever visit Dizstrum; the texts Alitiar's library provided me will have to suffice.

No matter. I head to Valoon in the next few days. The glass city awaits!

~ Associate Professor Lucky Montana



“Hoots? Hoots!” Elaria hurried through the crowd over to Carion, who was kneeling over Hoots. Several dwarfs were gathered around. Trit stood nearby, trying to keep people back.

“Stand back; give her some room, dammit!” Trit wailed. Elaria skidded to Hoots’ side and began rubbing her hands together. Carion had opened one of Hoots’ eyes; the pupils were large and contracting uncontrollably.

“Move aside; I’ll heal her,” Elaria said in a panic. “She’ll be okay.”

“No, don’t touch her,” Carion commanded. Elaria looked at him in surprise. “This ailment is not physical.”

“Are you kidding? She must’ve got a conc—”

“Did she use her spells down there?” Carion interrupted, sinking a hand into his component pouch.

“Well, yes. She used one to unlock all the shackles and ... I think another fire one to accelerate the lift, but that was all!”

“Fire to accelerate the lift?”

“Yes! Like a huge, torrent or something, without it we wouldn’t have gotten up in time.”

“How big?”

“What do you want? In metres?”

Carion looked back and into his component pouch.

"You knew you didn't have any."

I had to check.

Carion was breathing sharply. "She has arcane fatigue. She's used up more magical energy than she can handle." Carion held his hand just above Hoots' sternum.

"What does that mean? Is she okay?" Elaria pleaded.

"Where her magic comes from hasn't replenished; all the magic she conjured had to come from somewhere." His breathing became ragged. "All her cells are slowly dying. She will disintegrate shortly."

Elaria's eyes widened, "What! No! Hoots!"

"Stand back, Elaria. And give me room!" Carion yelled, distinct dread in his voice.

"Are you ready for this? Is she really worth the risk?"

I could save one—

*"One saved life does not balance out the genocide.
'Carion' has caused. Let her die. Be alone once more."*

I am not the same as that person anymore.

"I'm in here as well. I know that's not true."

And I am still in control, so do me a favour and piss off to the shade for just a moment!

...

Carion's hand started glowing a soft violet, and he began whispering in a language that sounded angelic and soft, almost like he was singing in baritone. His eyes were closed, and as the incantation continued, the purple light began delicately raining down onto Hoots' body. Carion continued. Elaria's eyes didn't leave Hoots. She grabbed her hand and squeezed

it tightly. All the dwarfs nearby stayed silent and watched on. Trit peered over to Carion as this continued, noticing Carion's skin start to lighten.

Suddenly Hoots' eye burst open with a flash of purple light, and she squeezed Elaria's hand before taking some deep breaths. Carion stood up and backed away quickly, pushing through the crowd, which parted to let him through. Hoots bolted up to a sitting position, and Elaria embraced her.

"Oh, do not do that to me again!" Elaria said between soft nervous chuckles.

"Yeah... Yeah, well... I still have to give the necklace back, right?" Hoots responded.

Carion had swiftly run from the scene and clambered up the rocks to the hall leading outside. Trit smiled as Elaria and Hoots hugged tightly, and the dwarfs all threw their hands up in triumph and began embracing each other, thrilled that those who had saved them were also saved. Trit looked over to see if he could see Carion and got just a glimpse of him stumbling up toward the entrance hall.

Trit cautiously followed him, the sound of people cheering and celebrating fading behind him. Trit saw Carion lean and stumble, and where his hand had touched the stone wall it had left thick, dark blood. Trit saw Carion disappear outside and followed more quickly. Trit saw Carion sitting at the edge of the path, facing the western lands, and overlooking Alitiar in the distance, a small puddle of fresh blood beside him. Carion's feet were dangling over the edge towards the path they had come up from a few meters below. Trit walked briskly over, and as he did, Carion leaned over to one side and violently threw up a mixture of bile, phlegm, and coagulated blood. The mixture dripped down the stone, slowly making its way to the path below. Carion sat back up then, breathing heavily, his hands on his knees. His once dark-purple skin was patchy with pale blotches.

"...You used some of that druid magic, didn't you?" Trit asked, standing a few metres behind him.

"She good?" Carion asked through a full mouth, then spat more of the vile mixture out over the edge.

"She is. Using that magic is really killing you, isn't it? You were about to kill yourself to save Hoots?" Trit took a few steps closer.

“What gave it away?”

“I’m... I’m sorry I made you turn into a horse. That probably didn’t help.” Carion didn’t respond. After a long moment, Trit asked, “Can ... can I do anything?”

Carion wiped his mouth and leaned back a little, “Do you think you can?”

“Well, ah, no ... but I thought it would be nice to ask at least.” Trit sat down next to Carion, his feet also now hanging over the edge. It was much darker outside now, some of the brighter stars becoming visible in the dimming sky. The two sat in silence for a moment.

“You must’ve been a pretty powerful druid, when ... you know ... it wasn’t killing you to use druid magic.”

Carion nodded slowly. “I ... was the best. Damn, I was good. Now that I am ... severed from that life, the magical energy has to come from somewhere.” He peered over to the unpleasant mixture still oozing over the stone. “I guess I’ll live this time, and now Hoots can too. Until some other dumb thing she gets herself into kills her at least.”

Trit smiled. “I mean, Elaria saved her when she got wounded in Alitiar, and you saved her when she overdosed on magic in Earthheart. It’s my turn next, right? Like ... ah ... I have to pull off something to save her?” He looked over to Carion and saw that he was staring off into the distance with blood-shot eyes.

Trit slowly reached his hand over to Carion’s shoulder.

“Don’t touch me,” Carion snapped.

“Okay! Okay... Just letting you know I’m here and stuff.”

“And don’t tell them.”

“Don’t tell them? What ... like Hoot and Elaria?”

Carion turned towards Trit, and even with his lowered eyelids contorting his expression, Trit could tell he was serious.

“Yeah, yeah, no worries. How about, for now though, I’ll just be quiet. You seem to like that. Silence. I can help with that at least.”

“He’s not all that bad.”

He really isn’t.

“He reminds me of your brother...”

Don’t...

“Remember him?”

Please don’t. Not now.”

“It means I can also remind you of Mum.”

“Hey, do you think there’s food in Ma-Ural that I can’t get anywhere else? I mean I’ve tried load of stuff and—”

That was, what, ten seconds of silence?

“I counted eleven.”

“There was this weird pie, like it had meat in it rather than apple or pumpkin, and that was just weird, but damn, I kinda liked it! So, yeah, if this place has new food, even weird stuff like that, I’m keen as.”

As the dust settled, everyone collected themselves, with their battered and bruised bodies. The dwarfs helped each other and began to trudge out of the mine, holding on to one another and walking with sombre steps. All the redsands guards that had been taken with them were promptly tied up and stripped of weapons and armour. Able dwarfs were assigned to escort them to a small prison near Loft where their fate was yet to be determined. Several other dwarfs made sure the other circle was destroyed, knowing that its failsafe would destroy the top area in the next three hours, they all made for the exit. A weakened Hoots and Elaria got changed back to their original outfits and ensured the mine was indeed clear—picking up Trit’s lute along the way—before they exited at the rear of the crowd and met the brisk outside atmosphere. The contrasting cool, fresh air flooded their lungs as they all took large refreshing breaths. Trit and Carion were off to one side, having gone to collect the horses that had retreated down the path, were just now returning. Elaria gave them a wave. Trit returned the gesture, but Carion had his head down and plodded along slowly while

ignoring everything else. Loshe was greeting each dwarf by name, with Yoseef standing next to her. They all greeted each other with forearms crossed, the undersides of them exposed.

Elaria approached the pair. "We could stay the night here. I mean, we are safe now," Elaria said calmly.

Yoseef shook his head, and many other dwarfs nearby followed suit. "This place 'ere, it isn't a mine anymore." He solemnly looked over at the tunnel leading into the mountain. "It's a tomb now, and we let the dead rest." Yoseef lowered his head a little, and so did many others, out of respect.

"We make for home!" Yoseef yelled at the diminished group of pale dwarfs. "The north waits! *Our* north waits for us!"

The moon and starlight in the cloudless sky illuminated the exposed path, heading further up into the mountain range, as in single file, the dwarfs trudged upwards.

"That was pretty intense, yeah?" Hoots remarked, walking slowly, still in a weakened state like many of the dwarfs.

Elaria walked close behind. "Yeah, that really was. I think that's one of the reasons why adventurers don't live long."

"Oh, you think they all have dumb ideas like that?" Hoots asked playfully.

"I bet they do, probably dumber!" She laughed, and Hoots started to giggle.

"I guess I'll have to up my game then."

"Was that a spell the lizard-kin taught you?" Elaria asked.

"No, no one taught me that one. Carion's morning lesson really helped actually," she said, looking over her shoulder. Carion was walking behind them with Trit. His head was down, and he was not showing any interest in his surroundings. Back to his usual self.

Hoots frowned a bit, thinking. "It was like trying to remember something you've never been told, but I heard ... voices or *feelings*. One I focused on them; it was like I had always known the spell."

Carion's ears perked up a little as Hoots described this. "It was hot, *really* hot, but I just let it ... I don't know, take me over?"

"Yes," Elaria said. "I can do spells too, you know. I understand. When I use my healing spells, my hands get healed first, or it at least feels that way before, like—"

“Pushing,” Hoots said.

“Yes, like I’m pushing it out.” She nodded, and they shared a smile.

“Look at you, becoming a sorcerer and all,” Elaria said. Hoots nodded. “You should thank Carion though. He did something when we arrived at the top and you were unconscious. You would be gone from this world now if it wasn’t for him. You were about to be.”

Hoots looked back to Trit and Carion. Trit had his head up and smiled as she looked back, but Carion had now fully receded into his cloak.

“I will. I think he knows how much he helped,” Hoots said.

“Yes. I think it was a bit much for him too, probably needs just as much rest as you do.”

“Mm hmm ... and I’m looking forward to some dwarven hospitality.”

“Let’s get them all home first; it’s been a long day,” Elaria said as she began reflecting on recent events. The crowd was silent, solemn as they walked up the mountain path.

Trit swung his lute around and strummed it a few times. With a few rotations of the tuners, he found the right key.

“*From one place to another*,” Trit sang softly, strumming a few chords as he did.

Elaria’s ears flicked as she picked up the tune and listened.

*“From the house I met my brother,
I will not yield
From those familiar fields,
For I won’t forget where I came from.”*

The song felt as familiar as a sea shanty.

*“From one place to another,
From a home I left my mother,
With all those smells,
For I can always tell,
That I won’t forget where I came from.”*

With each verse, more joined in, saying the first line with him.

*"From one place to another,
From the shelter of my father,
All in the past,
Although it goes by fast,
No, I won't forget where I came from.*

*"From one place to another,
There is so much to discover,
Out on the road,
With adventures bestowed,
But I won't—I'm telling you I won't,
No ... I won't forget where I came from."*

Smiles all around. For a moment, Trit's tune had lifted their downtrodden spirits.

"Just a little *travel* song for you," Trit muttered, playing with his lute's strings a little more.

"You sang *brother* and such, but why not sister?" Hoots teased.

"Oh, I don't know, Hoots! Maybe it just doesn't rhyme very well! See...

*"From one place that gave me a blister,
I left behind that annoying little gnome of a sister!"*

Trit purposely strummed his chords out of tune. Hoots laughed and Elaria chuckled. Several dwarf onlookers joined in. Through the grime and dirt on their faces, small sparks of joy could be seen. Trit was used to singing and playing in taverns, so it was nice knowing he could lift spirits, even just a little, outside his normal setting.

For what felt like hours, the group continued up the elliptical path. Up and up they all went. The mountaintops got closer and closer, the air became more and more frigid, and the once-warm air that lightly trickled down upon them became less and less pleasant. Carion began to wrap his large cloak around himself more tightly. Hoots walked closer to Elaria, and Trit blew warm air into his hands and rubbed them together. Soon, their

approach to the mountaintops stopped as the path had finally reached its apex.

Like the entrance to the west that Elaria and Hoots had walked through several days ago, two towering peaks overlooked a parting where the path continued. What was now open to view was the frozen north of Ma-Ural: a wondrous tundra, with rolling hills of white, with no rock or ground left uncovered, no trees or greenery visible, just a smooth and everlasting land of soft snow. In the far distance, more colossal peaks soared above it all. The sky was clear on this night, and the dark sky littered with stars gave a beautiful contrast to the ground's magnificent white. Despite it being the dead of night, the reflective snow made the scene all too visible. The dwarfs, still in single file, snaked off to the east, their pale skin giving them camouflage in the bleached environment, almost invisible if it weren't for their ragged clothing and dark tattoos. Aghast, the four followed suit after coming face to face with the frozen northland of the pale dwarfs.

Not long afterwards, a small town became visible. The houses and buildings were not like those in Palmy or Alitiar. These were almost like mounds, using dug-up earth to create hovels, each decorated and fortified with thick and jagged rocks. Despite the tough and coarse exterior, they all looked and felt homely, and a cosy feeling rushed over the four as they passed each house or building. The dwarfs trickled into each house, knowing exactly where to go. Some doors had been left open at their departure and had snow piling up into the interior. Pushing through any snow drift or cushioning pile, the dwarfs had made it home at last. The four kept looking around, seeing both happiness and despair. Some families were returning together, and the joy they expressed was felt by those around them, but others were returning lighter, and some houses were left dark and uninhabited despite the return. Realizing all had destinations, the four slowed down and ended up standing still in the ankle-deep snow roughly in the centre of town. Amongst all the recovering dwarfs, Yoseef could be seen approaching them.

"The main 'all, just over there. You can stay there for the night." Yoseef pointed to the largest building in the town. The four looked over at it. The entrance was much larger, and the rocks of the entrance were ornamented with dwarven runes.

“We’ll get the fire goin’. Arrangements are bein’ made now. You’ll be warm. Rest well.” Yoseef turned away. He had many things to deal with before he himself could rest.

“Oh, Carion...” Yoseef turned to the foursome, all of whom had begun making their way to the main hall, looking forward to a warm rest. Carion turned, starting to shiver a little. Yoseef tossed him a small red fruit. Carion hastily caught it and examined it briefly before looking up to see Yoseef already disappearing into the crowd and out of immediate view.

“Got your snow fruit after all,” Elaria said, forcing a smile through a tired and worn exterior. The other three made for the main hall.

The snow fruit sat in Carion’s hand. It was red, much like a strawberry, even with tiny spots that looked like seeds dotted all over. There were several ridges from the bottom to the top, with the top having a small leafy structure, like a pineapple’s, but much smaller. Carion took in the smell and could feel immense sweetness fill his nostrils. Carion put his teeth to it, but the outside was thick and leathery, tasting like foul earth. He winced and turned up his face at it.

A little dwarven girl was walking past, her head low. She was tired and clearly in need of a warm hearth. She looked up at Carion, who was trying to figure out how to open the fruit, gnawing at it unsuccessfully and looking more and more frustrated. She tugged at his cloak, and Carion looked down with a scowl. She motioned with her hand to come closer. Carion did so. She grabbed his finger lightly. Carion was perplexed at this little girl’s capacity to ignore anything intimidating about him. Grabbing one of his fingers—one with a long nail—she pressed it to the fruit, and with a bit of pressure, it penetrated the skin.

Pushing down the ridge, a cut was made. She continued using Carion’s sharp nail, making five cuts. She grabbed his other hand and used it to pop off the bushy top. The fruit peeled open, making a five-pointed star with orange flesh on the inside. She smiled at Carion briefly, but then continued on her way and into the diminishing crowd. Carion watched her for a moment as she plodded alone into a dark hovel. Carion looked down at the opened fruit and grabbed a piece from one of the five sections. The orange flesh peeled off in one complete piece. It felt a little warm and soft

between his fingers. Carion threw it back into his mouth and chewed with vigour. Emotionless, he swallowed.

"This is the best thing in existence," Carion muttered to himself. He started looking around frantically. The other three were entering the main hall by this time.

"I must acquire all of it," Carion said.

Lying down in the main hall, the four had unloaded their bedrolls and all the supplies they had. The horses quickly munched away at the hay the dwarfs had provided but then quietly stood together to rest. The four barely muttered a word to each other before closing their eyes and resting their heads for the night.

Hoots was not quite asleep. She lay on her back, her hands up and behind her head, supporting it. She looked around at the others, the beds arranged in a small semicircle at a curved corner of the main hall, a small brazier still glowing with embers nearby. Elaria had removed her armour, which lay next to her in a neat pile, all arranged perfectly. She lay in a deep and well-deserved sleep, taking in large breaths. Her whole body could be seen inflating as she lay on her side. Trit lay on his back nearby, also sleeping soundly. She looked over at Carion, who was on his back as well, with his hands just below his chest. He was very still, like a corpse on a funeral bed. Much of the colour in his skin had returned.

"Must you?" Carion asked softly, but with conviction. No other part of his body moved, only his mouth. Hoots knew this comment was directed at her, as he only said this when her eyes fell on him.

"Can't sleep," Hoots muttered softly.

"I know. You are keeping me up with your constant eye movements," Carion continued, still unmoving.

"I just ... can't shake it off. Those redsands we fought outside the mine... we *had* to fight. They were so..."

"Normal," Carion interrupted.

"Yeah," Hoots said, thoughts scrambling around in her head.

"Good and evil are all relative to your own moral code."

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned. But that’s the problem. They *were* good. Elaria and I could tell. They were different to the ones in Alitiar sure, but nothing about them felt ... evil.”

“Not even the slavery?” Carion remarked.

“Well, that’s the thing. The way they talked about it made the dwarfs seem like the evil ones.”

“They believed it to be true. Good possession does that,” Carion said. Trit twitched a little but then rolled over back into slumber.

“Those gems turned them into monsters, *real* monsters, but they weren’t to begin with. They were just...”

“Just like you,” Carion said, completing her sentence.

“You wouldn’t dare say ‘just like us.’ Would you?”

“Yeah.”

For a moment, they both lay in silence once more. A few embers collapsed in the small brazier, and a couple of sparks floated gently upwards before extinguishing in the air.

“What if one of us touches one?” Hoots asked, knowing Carion still lay awake.

“Those gems are conduits to another form of possession, one that allows other beings from other planes to inhabit them. Like all those you saw, you too would fall victim.”

“Does that make me evil though? Like even a little?”

“We all have the capacity to be good or evil in another’s eyes,” Carion muttered.

“What?” Hoots asked, not quite hearing.

“I said go to sleep. You’ve had your questions for the day,” Carion said. He hadn’t moved the whole time. He slowly, but inevitably, fell asleep, but his eyes darted violently around behind their lids.

Hoots though, stayed awake for some time, still pondering those ideas in her brain until it tired of thought and she drifted into unconsciousness.

The morning came. First to rise was Hoots. The building in Loft had little windows, and most of the natural light came through a skylight.

The roof was angled so that snow would mostly trickle off. The room was lit, with the light reaching all corners of the main hall. Hoots stood and stretched before leaving through the front door, which creaked. Hoots shielded her eyes from the brightness of the outside sun, which had only just risen, but the whiteness of the north was illuminated immensely. Several dwarfs were out, collecting various goods, moving debris around, fixing houses, or clearing the streets. The daylight allowed Hoots to see the dishevelled town of Loft and how it had been left in shambles when the dwarfs were taken. But the dwarfs were busy making things right; they didn't waste a second. Hoots stepped further outside. She knew what she had to do to start each morning from now on.

"Alright, time to practice," Hoots said to herself before looking for a quiet and open place.

Next to wake was Elaria. As she sat up, she groaned audibly as her joints clicked. Her muscles were still feeling a little tight. She looked over at the other two, still sleeping. There were a few bowls on the table nearby. Steaming. Someone must have come in and dropped them off recently. Elaria grabbed one and gave it a sniff. The smell was earthy. She gave it a taste; indeed, it was earthy, full of root vegetables in a thick brown broth. Considering the town was still abandoned only hours earlier, this was a surprise. She picked up the bowl and took it over to Carion. He seemed to be peaceful, but as she approached, she could soon tell he was convulsing slightly. Elaria put the bowl down, then put her hand firmly on his shoulder. Violently, Carion awoke. Eyes jolting open, they rotated to Elaria, who gave him yet another warm smile. Carion breathed out, almost in relief.

"You should have left me to sleep," Carion said, adjusting himself and sitting up.

"I told you, keep waking up; that's how we'll get through this," Elaria said, grabbing the bowl again.

"My dream was at least warm," Carion barked, accepting her offer.

"This snow fruit though!" Trit's voice said, echoing in the chamber a little. The two turned to him. Trit was sitting up and holding a snow fruit, munching on it. There were juices running down his chin.

"Where did you find that?" Carion asked.

“Big pile here.” Trit pointed to a sack between them.

“Those are mine, you cretin!!” Carion threw the bowl at Trit, sending the soup flying, and bolted up to snatch the fruit from him.

“Now that you have all awoken,” Loshe said from the other side of the room, “the dwarven council wishes to speak to you all.” From the other side of the long tables, Loshe stood, a long woollen coat covering her, decorated with several light purple shells, like pieces of armour.

“Once you have gathered yourselves, stand before the table here, and we will greet you all. Because of the circumstances, several council members have passed on their responsibilities; normally there are six. At his time, we have four who will represent the pale dwarfs. I apologize for this. Enjoy your morning soup.” Loshe turned to a door at the back of the room and left.

As the door closed, Carion wrestled a snow fruit from Trit, who managed to scarf down the last of the one he had in his mouth. Carion grabbed the sack, sat back down on his bedroll, and started counting them. Trit laughed and went to grab his own bowl of soup. Elaria sat down with Carion.

“I just want to make something clear, Carion,” Elaria said.

Carion, still counting the fruit, didn’t look up. “What’s that?” he muttered between numbers.

“Back at Earthheart ...” She paused, sighing. “No more senseless killing.” She said this sternly.

Carion breathed out heavily. “Look, these things happen.”

“Yes, well not with me around. You want protection? You want to come with us? You want me to help?” Elaria stopped. Carion’s head was lowered. He seemed to get more vulnerable around her. “I know you are battling a lot right now. I don’t want to know what you were like before this, but now, just for me, how about we start with a no-murder rule? Or at least, let’s make sure they are under irreversible interplanar possession first,” Elaria said. “That also goes for Trit, even when he steals a snow fruit.” Elaria looked over at Trit, who gave them a guilty shrug. Carion said nothing but handed a snow fruit to Elaria. She accepted it and sat at a table to continue her breakfast.

"I bet Hoots would also like to have a word with you before the meeting, I think she's very thankful for what you did yesterday. We all are," Elaria said. Carion tried to ignore her words as best as he could.

A block from the main hall, in a small field surrounded by small hovels, Hoots was practicing some magic. Apart from a little circle of compacted snow, and Hoots' footprints, the field was untouched. The sound of her magic and incantations didn't travel far, thanks to the dampening effects of the snow around her. The snow wasn't deep, only up to Hoots' knees at its deepest. Preparing another spell, she threw the small glowing orange outline of a bird into the sky, much like she had done with Elaria their first night. Hoots watched it careen into the sky as if it were a real bird, then shielded her eyes as it continued upwards in line with the rising sun.

"Got it a bit further this time," Hoots muttered. From the southern side of the field, Carion trudged through the snow; he held himself tightly within his cloak and made large footprints in the snow alongside Hoots'. She turned when she heard Carion's feet squelching through the snow.

"Oh, hey," Hoots said. *How do I bring this up? 'Oh hey, thanks for bringing me back to life the other day!'*

Carion stopped near Hoots' small, compacted snow circle, eyeing the empty field around them. *Shit, I hate snow.* "... Elaria said you wanted to speak to me," Carion said begrudgingly.

Hoots shrugged. "Yeah, thanks for yesterday I—"

"You have to limit yourself," Carion interrupted.

"Yeah, yeah, I know—"

"You aren't special. You aren't some 'chosen one' with all the power she needs at her fingertips, invincible to the dangers around them. Magic. Is. Dangerous. And you'll be dangerous if you let it consume you, not just to others but to yourself." Hoots stood paralyzed, as he continued. "You almost died yesterday, because you abused it."

"Hey, I saved them all!"

"You can't be at the brink of death every time you want to help someone. You have to be aware of your limits!" Carion said sternly. He saw that Hoots was starting to get upset. She knew what she had done was careless, and she knew Carion really *did* save her. He could see that she felt guilty.

He sighed. "At least ... at least now you know your limit. What you did yesterday, the number of spells you pulled off, the number of times you did them, how long you did them for ... that is your limit. Your *absolute* limit. At least for now. Remember it."

"Okay," Hoots said softly.

"When we die, our souls go on to the outer planes."

"Okay?"

"If you die from arcane fatigue, if the magic energy takes you, it doesn't just rip the energy from your cells, it'll take your soul as well. Only oblivion awaits. I..." Carion slowed, his eyes shifting from Hoots.

"You don't care."

... I...

"You can't care."

But...

*"Everyone you care about dies. This changes nothing.
She will die, and you can only blame yourself."*

Carion was quiet for a long moment, then blurted out, "I wouldn't wish that for you." Hoots fell silent and just watched as Carion struggled to get those words out. "Just ... just remember your limit," he said. "You can't get there again, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Hoots said softly.

"Okay?" Carion snapped.

"Okay! I'll remember! I'm just doing small spells this morning as practice, like you said."

He nodded. "Then practice those spells a few more times. We have a meeting with the dwarven council, apparently." Carion turned and quickly stormed off.

"I'll be here to watch you regret caring again, 'Carion'."

The four stood side by side, dressed up and ready in the centre of the room. As soon as they stood at attention, the back door opened. Four dwarfs entered the room in single file. Yoseef, Loshe, an elderly female dwarf with a clouded eye, and another male in an apron. As the last walked by, there was a smell of cinnamon; he was clearly a baker. All but the baker was dressed in thick fur with light purple shells sewn into the material. The shells were single pieces, large enough to cover their arms, shoulders, and chest, much like plate armour, but it looked and moved like it was much lighter. The four took a seat behind the back table. Although there were six seats, only four were occupied by dwarfs.

“Our council gathered earlier this mornin’ to discuss your matters,” Yoseef said, Loshe to his side, the other woman to her right. The baker sat to his left. The quartet listened intently.

“We are eternally grateful for you liberatin’ us from the redsands,” Loshe said, gratitude flowing in her voice. “Before our council can hear you, you must be considered one of us, kin in our eyes,” Loshe continued.

Elaria spoke up, confused. “We speak on behalf of Lady Kai’sion. She sent us to discuss joining her forces to retake Alitiar from the redsands. Will you not listen to us as representatives?”

“We don’t listen to her, and we never listen to anyone by that name. We listened to her brother’s voice, her brother who was also *our* brother, *our* kin: Kain,” Yoseef answered. Clearly the death of Kain weighed heavy in his voice.

“So, *our* word means nothing?” Hoots exclaimed, looking a little disgusted.

“Yours and Maria’s word hold no weight in the ears of the council,” Loshe said before Yoseef could continue.

“And this gratefulness you talked about was just ... a courtesy?” Trit asked, continuing Hoots’ mood.

“No,” Loshe said. “The council has decided that you four will be allowed to *earn* kinship within our community. As thanks for the efforts you four gave in Earthheart.”

“This does not come lightly,” Yoseef added. “No one outside the Kai’sion family ’as ever ’ad the opportunity, let alone the *privilege*, of earnin’ even the slightest possibility of our kinship! So yes, we are bloody grateful!”

Yoseef pointed the stub of his index finger towards them, forgetting what he had lost physically, but not emotionally.

Hoots looked at Elaria, and both shared a look. Carion was uninterested and was staring blankly off somewhere else.

“What is the opportunity then?” Elaria asked, albeit reluctantly. “How do we earn your kinship?”

“Yeah, we are so *privileged*, I guess...” Trit said, avoiding any eye contact with the dwarfs. “Risked our lives is all...” he muttered.

Loshe leaned forward. “Earthheart was our leading mine, but not our most sacred.” Attention once more fell to her. In this element, Loshe was clearly in charge. Yoseef might be muscle and good with physical plans, but diplomacy and tradition were Loshe’s specialty. “To the north, the far north, is the mine where we obtain our purest mythril.”

“The richest mythril,” Yoseef said, interrupting. Loshe eyed him up and down, and he retreated into his seat.

“You four will go to this mine and bring back a sample of mythril. Then we will hear you out more seriously and listen to you as our kin.” Loshe sat further back into her chair.

“Is ... Is that it?” Trit asked nonchalantly. “Just get a rock?”

“*Mythril*, you tripe,” Yoseef snapped, but again he was stared down by Loshe. He nodded, settling himself. “Yes, obtain the mythril.”

“Let’s go north then! Off we go, gang!” Hoots howled.

“It is best you go just after midday,” the more elderly female dwarf said, speaking up for the first time.

“Why?” Elaria inquired. The other three dwarfs looked at her, biting their tongues. She instead smiled cheekily at the four. Elaria nodded a little in understanding, then motioned for the rest to follow outside. Carion stayed standing and spoke up.

“Loshe, a word?”

The other three stopped.

“You are free to speak but be brief,” Loshe answered.

“Privately. Hoots, stay here a moment.”

Loshe looked at the other council members and gave them a single nod. The other three, Yoseef included, all exited through the back door.

“Come on, Trit, we’ll wait outside” Elaria said, ushering Trit out. Hoots stood at the back of the hall. Carion only started speaking once everyone else had left.

“What are you?” Carion asked Loshe, his unblinking eyes staring into hers.

“Excuse me?” Loshe asked.

“Answer, the question. What are you?” Carion continued.

Loshe appeared confused. “I don’t understand what you are asking of me.”

“I saw what you did with the tattoos.”

“And what did you see?”

“Infusion.”

Hoots looked on, not sure what was going on as Carion continued. “Only two ways you can infuse magical energy into objects. Using an arcane forge or being a sorcerer.”

“You’re a sorcerer too?” Hoots asked enthusiastically as she moved to Carion’s side. Loshe’s eyes left Carion’s briefly and looked to Hoots before returning, able to see what Carion was doing. Hoots was new to being a sorcerer, and she was scared of her abilities and what she could do, especially since she’d had a brush with death just last evening.

“Yes, I am a sorcerer,” Loshe said to Hoots with a confident voice.

Hoots excitedly opened her mouth and smiled. “Me too! You are the first one I’ve met since I learned about it! Well, other than that Salazar guy in the mines, but what kind are you?”

“What kind?” Loshe questioned.

“Yeah, Carion was saying each sorcerer has different abilities. There’s some that are necromancers, there’s phase shifters, and—”

“The only kind of people that categorize sorcerers like that are...” Loshe looked at Carion, who still hadn’t blinked.

... *are ones that hunt them*, Carion finished in his own head.

Dismissing him and turning back to Hoots with a smile, she said, “Well, we don’t tend to call ourselves anything. But I think you’d call me an ‘infuser’”

“Yeah, so was that Salazar by the sounds of it.”

“Oh wow, Carion didn’t say anything about infusers. I’m apparently an *elementalist*.”

Loshe looked back to Carion. “Sounds like he knows a lot about sorcerers. I hope he’s teaching you properly.”

“I am, *while* I can,” Carion answered.

“Yeah, I’m a quick learner! But I have to know my limits, of course.”

“Of course, as an elemental, it is important to know what you are capable of,” Loshe looked back to Carion, “and how to control it.”

“I have so many questions!” Hoots started and moved closer to Loshe. Carion held her back.

“We better prepare, actually,” he said. “We don’t know what this ‘trial’ has to offer. Come on, Hoots.” He started turning them away.

“Oh but...”

“Come on, Hoots.” Carion began shepherding Hoots towards the main door.

“Eurgh, fine!” Hoot slumped. “But we’ll talk later!” she hollered back to Loshe.

Before they left, Carion turned and locked eyes with Loshe, and they nodded in unspoken agreement.

“Could you really trust her to look after Hoots when you are gone, ‘Carion’?”

Loshe knows. She knows what could happen to Hoots without proper training.

“Would she risk Hoots living here? Or would she just take the easier route?”

I don’t want to think about it...

“Oh, but I do...”

The four met outside. Dwarfs were out, and the sun still shone low in the sky.

“Everything good?” Trit asked.

“Oh yeah, just sorcerer stuff,” Hoots said with a smirk, making Trit chuckle.

“Gather yourselves,” Elaria said. “We meet here in two hours. Then we make for the mythrill mine.”

“Why did the old broad say to leave after midday?” Trit asked. Hoots was about to ask the same question.

“I think...” Elaria said hesitantly. “I think this isn’t as simple as a go-fetch-it quest. This is a test, and I think she gave us a little clue.” She was gaining a little confidence in her idea.

“Clue?” Hoots said.

“I’m not sure, but see what you can find out. Look around. Ask people. This’ll be important. Remember, these dwarfs have traditions; we should honour them as best we can, so be courteous.” She turned to Carion, who looked up briefly and then dipped his head in understanding.

“Sightseeing!” Hoots yelled and darted off in a random direction. Fanning out, the group wandered the town.

Hoots scouted the perimeter of Loft, right where the buildings stopped, and the tundra began. The sun glistened against the mounds of snow, sparkling gently. She was a quick learner, and so training with spells she was already a master of—or had already used a few times effectively—had made the morning training a little lacklustre. Knowing that she still needed to find an arcane focus, so she could see what else she could accomplish, also plagued her mind. Shuffling around with her feet as she walked, she found a few stones and loose rocks, probably from the houses nearby. Using her Magic-Stone spell, she infused them with magical energy and haphazardly threw them over the town’s limits into the soft snow beyond. With small magical blooms, the rocks popped in the near distance, spraying snow in neat and harmless explosions. Hoots continued going around the town’s perimeter. Up ahead and around a bit of a bend towards the town was a structure she hadn’t noticed before. It looked like a monument or some kind of statue. She couldn’t make out any details, so decided to take a closer look.

As she got around to the other side, she was able to make it out better. It was a monument with several large, layered plaques, transparent in parts.

Although they were on a two-dimensional surface, their details were made obvious from a particular angle, and the layers made it look like a three-dimensional image from the front. The first series of layered slabs depicted a large mountainous landscape, looking endless, and dotted over the mountains were little towns or villages. Closer to the front, several dwarfs stood with linked arms. They looked different from the pale dwarfs.

For the plaque to work, each slab was transparent, and the details were etched in with metal. These dwarfs were depicted with bronze, making them appear to have a darker complexion. They also didn't have tattoos, nor did they have beards. Instead, they had long hair draping over their shoulders. Some had their hair plaited in intriguing patterns. The second and central series of slabs depicted the same scene, but instead of mountains, it was a sprawling, featureless desert. At the front was a lone pale dwarf, recognizable by his bald head, long beard, and tattoos. He was burying something in the sand. Hoots tried to look between the panels to see if she could make out the object being buried but to no avail. On the third and final series of slabs were these other dwarfs again, in rows, the first showing them linking arms once more with a separate, central dwarf blowing a horn. The second row showed the dwarfs throwing their fists into the air. The whole scene included both the pale dwarfs and these other foreign ones. The tattoos of the pale dwarfs were etched with copper, which had oxidized over time to a green blue, making it look like the tattoos were glowing. Hoots stepped closer to get a better look at the horn; it was alluring. She moved a little closer just as an older female dwarf also approached it, laying down some trinkets in front of the final plaque. They almost collided.

"Oh sorry, my bad," Hoots said, stepping back.

"Not a worry, just glad to see you are alright." She placed several ornaments down in front of the slab: sword hilts, mining pick heads, some worn jewellery, and locks of hair, braided and tied carefully.

Hoots looked at her. She had just recognized the voice. "Oh, hey! It's you!" It was the dwarf she had met with at the bottom of Earthheart, who had also been on the council earlier. "Yeah, glad we got out of there together." The dwarf's nose was still a little bloodied from the blow she'd been dealt. The natural light allowed Hoots to see how frail she really was.

She smiled warmly at Hoots. "Yes, I am glad to see the sun once more." She looked up and basked a little.

Hoots' attention again moved to the depiction of the horn. The lady saw Hoots' interest.

"Do you like our monument, Hoots?"

"Yeah... Yeah, I do. What is it all though?"

The dwarf took a breath of the cool, fresh air. "Well, the left-most panel is our kin from the east, the golden dwarfs; their skin is a collection of bronze and gold, with long flowing yellow hair. The east used to be an endless sprawl of mountains where they lived happily off the land above. One day, a cataclysmic event happened that shook the very earth. We didn't know what it was, but when we looked to the east, the mountains were gone and all that was left were the endless sands that are there now. This was long before anyone else had come to these lands, but our kin, the golden dwarfs, all perished. None could be found."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Hoots said.

"This was not your doing. I know gnomes came in search of the treasures that may lie within those endless sand dunes. Still, they do not know what they do."

"Some being my ancestors though..." Hoots was looking a little ashamed.

"Better the land be used for something than to lie in waste. After this event, we recognized that we did not come to the aid of our kin. This saddened my kin; it was as if we had betrayed them somehow. So, our chief at the time, Jorgunmuur, fashioned a horn, made from the bone of his own arm, the finest and smallest jewels encrusted into it, and the finest engravings of our kin's stories embedded into it. It is the horn of Jorgunmuur. They buried it long ago in the desert, hoping that if any golden dwarfs were to return, they'd find it, and know that ... if they were ever in need, the sound of the horn would summon all pale dwarfs to their side."

Hoots looked up at the horn once more, appreciating the simplicity of it. Subtle details made it look very personal, as if you could relate to every inscription it had, like it spoke specifically to whomever picked it up.

"And so, the saying goes, '*Sound the horn of Jorgunmuur and even the mountains themselves will rally to your side*.'" The old dwarf smiled a little. "We pale dwarfs like to think of ourselves as literal mountains. I like that.

That day has yet to come, but the last panel shows what we hope will happen. So, these offerings are from all the fallen dwarfs of recent times. We lay one of each of their possessions at the last panel, so that when the horn sounds, even from beyond death, we may honour the call.”

Hoots noticed quite a few possessions at the foot of the last panel. “I’m so sorry...”

“No need to apologize again, young one! You were not involved; I am simply happy to share the story.”

“No, I’m sorry we couldn’t have come sooner,” Hoots said, holding back a few tears as she looked at the mass of possessions.

“Do you accept possessions from anyone?” Hoots asked.

“Alive or dead, feel free. They get swept up by the elements, being one with the horn.”

Hoots reached into one of her pockets and pulled out Kain’s broach. Knowing he’d found solace and friendship amongst the dwarfs here, she placed it gently with the other possessions.

The lady smiled. “Our Kain... He was a good man. I am sure that, when the horn sounds, he’ll rally as the mountains do.” A solemn moment passed in which the air was still. The two took that moment to recognize the sacrifices many had made in recent times, but also to acknowledge that freedom was still on the brink of being torn from the west. Soon the moment passed.

“Young Hoots, I have many stories to share. Would you like to join me for a small drink before you head north? That is my role here in our town: I recall the stories of old. Sometimes I recall events that are yet to happen. Told Yoseef how he’d die once. Oh, the look on his face!” She grinned. “And I know you are taking the kinship trial, so I won’t take too much of your time.” She gestured to her small cottage, which was nearby.

Hoots nodded gratefully, and the two walked there together. The lady told Hoots of all the traditions of the pale dwarfs and several famous stories passed down to her. Hoots barely touched the drink as she was too enthralled in the stories being told. The limited time she had that morning flew by.

Carion and Trit wandered together, or better put, Carion had a plan and Trit was following, still worried that Carion had yet to recover from yesterday's events.

"I was able to find the baker's house before we went to sleep last night," Carion said, as he led Trit there. "He let me take some of his snow fruit. Apparently, they don't last long, so he needed a fresh batch for his baking today anyway. I *need* to know where they are sourced."

As they approached, Trit noticed it looked empty. "He was just at our meeting. He probably isn't back yet. Did you really storm into a bakery when they were all returning last night? Damn dude..."

Carion circled the small house. Carion ignored him and started looking at the door suspiciously.

"The snow fruit are good, don't get me wrong, but don't break into these people's house," Trit said, watching Carion, as he seemed to be slowly sizing up the door.

"They aren't just good, Trit; they are the best thing I have ever tasted," Carion said, almost sounding unhinged.

"Oh, give me a good pie or cinnamon bun *any day*," Trit said, starting to rub his belly before Carion approached him, rather aggressively.

"I've tasted ale that has been kept in the barrels of the world tree. I've eaten animals that are bred by gods. I've eaten the kill of a seasoned hunter, spiced by generations of knowledge. But this fruit, Trit... This fruit is the best thing I've tasted." Carion turned his gaze elsewhere and started walking in another direction.

"I mean ... it's *alright*," Trit shrugged.

"I have no idea if this fruit is in Mysrik, so I'll get my share while I'm still mortal, your opinions be damned," Carion said, following some tracks. The two zigzagged through the town, seeing people going about their business, meeting up with friends, tending to wounds, making arrangements for the lost, or simply resting. Eventually they passed by a young child holding one of the snow fruits. He was carefully opening it, his tongue sticking out in concentration. Carion intrusively approached the child and held him by his shoulders.

"Where did you acquire the fruit?!" Carion commanded. The child screamed, wriggled free and ran off. Carion looked up in the direction

the child had come from and saw a small field close to the eastern end of the town. The field was fenced in with some pillar-like rocks, marking its width and length. One farmer was in the field, carrying a small basket in her arms, filled with the red snow fruit Carion was so desperate for. Carion strode towards the field, but as he was about to enter, a voice stopped him.

"Aye, 'old up there, lad. Don't want ya steppin' on any ov the plants 'ere." A pale dwarf farmer stepped into view from near one of the rocks. He had clearly seen his fair share of seasons. He walked with a little sway, placing his feet firmly each time. The dwarf had a face full of wrinkles, and they seemed to outline his smile, making it seem like he always wore a grin. Tattoos coated various parts of his skin, but with age, they had faded, and looked a bit warped with his loosening skin.

He lifted his arm and pointed to Carion's feet. "The fruit lay within the earth 'ere in those mounds. Don't tread on 'im!" he said playfully. Trit caught up with Carion and they saw that the field was peppered in evenly spaced mounds, only just visible when the sun cast the slightest of shadows on them.

"I require the fruit," Carion said bluntly.

"Oh ah..." Trit quickly interjected. "What he means to say is that we heard the snow fruit was harvested nearby."

"Ah yeah, so ... this is where we grow 'em," he said, indicating the small mounds.

"Where are they?" Trit asked, doubtful. Carion peered at the small, pancaked mounds closely. Trit looked at him. He had never seen Carion so focused on something so trivial.

"Well, the fruit is on these 'ere long stalks. During the warmer times, they shoot up an' flower, so we collect what we can before then, as ya can't eat them durin' that time. They grow back plenty quick. So long as we don't pick too many, they'll still flower nicely. Want ta see a stalk? I was going to 'arvest it shortly."

"Yes," Carion answered immediately, almost speaking over the farmer. The small mounds were about a metre in diameter and only rose about ten centimetres. If they weren't neatly plotted in this field, they could easily be mistaken for some trivial rises in the snow. The farmer brushed some snow aside. The ground beneath it looked rougher and a little creamier in colour

than expected. A small hole could be seen on the top, as the layer of snow was brushed aside.

"See, they're all done 'ere. If we're cautious, we can take a few fruit from it, but we 'ave ta be careful. Disturbin' the casing on the top would kill the plant; takin' too long would also kill the plant," the farmer explained. He then grabbed a long metal rod, with a small hook on one end and a small grip at the other. The metal rod was almost as tall as him. He neatly placed the hooked end into the small hole.

"Alright, I'll pull the shoot up. Grab some fruit quickly. Ya gotta be quick now! Then I push it all back down; so it'll stay cosy down there for another time." The farmer plunged the long rod further into the pod, right up to the handle.

"Be ready, now," he said, and with a heave that almost made the farmer fall backwards. The casing widened a little and a bunch of the red snow fruit, attached to a bright yellow shoot, rocketed up. Small pockets of steam billowed out of the hole and from the snow fruit themselves.

"Quickly now!" the farmer said. Springing into action, Carion started nabbing all the fruit off the stalk. Trit lagged but began to help out.

"Oh! Oh, what? They're like ... hot!" Trit wailed, juggling a couple, warm air emanating from them in the frosty temperatures.

"Sure are! Alright, back in they go!" the farmer sounded out, plunging the rod back into the casing. Trit stood back, having grabbed about five, but Carion continued grabbing until the stalk had been completely reburied. Carion then stood, a mass of fruit in his arms.

"Aye! Got quite a few ov them, 'ave ya?" the farmer exclaimed, fiddling with the rod, unhooking it from within and pulling it back out. The smell of the freshest and sweetest fruits filled the air. It smelled like tropical jungle, or a fruit salad.

"Alright, put some in the basket 'ere; rest ya can keep for 'elpin." The farmer picked up a twig basket and placed it nearby. Trit dumped all but one of his catch in. Carion dumped about half.

"I require the rest of these," Carion said, arms still relatively full of fruit. He then turned and put them all on the ground nearby. Carion sat cross-legged in front of the mound of steaming red fruit. Delicately, and with the utmost concentration, Carion opened each fruit and selfishly gobbled

down the fleshy insides. He didn't spill a morsal, nor did the juices spread across his face. He was extraordinarily accurate with his consumption. Trit and the farmer looked on, a little horrified but also a little impressed.

"Ah so..." Trit began, looking at the farmer. "We've got to go north to some mine."

"Are ya doin' the trial?"

"Ah yeah, what is it?" Trit asked, helping the farmer carry the basket. Both headed toward the little hovel nearby.

"Oooohoooh, I can't tell ya much, lad. That's almost the point of it all." The farmer chuckled. "But ya don' forget it, that's for sure!" The farmer continued chuckling. Trit nodded, not sure how to continue. Still chuckling softly, the farmer grabbed the basket from Trit.

"Look, lad, jus' be glad it isn't durin' the winter. At least she's warming up." He gave Trit a warm smile. Trit nodded a little more, thinking he understood the small hint the old farmer was giving.

"Ya'll be respected greatly amongst us all, 'specially bein' outside the tribe," the farmer said, stepping into his hovel. "Oh, I mean ... assuming ya live. Aye, lad." The farmer closed the door with another little chuckle.

Trit stood outside, wide-eyed and perplexed. "*Assuming I live?*" Trit muttered to himself.

What in the world is this trial?!

After a few hours, they met up with Elaria outside the main hall. She was talking to one of the dwarfs about looking after the horses.

"Oh, so we can't ride the whole way north then?" Trit asked. Elaria turned her head to see Trit and Carion approaching.

"Doesn't look that way. Walking only, but apparently, we can make it by nightfall if we leave soon. Find out anything useful on your walkabout?" Elaria asked the group, patting the horses as the dwarfs took their reins.

"I found out this one's a nutter for the snow fruit," Trit said, thumb pointed to Carion.

"I regret nothing," Carion answered. "And now I have some for the road."

"I picked up some rations as well, but thanks," Trit mocked.

"I'm not sharing," Carion snapped. "The sooner we are gone from this cold hell the better." He disappeared into the warm hall.

Trit sighed. "Well, otherwise, apparently we are going at a good time of year. I think this trial thing isn't seasonal. Like they do it all year round, and this is a good time to go, but we probably should have some warmer gear, right?"

"Yeah, they gave us some fur linings for our trip, so that's nice," Elaria said, motioning to the hall inside.

"Also, it's supposed to be quite deadly," Trit continued. "The old farmer implied that anyway."

"So, exposed and possibly involving death. This sounds very safe!" Elaria said sarcastically. "They are all pretty secretive about it all. I tried to get something out of the townsfolk, but they were pretty stubborn. I ended up just helping fix doors and shovelling snow. Being big and tall has its perks I guess," Elaria said, beginning to head inside. Soon Hoots was hopping towards them.

"Oh, good, you guys haven't left yet," Hoots said quickly, trying to catch her breath.

"You find out anything useful about this little trip we're taking?" Trit asked.

Hoots seemed about to speak, but then said nothing for a moment. "... No ... Well, yes. Only that everyone has to do it, and I mean *everyone*. They don't take it lightly, so it is a great privilege. Only six outsiders have ever completed it!"

"Six completed it, but how many outsiders attempted it?" Trit asked.

Hoots stopped and thought for a moment. "That ... that wasn't clear, *but* ... I did learn so much about this tribe here! It was awesome! I'll share it all inside while we get ready." The remaining three entered the main hall and prepared for the journey, all while listening to Hoots re-telling the stories the older woman had told her, and talking about all their unique customs with giddy enthusiasm.



CHAPTER 15



AS THEY TRAVERSE THE FAR NORTH

For a long time, only the pale and golden dwarfs resided on Ma-Ural, but on the fateful night, the pale dwarfs describe it as an “earth-shattering and ear-splintering” series of explosions that came from the east. No one could sleep due to the noise and the blinding light that erupted.*

When scouts were sent out to investigate, they found the once mountainous ranges of the eastern province had been reduced to a sea of sand dunes and a single island.

The pale dwarfs mourned for weeks.

Unable to find the cause of the destruction, their leader, Jorgunmuur, forcefully removed his own arm and used the bone to fashion a horn. ~~How does someone make a horn out of an arm bone? Seriously that doesn't make sense.~~

The horn was buried in the sand with hopes that, if the golden dwarfs returned, they could sound the horn.

It is important to note that several chants and sayings have been developed from this legend, including, “Sound the horn of Jorgunmuur, and even the mountains themselves will rally to your side,” “We will not fight for vengeance; we will fight for redemption,” “The blood of our ancestors will fuel us,” and “We fly to their aid.”

It is unclear if these are related to some lost portion of the myth or are prophecies, as written language was not practiced in those times and they relied on traditional oral history. Depictions of these events are observed in the tattoos of the pale dwarfs but do not provide additional information.

**Not to be confused with ‘The Screaming Night’ which is the more recent genocide of the dragon-kin of Dizstrum, refer to the latest edition for details.*

On the history of Ma-Ural

By Archmage Ivar



The four donned the warm undercoats provided. They were made of a thin fur that differed from the traditional fur of fox or rabbit; this was denser, and the extra padding initially felt sluggish. As they slipped outside, the fur lining tightened around them, insulating them as if they had a second skin while maintaining manoeuvrability. The chill air still created a small amount of moisture as they breathed.

“Alright, team, let’s head north,” Elaria said with vigour.

Trit looked to the frozen wastes of the north. “Oh, that’s very general. I mean, there’s a lot of *north* out there.”

“North to ... those mountains?” Hoots pointed a little to the left.

“No, that’s too west. We gotta go *north* north,” Trit said.

“They said we’ll find the mine easily; we just have to keep walking,” Elaria said, trying to spy any discernible landmark or geographical feature; the shape of the mountains from this position would have to do.

Impatient, Carion rolled his eyes and just started striding forward across a field, kicking the light, fluffy, knee-deep snow violently out of the way as he walked. The three just looked at him as he so confidently walked into the unknown. He turned and looked back at them, his face blank as always. “I’m cold. We’ll stay cold in the open, so we might as well get

moving,” he said before continuing. The other three shrugged, giggling a bit before heading in the same direction.

Yoseef and Loshe looked on as the four walked north. “If they make it, we ‘ave to ‘ear them out. We ‘ave to consider the possibility of going to war Loshe,” Yoseef said. Loshe’s eyes still hadn’t left the four as they ventured off.

The sun hung high in the sky, lighting the whole tundra in brilliant white. The four travelled light, carrying only a few provisions and any weapons they deemed necessary. What felt like an uphill walk seemed endless. Every time they looked behind them, Loft disappeared a little farther behind mounds of snow, but the mountains all around them seemed to get no closer. The weather was on their side. The clouds were absent, and the sun was aiding them against the bitter icy air. The snow was deep. How dwarfs were able to survive where the snow would come up to their necks, the four would never understand, but they were able to push through. Hoots walked behind Elaria as she helped carve a way for her. Each step needed to be as powerful as the last to part the powder in front of them.

After a few hours, the wind started to pick up, and although the sun was only just descending, the temperature dropped, and dropped hard. The four began shivering and bracing themselves, leaning forward against the wind wherever it was pushing at them. Carion was lighting small fires in his hands; it was burning his hands a little, but he felt like that was better than feeling the insufferable cold. With the wind came the bitter ice particles, being picked up and thrown at any bare skin available. Squinting was the best way to shield their delicate eyes. Their limbs got slow and more and more numb as the sun dipped further, and the wind continued to batter them. They showed commendable fortitude as they continued.

“Do you guys feel a rumble?” Trit yelled, only just able to be heard over the wind.

“What do you mean a ‘rumble’? Like shaking?” Elaria asked. The cold had made her a little bitter. But as she thought about it a little, she realised that she did feel something. She looked up blankly and started to focus. The snow around them sat still. Hoots looked up, only just noticing that Elaria, who was at the front with Carion, had stopped moving.

Hoots looked around, not noticing anything. “What’s up? You see something?” Hoots continued to look around.

“Okay,” Trit said, spreading his arms and parting his legs a bit to steady himself. “I definitely feel something. It’s a rumble.”

Elaria looked around at the ground, trying to make anything out. “There’s ... something ... something underneath us ... moving.” Elaria kept looking at the ground, rattled by the sudden shaking. It was very apparent now. Hoots was still confused at what the others were focusing on.

“Maybe if we keep still, the rumbling will stop,” Trit said. The other two looked at him weirdly but didn’t move, and the rumbling continued. If anything, it got more noticeable.

“That was not the solution,” Trit said, now a little panicked. Carion though, who was up ahead, didn’t stop and just kept moving to stay warm. Little blips of light could be seen coming from him as he continued to light his little fires. He finally noticed the others not moving and turned to yell at them.

“Move faster! The sun is about to set, we—” Carion suddenly disappeared, straight down behind a snow drift and completely out of sight.

“Carion!” Elaria yelled, kicking the snow violently as she stampeded towards where Carion had been. As she got close, the snow ruptured, and a huge monstrosity made itself known, throwing Carion some distance. He landed in the snow nearby, steaming vigorously. The creature that had sprung from the glacial depths rose up high. It was a deep blue with dozens of legs down its long and segmented body. A thick, leathery hood sprouted from its head down part of its body. Its head had two great yellow eyes, and large powerful mandibles that spread violently, showing dagger-like teeth. It screeched an unnaturally loud and abrasive sound, which roared over the tundra. Despite its icy blue colour, wide, red spikes lined its entire back.

The three looked up at the gigantic horror, standing several stories tall. It shrieked directly at them. Elaria drew her sword and approached the creature, blade in hand, coaxing the creature to attack her. The creature dove towards her, snapping its mandibles wildly. Elaria swiped hard and strong as she nimbly leapt and rolled out of the way, coating herself in a thin veil of snow. She managed to attract the creature. The large, wrinkled hood negated some of her view, its midnight blue colour all she could see

when she looked up, other than the pungent yellow eyes above its bladed mouth. Trit stood behind her, backing up just enough to be out of the way. Elaria was making it a priority to stay between the creature and everyone else.

Hoots had jumped out of the way quickly and hidden out of sight, but as the creature was interested in Elaria, Hoots ran towards it. She knew Elaria could hold her own, but this creature was massive, and Elaria lacked a shield. *Not like that would help here anyway.*

Hoots saw the creature's powerful but thin legs. If she distracted it enough, Elaria might have an opening and an advantage. Hoots grabbed one of the legs, and with all she could muster, gave it a mighty tug. Her footing was off, though. The snow was soft and difficult to plant her heels into, so she slipped. The creature, without turning to look, flicked that leg up. Hoots still had her arms wrapped around it though, so she was thrown upwards and landed on its back. The spikes along the creature's back were thick and not terribly sharp, so they didn't penetrate her, but they were still sturdy, so Hoots took a hard hit.

But that wasn't the painful part. The spikes were actually red because of how hot they were. They were steaming and vaporizing the liquid in the air around them. As Hoots landed on one, she felt her skin boil instantly. She rolled off the creature and into the snow on the other side of it. The cold snow gave her temporary relief but didn't stop her from screaming out her pain wordlessly for a moment, before warning the others. "Its back! It burns! It burns!" Hoots wailed, but no one seems to notice, or be able to hear her.

The creature was still snapping at Elaria destructively, snow being kicked up all over the place. Suddenly, to Elaria's surprise, the creature stopped mid-attack. The creature lowered its head, its eyes seeming transfixed on something behind her. She turned around to Trit, who was strumming his lute wildly, looking wide-eyed at the creature. The tune he was playing was upbeat and aggressive.

"Well?! Stab it or something!?" Trit yelled at Elaria. She gathered herself and turned, sword in both hands. She plunged her sword into one of the eyes of the creature. Once the outer layer of the eye was punctured, the sword sunk in easily. Goopy orange and deep-yellow ooze flowed out

of it onto the ground below at Elaria's feet. The creature was no longer transfixed by the tune and heaved in pain, wailing, and screeching as it did before. Elaria stepped back towards Trit, who had stopped playing, taking her sword with her. The creature turned to its right and started burrowing, its whole body disappearing under the soft snow. Hoots was off to one side in the near distance, holding snow to her burnt arm.

"It, like, must detect movements or something, right?" Trit asked, trying to keep perfectly still.

"Should we spread out or something?" Elaria asked, a little panicked. As Trit and Elaria questioned the creature's motives and instincts, Hoots looked over to where Carion had been thrown from when the creature had first burst out from the snow. Against the white was something dark, rock-like but smooth. Hoots got up and walked over to it to get a better look. The snow around it was caved in a little from the creature's appearance. She looked at the rocky surface that had been unearthed. On closer inspection, she could make out some engraved writing, with runes as big as her, although she couldn't read them.

Elaria was reluctant to leave Trit, but he kept arguing that it might swallow them both if they stood too close to each other, so they spread out a bit before looking up ahead to see Hoots, pounding loudly on the bare rock with a buckle from a strap on her clothes. All three looked around, frantically trying to determine where the creature might spring up next. Still smouldering, Carion sat up, his head and shoulders protruding from the crater he had made when he landed. Looking pissed, his brow low and mouth taut, he bolted up and brushed himself off before throwing his cloak's hood back and pulling up his left sleeve, exposing the wand stitched into his flesh. Noticing nothing seemed to be attracting the creature, Hoots used her Fire-Spray spell on the snow beneath her. As she did, the snow melted quickly, more of the rock was exposed and an enormous, rocky doorway was uncovered.

"There's a structure here! I think it might be the mine!" Hoots yelled out to the others, who took quick notice of the rocky entrance.

Unfortunately, Hoots didn't notice the rumble starting again, and once more, and the creature burst up out of the snow close by. As soon it was exposed, Elaria and Trit rushed over through the snow, kicking it up with

every step. Carion sent a mighty blast flying from the wand in his arm, bright against the white of the snow and the darkening sky, flashing like a strobe. The blast contacted the creature, which took the full brunt of arcane energy but did not falter. With one wild eye, it turned and saw Carion, who had his hand outstretched. The creature, now equally as pissed, spun around and began bounding towards him. As the creature spun around, it smashed into Hoots, throwing her against the entrance of the mine. She felt the top of the entrance become loose with the impact, as if the rocks had worn down over eons, and a large boulder fell, narrowly missing her. She rocketed back up and charged after the creature.

“Kite the thing! Send it one way, then back another way! The entrance is here, just under all the snow! This IS the trial!!!” Hoots howled to the others.

Elaria looked to Hoots as she said this and then turned to Trit. “Go! Stay at the entrance! You’ll be our guide to it.” She then lifted her sword high with both hands, and with a quick incantation, brought it down to the freezing ground. A ripple of radiant energy erupted in front of her, cascading into a wave in the snow that crashed violently against the creature, which was still going for Carion. It didn’t topple the creature, but it did stop it briefly. It stood still and screeched loudly at her, and as it turned to her to charge once more, a thorny whip caught its mandible. Carion had some good aim. He tried pulling it towards him. He had heard Hoots and agreed that this creature was too massive to take on individually; so they had to be smart about this and try run it to the ground. The creature was too strong for the whip, and it pulled Carion violently towards it, biting on the whip and breaking it. Carion landed close to the creature, which descended on him, winged hood outstretched. Elaria took a leap and sliced the hood with her sword, landing right in front of Carion, who had landed on his side. He was looking up at his possible demise.

The creature still descended on them. Elaria, with a battle cry, threw herself at its hellish mouth. The creature bit down hard. The creature had only grabbed Elaria’s sword, and she wrestled with it for a second before letting go as the creature bit down viciously on it, crushing it and swallowing the pieces. Intense heat could be felt emanating from within the boiler of its insides. As it reared up for another attack on the defenceless pair, flames flared up beneath the creature, engulfing its legs, and melting the

snow. The creature started to sink into the ever-deepening pool of water, and Carion saw his opening.

Reaching his hand into his pouch, he grabbed the shard of jagged ice Trit had given him, and still on his side and aiming around Elaria's legs, he threw open his palms and out came a cone of freezing-cold energy. The cold froze the slushy water, making thick ice. Hoots could be seen on the other side of the creature, palms also outstretched. Carion would have smiled, wildly impressed with her, but he was practically incapable. He shot up onto his feet, grabbed Elaria by the arms, and together, they slid under the creature, whose legs were trapped in the ice for a brief moment. The two slid comfortably to the other side, joining Hoots, and the three began running together towards the stone entrance.

Trit was still there, making sure he was still visible over the snow drifts so the others could find the entrance, which was an equivalent size as the entrance to Earthheart. The creature shrieked and struggled and finally burst free of the ice. With complete disdain in its one eye, it vaulted with all its might towards the escaping trio. Hoots was quicker than the other two, despite the snow, especially Elaria, who was lugging around her heavy armour.

Carion shot bolts back at the creature from his arm, ripping apart its hood, but it kept coming. Hoots saw the boulder that had fallen earlier as she got to the entrance and a panicked Trit. She placed both hands on the boulder, imbuing it with magical energy, just like she had done with those pebbles on the way up the mountain path to Earthheart. As the creature got closer, and continued to descend on Carion and Elaria, Hoots pushed all the magic she could into the boulder without passing out.

Brightly lit and vibrating chaotically now, she launched the boulder, with her magic, over Carion and Elaria and towards the creature. With a mighty crash, the boulder exploded into pearlescent particles, the force slamming Carion and Elaria to the ground just outside the entrance to the mine. As the dust settled and cleared, they could see a heap of steaming biomass covered in rocky debris. The red-hot insides of the creature spilled everywhere and were melting even the rocky surface beneath the snow. Seeing the dead creature, Carion and Elaria rolled onto their backs, exhausted. Hoots went and joined them, lying on her back and burying her

arm in the snow. It was still painfully burned. Trit sat close. They basked in their victory against the heat of the lifeless creature and the clear night sky.

The quartet sat together at the mouth of cave as relative darkness set over the white land, which was slowly becoming illuminated by the moonlight from a cloudless sky. They were all recovering after an eventful evening. Carion had started a fire and sat awfully close, almost sitting within it, still completely wrapped up in his cloak. It was difficult to tell if he was sleeping or just basking in the fire's heat. His back was to the outside, as he sat facing the darkness of the mine. He trusted the outside; he knew what was out there, or at least now he did. It was the mine that was uncertain, and he had enough experience to know that he shouldn't keep his back to that darkness.

Trit had already got some shut eye and lay on his back close to the fire as well, clutching his lute closely.

After some respite, Hoots wandered over to the smouldering pile where the creature had died. She felt a call to it, like something was pulling her toward it. It didn't feel malevolent, despite its unnatural draw.

Elaria looked over at her. "What are you doing, Hoots?"

From within the warm mass, a short rod was protruding. "I ... I think I've found an arcane focus." Cautiously, she reached for it. It was an amalgamation of rock, ice, metal, and the creature itself.

Smiling, she turned back around with it resting warmly in her hand. She held up the wand, forged from the heat of the creature.

With the soft crumble of the fire in the background, Elaria tended to Hoots' wounds. Her arm was still badly burnt. They sat just within earshot of the other two, resting, a little more exposed but able to watch over the entire area. Elaria had her hands hovering close to Hoots' forearm. She was burned from her bicep down to her wrist. The creature's spines had burnt her right through her clothes, even through the under layer the dwarfs had given her. Amazingly, the 'skin' of the under layer had peeled away, stopping any clothing from adhering to her skin. A soft blue glow emanated from Elaria's hands, as she slowly scanned the area with her paladin healing magic.

"Almost done. The pain will stop at least," Elaria said reassuringly, "but there will still be some discomfort as your skin heals."

“Will I get a gnarly scar?” Hoots asked excitedly.

Elaria smiled at her childish remark. “Not too many people *want* a scar like this, but yes.” Elaria rubbed her hands together, then rustled around in a side pocket. Hoots inspected her arm, fascinated with her new look. Elaria pulled out some bandages to wrap her arm and carefully took Hoots’ hand.

“Whoa, hold up,” Hoots said, pulling her arm back a little. “I thought you were done.”

“This will stop infection. It is healing, but I don’t want you catching anything. Just be happy I did what I did. This helps make a thick dry layer on the top, so your skin doesn’t come off with the bandage,” Elaria said, now carefully wrapping Hoots’ arm. Hoots looked over at the other two, specifically Carion.

“Didn’t ask your question of the day?” Elaria asked. “I’m surprised you aren’t showing off that wand you have. It’s pretty neat, bunch of materials mixed together like that.”

Hoots shook her head. Elaria stopped briefly and turned to look over at Carion as well.

“No way he’s asleep,” Elaria remarked.

“Oh, no chance, probably listening to us right now,” Hoots quickly said.

“Go ask him then. I think he does appreciate your curiosity, even if he lacks the emotion to show it.”

“I don’t want to bother him too much. Seems like he deals with a lot already, you know, within himself. Plus, the cold has made him *really* bitter.”

Elaria just smiled and nodded a little as she focused on the bandage for a moment. “What would you have asked him today?” Elaria asked, keeping Hoots’ mind off her arm to keep her from fidgeting.

“Dunno... I wanted to ask about what he did before coming here, but something tells me I wouldn’t like the answer.” Hoots gaze fell on Trit then. “He’s not really your brother, right?”

Confused for a moment, Elaria looked up and turned her head. Finding Trit, she answered, “Oh no way. We look nothing alike.”

“What about, like ... a long-lost brother?” Hoots pressed.

“I am older than him,” Elaria continued.

“So?”

“My mum wasn’t exactly allowed to have another child after me.”

“What about a *secret* one?” Hoots teased.

Elaria smiled a little at the notion. “No, it was a condition for them. Half-elves aren’t accepted in most civilized cities, so to stay, they had to get rid of me and...”

“And?”

“Let’s just say she got a gnarly scar of her own that prevented the possibility of siblings.” Elaria waved Hoots’ arm around. The bandage now almost covered the burn.

“Oh... Oooh... oh, I’m so sorry.”

Elaria shook her head a little. “No need to apologize. She had enough love for me.”

“You don’t hear from them, do you?” Hoots asked.

Elaria shook her head once more. “One of the conditions of my sect of paladins is that we ‘remove as many distractions as possible.’”

“You had friends?” Hoots asked.

Elaria shook her again, then with a free hand, flicked one of her pointed ears. “Not with these out on display. That and paladin initiates like to boast of their heritage, not much of that from me.”

Hoots nodded and fell silent. Questions with Elaria weren’t nearly as exciting as questions with Carion. She just started to feel bad for her. Elaria was the emissary of darkness and a beacon of justice; thinking of her being alone in the world just didn’t feel right to Hoots.

“I’ve got you guys now anyway,” Elaria said, breaking the silence, finishing off the bandage and tucking the last part underneath another layer of it. “Never had friends, or anything close to it, who I wanted to not just fight for but fight *with*. People that have my back, you know? I mean, not bad teamwork earlier.”

“Even Carion?” Hoots asked. Elaria looked up, thinking she was serious, but then saw Hoots’ grinning and smiled herself.

Elaria stood up and looked back at Carion, who was still slumped over. “Someone like that ... being tormented by something ... he needs a bit of light in his life now more than ever.”

“But he’s going to go the eternal city of Mysrik,” Hoots said, “or he’ll die trying. Don’t get me wrong; I’m having a blast with him, and learning a lot,

but I'm just saying a lot of people would have given up on him. Seems like he's given up on himself already. Either following us as a death wish or ... I dunno."

"There's something good in there still," Elaria said, turning back, looking over the tundra.

"And if there's not?" Hoots asked. This had clearly been on her mind a bit.

"There always is," Elaria said confidently. "I want to believe that. I *have* to believe that. Otherwise ... what's the point?"

Hoots nodded. "I always just hope that, whatever he has done, it hasn't taken him too far... Sometimes, I think it's better we don't know. I hope the new place helps; it's helping me."

"Oh?" Elaria asked, hoping now that Hoots was opening up.

"It's like what Maria said. This place is almost lawless. They don't care about the regulations of the mainland, and they forgive all those who set foot here. Like a clean slate. You'd think that'd make people go all savage and everything but ... they don't. Some go to Mysrik, but there's peaceful villages we didn't get to visit that are full of all kinds of people, just being better people than they were... Like me."

Hoots hung her head a little. Elaria wanted her to just let it out, whatever it was. This was good; this was therapeutic for the both of them.

Hoots stared out into the night. "Unlike you, I was surrounded by family and people who didn't beat me to shit. But like you, I was alone... I mean the lizard-kin were nice and taught me a lot. I mean ... *a lot*. Before they helped me to focus it all, I was unstable and wild. But lizard-kin were just too different, you know? Perspective was nice, but they had a different way of life."

"Why did they take you in?" Elaria asked.

"Oh, there's lots of turmoil in the marshes. People arguing over land. Some wanted the lizard-kin out, and lizard-kin had other internal troubles. I think I was some kind of peace offering, showing we could work together, and maybe practicing for it. I don't know really. It helped, and I am grateful. They let me try different things, but it still didn't feel right, and I had to leave in a hurry too. But here... *Here*, I feel alive." Hoot continued

looking over the tundra with Elaria, breathing in the crisp air. It felt fresh and unspoiled.

“Like a fresh start. I’ve never felt more passionate about anything! As soon as we started walking together, entering the west, it just felt *right*. This thrill I never felt, this feeling of a land untainted by the squabbles of centuries of conflict. I mean, the dwarfs are practically at one with the wilds of the north. I spoke with that elder for hours and ... oh ... just beautiful...” Her voice trailed off.

Elaria looked down at Hoots, who had warm cheeks and a warmer smile. Elaria smiled with her, and they continued taking in the view with the stars peering down.

“I hate the idea of conflict here,” Hoots said. “I don’t want it starting up. We can do better. Do I know better? Heavens no, but Maria does. Loshe can wrangle up anyone. And you know what’s right. It’s just a shame we have to deal with mindless possessed husks.” Hoots looked at Elaria.

“Maybe ...” Elaria said, “that’s why we are here. Maybe we can help; maybe we are *supposed* to help.”

“What, like destiny? *Pffft*. The Eight Winds paladins all about destiny, are they?” Hoots jeered.

“No, not really, but that doesn’t mean I can’t think of us being somewhat impactful, especially if you are so passionate about this place.”

“I’ll just do what you’d do. I feel like, if I live that way, and convince others to as well, we’ll all be better off.”

“Thanks, Hoots. I’m trying.” Elaria placed her hand on Hoots’ shoulder, and they both smiled. “Let’s help those two behind us as well, while we convince dwarfs to go to war to stop an all-out battle royale, tipping the balance of this land over on its head. But you know, small things too.”

“Oh, he’s beyond help,” Hoots remarked.

“What?”

Hoots pointed over at Trit. “Absolute lost cause, he is.” They both giggled before realizing they may have been a little loud. They held their mouths to muffle any laughter.

Carion stared unblinkingly into the black abyss of the mine entrance in front of him. He was half-asleep, in a sort of trance, unable to bear the void of complete sleep. Of course, he had heard the other two, but it was

suppressed by the screams, wails, and cries for help and pain that echoed within his skull, the sounds that plagued him every time shade enveloped the day and nightfall came. He could never escape his own mind.



CHAPTER 16



AS THEY DELVE DEEP

The moonlight continued to rain down on a clearing enclosed by the dark forest. With only the stars and each other as company, Carion looked at his elf friend with her kind and forgiving purple eyes. Magnificently purple, with droplets of violet dancing in swirls within each iris, Carion would get lost in these eyes often. She looked at him with such admiration.

“Let’s... let’s just stay awhile, have a picnic?” Carion asked.

“Did you pack one?” she asked kindly.

“No, not really. Does it matter?” Carion said cheekily.

The elf leaned against the tree, slowly slid down, and basked in the glimmer,

“Not at all,” she said with eyes closed, and for several moments, the worries of the whole world ceased and all that mattered was the two of them peacefully lying down.

Carion rolled over, his eyes closed and a large smile on his face. Upon opening them, he was greeted by her gorgeous face and purple eyes looking back at him. She giggled, exposing her dimples, and he jumped a little in surprise. For another moment, they just looked at each other longingly.

A crushing sound came thundering from the sky, and with a mighty *thud*, the elf’s head was caved in, splattering large volumes of blood over Carion’s face. Her face was frozen in agony. Carion began turning pale. He tried to blink. He tried to remove the scene from his vision, but his eyes were forced open by something unseen. He tried reaching out to her, but he was paralyzed. A second *thud* came then, and her head was again struck

by something invisible. One of her eyes popped out of its socket, and her chestnut hair became tangled in her own brain matter and skull fragments. A third *thud* came, and this time, her whole head was pulverized, covering Carion's entire head in a thick coating of blood and flesh.

Carion bolted upright and began breathing heavily, the chill air filling his lungs. He was in the tundra once more. Trit and Hoots were huddled together, still asleep. Elaria was standing nearby, holding a slice of bread that had been carefully coated with red jam.

"That ... that nightmare seemed particularly nasty," Elaria said softly, as she leaned down to comfort Carion.

"It's always the same," Carion muttered. "Always."

The morning had come, a little overcast but with very little wind. The air was still at the mouth of the mine.

"You guys can't see into it, right?" Trit asked. The four of them had geared up and were about to head into the cavernous mine. The entrance was wide enough for two people to walk side by side.

"No," Carion said, wrapped up in his cloak, shivering a little.

"Oh, thank goodness. I thought I was going nuts," Trit sighed in relief.

"It is magical darkness. We will have to light our way," Carion added.

"Yeah, this isn't your normal everyday darkness," Hoots said. The other three looked at her in anticipation. "This is ... *advanced* darkness." She was wild-eyed and wore a playful smile. Elaria and Trit smiled when they realised she was lightening the mood. Carion paid no mind to it and instead held out his hand towards Hoots.

"Oh, I think I've got torches and flint in here," Trit said, using his shoulders to throw his rucksack in front of him; he began rummaging around inside it.

"Your wand?" Carion said, still reaching out to Hoots and sighing.

She grabbed her wand and placed it in his hand. He inspected it a little, then with his other hand, retrieved a bit of moss from his component pouch. He rubbed it between his fingers, then blew it on the wand, which started to glow, lighting up the path in front of them. Trit produced a small torch with a bright smile, but seeing the glowing wand, he threw

it back into his rucksack in a huff; Elaria noticed and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Carion passed the wand back to Hoots before retreating into his cloak. With the ignited wand, Hoots stepped forward. The entrance hall was illuminated now, showing that it descended deep into the earth, with countless steps going down as far as the light would allow them to see. It was similar to Earthheart, with completely smooth, flat, white walls that were perfectly symmetrical.

“Let’s just ... be careful,” Elaria said. “We don’t know what else is involved with this trial.”

“Yeah. I mean you nailed the last one, magic flying all over the place,” Trit said timidly.

“Hey, you were there too, and you helped! You gave me my opening for that huge stab in the eye,” Elaria said, making with a thrusting motion with her arm. Carion and Hoots headed inside.

Trit shrugged. “Yeah, but I don’t have latent magical powers like you guys.”

“Trit, come on, you are literally the glue holding us together right now.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“You keep us in line, keep us grounded. You remind us of why we are out here adventuring and helping people. Because we help people like you.”

“People like me? You mean lame people. My lute doesn’t even have all its strings,” Trit said plucking its remaining ones.

“It isn’t the grand gestures that save the world, Trit. It isn’t always about saving people from damnation. Sometimes, all you need to do to save the world is make people happy, give them hope, help in the smallest ways. That’s you. I’ve seen you perform, and heard the jokes you make. You make us happy. You put a smile on my face. You help us! You are Trit, and that’s all you need to be to save the world.”

This brightened him up, and he gave Elaria a warm smile.

“Yeah, I am Trit,” he said, his hands on his hips, looking proud. “Hey, you know you don’t have a sword *or* a shield now, right?” Trit asked as Elaria began following the other two.

“Mmm... I should be fine. I hope. I wonder if the dwarfs can make me replacements. What do you think?” Elaria asked, looking behind her shoulder at Trit.

“Dwarfs do like smithing... Hey, wait up! I can’t see stuff good here!” Trit called, jogging after the others.

Step by step, the four continued down further and further into the earth. This went on for a while, for they were going slowly. The sounds of the outside disappeared behind them and all that was left was their breathing and their steps echoing in the dimly lit darkness. All four listened intensely for anything else. But so far there was nothing.

“Up ahead, it opens I think,” Hoots said. They all advanced cautiously. The room they entered was a gigantic hall; pillars lined the walls, with a large open space in the centre. The high walls were capped with a magical ceiling that was transparent, much like glass, and mysteriously illuminated with dim and translucent greens and blues, like the aurora borealis. Hoots put her wand away. Diminishing her light allowed the blues above to fill the room. One incredibly long wall, stretching almost half a kilometre, was covered in plaques, each a few metres wide and a metre tall. The magnitude of this hall made the group fall silent. Slowly, they spread out, each looking up at the magnificent ceiling. Silence still filled the chamber.

“This ... this is huge! This was just sitting under the ice the whole time!” Hoots exclaimed.

“I will definitely be writing a song about this,” Trit said in awe. Carion and Elaria walked together to the walls and inspected the images. Each one showed a similar scene, but with certain differences.

“They are all different, but ... they’re like the same scenes...” Elaria said, trying to take in all the interesting things that were depicted.

“They are all scenes of a trial with the creature we fought in the snow; there’s one in each scene,” Carion said.

“Some have more! Some have several of those creatures! Look!” Elaria pointed out another one higher up. Each painting was of the tundra, with different snow dunes in the background, and different mountain range angles, but each one had at least one of the creatures and a differing number of dwarfs, all in a state of battle. Some paintings had dead dwarfs and blood coating the snow. The time of day differed in each as well.

"There must be thousands of these paintings here," Elaria said, looking up towards the ceiling and then along the wall into the distance.

"Seems that the sun is high when there's more of those creatures... Guess that's what the old broad was on about," Trit said, walking a little farther away. "Ooh...! Hey, guys? Look at this." He was now focused on a particular painting. All three moved to join him.

"Like, that's ... familiar, right?" Trit was pointing at the painting, shaking a little.

"Yeah... That's... That's us!" Hoots pointed as well. The painting depicted the moment the creature had devoured Elaria's sword, with Hoots melting the snow, and Carion preparing to freeze it once more. Trit could also be seen in the background at the mine entrance.

"That's ... concerning," Elaria said.

"This must be an archive. All those who take on the trial are immortalized here in these paintings," Carion said, starting to walk away.

"Yeah, but who's painting them?" Trit asked.

"Those dwarfs aren't averse to magic; I mean have you seen the ceiling?" Hoots said, pointing up. Trit looked up and nodded at how majestic it looked.

"Each one of these plaques show a trial a group of dwarfs has taken on," Elaria continued.

"Not all survive the trial. There must be a lot of those creatures out in the tundra," Hoots added.

"Think there's, like, a village of them elsewhere?" Trit asked. "Do they have their own little hall?"

"Not all are dwarfs. Look at that one." Hoots pointed to one with a short human male taking on two of the creatures.

"Is he *literally* punching one?" Trit asked.

"That's Kain, the one who was interrogated in Alitiar. Wasn't he also accepted as one of their kin?" Elaria asked the group.

"Yeah, he was. That's incredible," Hoots said. Kain was depicted with one hand punching a creature in the eye, exploding it, while his other hand wielded a war hammer, which was lodged in the teeth of another creature.

"This is why they didn't tell us about the creatures, keeping the trial a secret," Hoots said.

“What?” Elaria asked.

“If they told each other each time they defeated one, people would get better and better at killing them, which isn’t a bad thing, but they’d get compliant then and wipe the creatures out. The dwarfs would get lazy and weaker, and they hate weakness. This keeps them in fighting shape through generations, being able to take the creatures on blindly. They don’t learn about it until they’re *in* the trial! They are pitted against the creatures when they journey to this mine...” She pointed at a nearby depiction of a trial, in which three of the creatures were devouring several dwarfs alive. “And those creatures sometimes win. The weak dwarfs are ... taken care of ... and vice versa. They are in balance, keeping each other’s population steady and strong.”

“That’s crazy barbaric,” Trit added.

“From what I’ve heard about them, this is what they’re like,” Hoots said. “It’s crazy to some, but not to them. It’ll be why their population never grows massively over centuries. They’ve let nature and these creatures balance them out.” Carion had walked to the middle of the room and was looking into the next hall.

“There’s something down there,” Carion claimed, staring toward the exit. The three joined him in the centre of the room.

“How can you tell?” Elaria asked, looking into the black up ahead.

Something is breathing down there... something big... and it is waiting for us... “Be on your guard.” Carion leaned down, about to cast Shape Stone to create a stone sword for Elaria. As before in Earthheart, he traced out an outline of a sword, but as he said his incantation and made a lifting motion, nothing happened. Carion tried it again, but nothing.

“This place is magical indeed.” Carion stood back up. “Standard magic will not work here.” He lifted his sleeve and looked at the wand in his arm.

Thankfully, I have this...

It isn’t working, ‘Carion’.

I designed this to never fail... I very carefully designed this to always work...

Carion now appeared shocked. “*All magic...*” he muttered as he traced the wand. Normally this would ignite it, causing it to crackle with small sparks of lightning. But it remained dull.

“Remember when you had to stitch this into your skin? When all your backups failed? You swore you’d never be defenceless again.”

I can always overload it.

“That is truly desperate of you.”

“Is this something you’ve dealt with before?” Hoots asked.

“No.” Carion looked around, almost frightened. “This has not happened before.”

Hoots looked at his arm. “Got a backup?”

Carion answered, “Not one I’d like use.”

“This is probably the point. We aren’t supposed to use magic, just ... *ourselves*, you know?” Trit said, walking towards the new hallway. The others followed, Carion on full alert.

They continued down the hall. This time the cavern curved to the left, and seemed to be heading to a room below the plaque room. It seemed this lower room, assuming that is what they found, would be just as tall as the plaque room, judging by the number of the stairs they were descending. The darkness was present but the soft blue and green glow was still strong enough that they could see the steps as they continued. Finally, the hallway opening came into view. This time the doorway wasn’t so nicely shaped; it was jagged, like natural rock. They went through it into a massive natural cavern, with stalactites and stalagmites all over the ceiling and floor. The whole cavern was not visible until they circled around a rocky mound to their right. Trit was leading, and as he turned the corner to view the rest of the chamber, he stood petrified. The others noticed and stayed still. After a few seconds, Trit spun a hundred and eighty degrees on his heels and retreated, hiding behind the mound.

“You, okay? What did you see?” Elaria whispered, moving next to him.

“Dragon,” Trit said, unblinking.

“What?” Elaria asked in disbelief. Carion walked around the corner, not trusting Trit. He immediately and hastily retreated behind the mound as well.

“That is indeed a dragon,” Carion said, pinned to the rocky mound. “I’ve never dealt with dragons,” Carion added.

Trit turned to Carion, both surprised and concerned. “What? Of all creatures you’ve had experience with, *dragons* weren’t included?”

“A dragon is unmatched on the natural plane. Incredibly powerful and unpredictable magical powers,” Carion muttered rapidly. “They find mortals like us fascinating, like pets or something. I avoided them like the three-toed plague.”

“None of us speaks dragon either,” Elaria said. “That could be a problem...” She then peeked around the rock at the great white dragon sitting on the other side of the cavern. Its neck was upright now, emerging from its original curled-up position. Even when curled up it was at least twelve stories tall. Deep ocean-blue eyes looked in their direction with anticipation. Expressions were hard to read on a dragon, but it plainly knew someone was near.

“I speak dragon,” Hoots said quietly. “well, dragon-ish.” She took a few steps forward.

“The lizard-kin,” Carion muttered. “Their language is similar, isn’t it...”

“Yeah, let’s see how it goes.” Hoots, now fully exposed, began walking towards the great dragon. Elaria reached out a little towards Hoots, concerned and wanting to protect her. Carion grabbed Elaria, holding her back; all they could do right now was watch.

Dragon-speak sounds different coming from non-native speakers, as if bastardized, and it cannot be faked easily. Hoots was not a native speaker, and it would show. Depending on who was listening, they may or may not be offended by an attempt to speak this language. Coming from Hoots, dragon-speak had hard consonants, not many vowels, and many compound words. If a word was incorrect, the whole sentence could take on a whole new meaning. Hoots would have to be very careful. Coming from a dragon though, dragon-speak sounded much more natural, almost musical; the language was made for their tongues and unique mouth structure.

Hoots reached the centre of the room. The dragon readjusted itself from its curled-up stance and rose to all fours. As the dragon readjusted, it spread its wings out wide, reaching from wall to wall. Dew and moisture sparkled on the sheets of white as dim light shone down in columns from vents far above onto the wings. The velvet-like membrane of the dragon's wings swayed a bit as the dragon stretched them broadly. Its scales glistened, almost indistinguishable from the blue and silvery gemstones embedding in almost the entire surface of the enormous room. Hoots stood bewildered at the gigantic creature. She stood in the centre of the room, but to the dragon, she probably looked like a small dot or a crumb on the floor. The other three stood, nervous and eager, to one side, peering at them from behind the rocky mound. The long slender neck of the dragon was not fully extended but curved and arched. The dragon looked at Hoots with its deep blue eyes, then slowly lowered its head down towards her.

"There's, like, good dragons, right?" Trit whispered.

"Yes," Carion answered.

"There's also, like, *evil* dragons, right?" Trit asked more nervously.

"Yes," Carion answered again.

"Which one is this one?" Trit asked, looking to Carion with concern.

"We are about to find out," Carion said, his eyes were transfixed on the situation before them. He firmly clutched his wand-stitched forearm.

"Of all things to not know, it's *dragons*," Trit muttered softly under his breath.

The dragon's head, now just a few stories above Hoots, stopped moving. The air felt colder, more frigid. With the lack of wind, it wasn't immediately noticeable, but the cold was clearly emanating from the dragon. Teeth were protruding from the dragon's closed mouth, and it was difficult to tell if they were actually pearly white teeth or simply sharpened icicles reflecting off the white of the scales. The dragon made a small rumble. Then its mouth opened.

"*Heilsan, litil menniskja.*" Its words filled the room with a deep, musical, baritone voice. Hoots swallowed heavily, ready to speak the best dragon-speak she could muster.

"Greetings, large white one," she said in its language.

The dragon made a croaking chuckle and responded in dragon-speak. "Your dialect is one I have not heard for an age."

"Thanking you," Hoots said.

"HA! This was not a compliment! I will tolerate you briefly. You are not a dwarf; this much is clear. What of your other companions? I know you do not travel alone."

Hoots looked over at the stone mound for a moment. They were out of her view at least. "We are four in total amount."

The dragon looked over at the other three. They backed up a little as its head turned to them. The dragon took only minor interest.

"There is Elaria, Trit, Carion, and me, Hoots," Hoots said, placing her hand on her chest and bowing a little.

"Hmmm." The ground shook as the dragon hummed. "I am Zargothrax, guardian of the pure mythrill of Mysrik," Zargothrax said, spreading his wings a little and stretching upwards so Hoots could bask in his greatness.

"I did not know such a great dragon such as yourself was housed here. The pale dwarfs said nothing of you," Hoots said.

"Nor should they. I regulate the mythrill, ensuring the earth stays pure and untainted in the far north. I achieve this by remaining an enigma to those outside of Loft."

"We are not from Loft. Are we doomed then?" Hoots asked.

The dragon chuckled loudly once more. "A week ago, some folk came here. They also did not know about me. They were, in fact, *doomed*, as you so elegantly put it." Zargothrax leaned down to Hoots, with a noticeable grin. Zargothrax then looked over to some corpses, wearing redsand armour, nestled in the corner just out of sight behind some stalagmites. Hoots stepped back a little, unable to run, as she was petrified in fear.

"They bore red armour and did not speak the correct tongue. You do, although it is coarse in my ears. You and your companions are not *doomed* by my hand today," Zargothrax said, arching back up a little. "So why have you come to my domain?"

Hoots sighed a little. She was trying to calm the throbbing of her heart and re-moisten her mouth to speak once more. "The dwarf lords sent us to obtain mythrill to prove us worthy of trust."

“The dwarfs normally pay homage to me, gifting me with fine craftsmanship before I can offer them some of the mythril I protect. So, I ask, tiny Hoots, what can you or your companions offer me?”

Hoots froze, like a deer listening intently when they hear a breaking branch nearby. In her head, she started trying to think of anything she and the others had that could be of any significance to a dragon. She stood quietly for a few moments before spinning around towards her companions.

“It wants a gift,” she yelled back to them.

The three looked at each other, a little confused. “Like what?” Elaria yelled back.

“It likes gems, or artifacts, or something,” she said. “I think it said ‘craftsmanship.’ We got anything like that?” The three looked at each other again and then in unison started frantically emptying their pockets.

Trit started rummaging. “Button... Button... Cool stick... Oh yeah, cool stick! ... No ... Okay, that’s shiny! Oh. It’s a wet rock, so not that ... feather?”

Elaria started laying everything she had out in a particular order. “These are all practical things; do you think a dragon wants armour or something instead?”

“What about your Eight Winds medallion?” Carion suggested. He was also emptying his pockets, many of which were already empty, except for copious amounts of snow fruit. Elaria pulled out her medallion, all eight points as unique as the last. She pondered it for a second, but then answered, “Worth a shot. Probably pretty unique for the collection, right? Good craftsmanship...”

“Just sell it. Make sure to get a story across; that should help,” Carion said, now looking at the medallion as well.

“Story?” Trit said, perking up from his pile of junk. “A story!” He swung his lute in front of him and began tuning it.

“The dragon-speak word for craftsmanship is not used just for physical items,” Trit said, now standing, “or so I’ve been told. Old dude better be right...”

How does he know this? Elaria thought.

Carion frowned. *No way he knows something I don’t.*

Trit stepped out into the light. *I can help!*

Hoots was still going through her own pockets when she saw Trit approach. He had not been able to really take in how large the dragon Zargothrax was before. The eyes of Zargothrax fixed on Trit and followed him as he moved to Hoots' side.

"Trit, you got something?" Hoots asked, trying to keep quiet so Zargothrax didn't catch on that they didn't actually have much of worth. Trit had walked, eyes completely fixed on the great dragon, to the centre of the room, mouth slightly agape.

"I got ... *something*. You trust me?" Trit said, looking right into Hoots' eyes. Hoots gave him a warm smile and nodded. She did trust him, but the circumstances would make anyone nervous. Trit stepped forward and strummed. The chords he played filled the cavern. No one dared stir as all attention fell to Trit. Even Zargothrax remained static. Trit took a breath and vocalized the story to all with a soft beautiful melody.

*yfir fjöllin hátt
 Þú munt svífa með mér
 Jafnvel þegar ég verð að bera þig
 Þú munt læra að fljúga
 Treystu mér bara sonur
 yfir fjöllin hátt
 Því að himinninn er okkar að reika*

Trit continued, able to sing in dragon-speak with grace. He then finished the song. The notes of his epic ballad rang out for a long moment before silence set once again. Everyone, including the dragon, stayed completely still. All eyes fell to Trit, who was catching his breath. Hoots turned to him.

"What did you sing?" Hoots asked softly.

Trit turned to her, a large grin across his face. "I have no idea!"

"What?!" Hoots said, with a touch of anger.

Trit, still grinning, said, "Some old guy at a tavern told me to sing it if I ever met a dragon, because they *love* stories. Or *lyrical craftsmanship*."

"Did this guy happen to have scales?!" Hoots asked, now more outraged because she kind of knew the answer.

"Aah, no. Weird though, yeah? He did have an exotic name—"

Zargothrax leaned down. His great head stopped right in front of Trit. The temperature of the air dropped several degrees, and as Trit breathed out, Hoots could see it.

Trit was now a little less laid-back, as Zargothrax inhaled.

Oh, this is it.

Zargothrax didn't take in a large breath; it was a just small one, and then he blew out a chill wind, frozen water droplets coating Trit in a shimmer. The wind also lifted Trit's hair up on end and whitened his skin a little. Trit held his arms out wide and embraced the refreshing air; it felt welcoming.

Zargothrax then lifted his head up a little and spoke. "Thank you, I haven't heard that song since I was a hatchling."

"Hoots, what did he say?" Trit asked, arms still outstretched.

"Oh, right. Apparently, he hasn't heard that song since he was hatched. He's thanking you," Hoots translated.

"Wow! So, he liked it?" Trit exclaimed. As best she could, Hoots translated the rest of the conversation as it proceeded, so they could both follow it.

"Yes! Oh, how I had missed that song! I didn't even know I missed it until now!" Zargothrax exclaimed.

"Do you know what it's about?" Trit asked.

"Of course. It is what my father sang to me when I was young, eons ago. It became a bit of a ballad among the youth growing too big for the nest. Thank you again for this gift. For that, I will give a special gift, little half-elf with the magnificent voice."

"Oh no worries, ya know? Just glad I could play it for ya," Trit said, a little overconfident.

"Before I gift you with the mythrill, you may ask me about anything you desire. I am glad to share knowledge, wisdom, and stories to those who share with me. Be quick though. The smaller one's tone is truly coarse in my ear."

"Ask you anything? Hey, guys! I can ask him something! Wha—"

"No, just you. Make the choice yourself," Zargothrax interrupted.

Trit stared at Elaria and Carion, who were watching intently, wide eyed. He then turned to Hoots, who just shrugged. "It's up to you, Trit."

He then started muttering to himself—Hoots didn't bother to translate, as it was obvious he was speaking to himself and not to the dragon. "Ask something... Ask something... Something you don't know... I don't know a lot... Ask something you want to know—no, something you *need* to know, something useful, something only he would know, something a dragon would know... Yeah, but what makes *him* special, oh wait, a dragon in Ma-Ural..."

Trit lifted his head up and looked up at Zargothrax, then without looking at Hoots, asked,

"We are concerned about the uprising of Kor-Thiliath. He was suspected to have died three years ago after visiting Dizstrum in what was known as The Screaming Night. Can you tell me what happened?"

Zargothrax paused for a moment but then spoke. "Very well. I know of the night you refer to, though I was not aware of the name. It seems ... fitting, but it does not properly describe it."

He adjusted himself and began. "This cavern is my home, the domain I've kept since my kind walked these lands. The dwarfs welcome me, and our relationship stays true. I am gifted a visit to the island of Dizstrum every solstice. Many dragons come at this time. It is a time where we deal with disputes. You may ask why any dragon might want to participate in this dispute. Well, it is for the privilege of using the birthing pools within the island. These pools grant powerful and fast-growing hatchlings. If a dragon wants access to these pools, they must commit to these disputes, have input, and participate during the solstice. All kinds of dragons participate. The elders see it as place where all dragons can be treated equally, something truly rare on this plane. A solstice approached, and many had gathered..."



"You have no right to enter those mountains! You have no right to mess with *my* cultists!" a large blue dragon bellowed while perched on a high tower. The rocky and sturdy castle where these dragons had gathered was perfectly square with several pillars erected at each corner. The blue dragon, named Tenax, sat on one.

“What you call *cultists*, I call slaves,” said a smaller golden dragon, named Errvex, who sat on the towers opposite Tenax. “I just give them an opportunity to think for themselves, see a different point of view other than your own.” His words came out quiet and relaxed.

Tenax found this cocky. He flapped his wings angrily, spreading them wide.

“Settle, Tenax!” Zargothrax barked. Within the square, three dragons sat overlooking the debate. These were the elders. Zargothrax represented Dizstrum, and the others were independently chosen to weigh in on the debate. They had already earned their place on Dizstrum. To the left of Zargothrax was a red dragon, who was as big as Zargothrax and the only red dragon accepted to Dizstrum. He was known to be very fair; hence his spot in the current debate. To Zargothrax’s right was a shadow dragon, a very old one. He was black and emanated a soft black mist. He had a vast knowledge on the nature of humanoid creatures, and so was important to the current debate. Onlooking from the walls of the square were several other dragons of all colours. If they liked what they heard, they would sit close to the dragon they agreed with. Although this didn’t ultimately decide the fate of the debate, the elders would consider their opinion, though often only briefly.

Currently, it wasn’t even, with five on Tenax’s side and three on Errvex’s side. Most were there mainly because their own debates were coming up. Participating gained the respect of the elders though, so they were keen to listen.

“Half! *Half* of my cultist have left, most going to you!” Tenax continued to yell.

“My concern is your desire to be in those mountains in the first place,” Errvex said. This infuriated Tenax, who reared up and was about to come at Errvex when the red dragon flew up into the centre. He breathed a large cone of fire at Tenax. The flames didn’t quite reach him, but it was a clear warning. The red dragon, Vor, was much larger than Tenax, and so he reluctantly withdrew.

Vor landed in the centre and spoke, his voice regal and extravagant. “Spouting rumours at each other will not please this council. Nor do we

expect you to settle this yourselves. Tenax, you have trespassed on a territory that is not your own. Errvex, you know our policy on humanoids.”

Vor looked to the shadow dragon, who spoke up then. “To be part of this council, you cannot interfere with another dragon’s personal affairs.”

Vor nodded to the elder and continued. “As Rheemhr says, Errvex, you are not permitted to interfere with Tenax’s people, and so your stance on their withdrawal has been denied. This is assuming the current pursuit is personal.”

Tenax appeared to chuckle for a moment.

“Silence your gullet, you stain!” Vor bit at Tenax, who silenced himself.

Zargothrax stepped forward. “Tell the council, Tenax, why you pursue these particular mountains. Errvex’s removal can only be justified with proof of personal input.”

“My reasons are my own,” Tenax snapped.

“Your reasons are also *our* reasons! If you want the council to decide the outcome of your occupation of these mountains, we must know of your intent, otherwise complete banishment from them will be necessary!” Zargothrax’s voice was respected; all dragons went quiet when he spoke.

“Blue—” Tenax started.

“Speak louder” Vor barked.

“Blue gems. There is an assortment of blue sapphires imbedded in the core of the mountain,” Tenax explained.

Two dragons jumped over to Errvex’s side. Tenax looked on with disdain.

“Errvex, you will no longer play a role in this. You must dismiss all cultists obtained from Tenax. Furthermore, the remaining—”

Zargothrax was cut short as a green dragon-kin ran into the square. The dragons were reasonably spaced out, but something as small as a two-meter-tall dragon-kin made the whole place look like a gigantic colosseum.

“You dare disturb a debate?!” Vor bellowed, stomping towards the dragon-kin, who was panting and in panic.

“The redsands... They... They are here...”

“What?!” Vor asked furiously. “Have they no respect for us?!” He turned to Zargothrax. “We should occupy that desert when this is done. I am sick of those Valoon filth.”

“We do not interfere,” Zargothrax started.

"The west is fine! The west is true, but the east? They should not have been allowed to lay claim," Vor continued, then turned to the dragon-kin. "Is this a skirmish?"

"No, sir, this ... this is an army! We are overrun!" the dragon-kin cried.

"Blood has never been spilled on these isles in such a manner," Zargothrax said, sighing in disappointment.

"Then *their* blood will be vaporized before it touches our soil." Vor flew straight upwards. "Leave if you must, but join me if you desire my respect!" Vor said to the onlooking dragons. Most flew off, but a few stayed and flew up to join Vor. They then started flying south to the coast, where the dragon-kin city lay on Dizstrum.

Rheemhr was about to fly up as well, but Zargothrax stopped him. "Stay, old friend. We must guard the pools and the vault."

Rheemhr nodded softly, and the two sat in silence. The green dragon-kin had left. Outside they heard flames, screams, terror, and all manner of unholy sounds. A small amount of time passed; the fighting continued. Suddenly, a voice was heard from the eastern wall, where there was a small walkway for dragon-kin. A gaunt figure walked into view.

"Such strange architecture this is ... so out of place. Who would really build something like this?" Purple eyed and in black leather, with a long dark red cape, Kor-Thiliath walked calmly along the walkway.

Zargothrax grimaced, icy white air blooming out from between his teeth. "LEAVE!" he commanded.

Kor-Thiliath continued walking. He wagged his finger at the dragons. "No, no, no. I wouldn't do that."

Zargothrax did not hesitate, launching a storm of icicles from his mouth, but as he did, he stopped short, his breath-impelled weapon dissolving into nothing. Transparent yellow chains and shackles appeared all over him, around his neck, pinning his wings back, clamping his jaw, and slamming him onto the ground. Zargothrax looked up to see Kor-Thiliath waving a yellow sceptre. It dripped with thick yellow ooze from a skull at the tip, with multiple eye sockets.

Kor-Thiliath continued waving his finger. "*No, no, no.* I said, I *wouldn't* do that."

“Rheemhr!” Zargothrax managed to muffle out. The shadow dragon looked at him and smiled a little.

Betrayal.

“Thank you, Rheemhr. You know, this *is* a nice wand! Do what you will with the place when I’m done,” Kor-Thiliath said.

Rheemhr took flight. “Lichdom requires sacrifices, old friend,” Rheemhr said to a helpless Zargothrax before disappearing from view.

Kor-Thiliath jumped down several stories from the walkway. Before he contacted the ground, he slowed and landed almost gracefully.

“Now rumour has it—correct me if I’m wrong—that *you* grant the blessing of entering the vault. Now—and as I said, *correct me if I’m wrong*—that blessing is *needed* to enter the vault. So, now hear me out, you grant me this blessing, I wander on into this vault, get what I need, and there will be no more bloodshed! Between you and me, I didn’t like that Rheemhr character anyway. His path to Lichdom will, let’s say, stunt him a little, so don’t worry about him! It is just *you and me*... Oh! And all the dragon-kin and dragons on Dizstrum!”

Kor-Thiliath had now reached Zargothrax, who was wrestling violently against the magical restraints. Kor-Thiliath threw a small pocket mirror up in front of them both, and it expanded, showing the battle that was happening at the coast.

The battle was fearsome and bloody. The dragon-kin were not fighters but rather caretakers to the island. The redsand army was essentially massacring them. The only thing holding them back were the several dragons, including Vor, who were struggling against the masses, scorching the numerous ships they had sailed in on. Zargothrax could do nothing but watch.

“Those dragons, they’ll probably survive. The redsands? Probably not. It is the innocent dragon-kin here, though... Those are the ones that’ll die, and I mean *really* die. This’ll be it! No more of this clan! I know you like this clan; in fact, I hear you were the one to start it, weren’t you? They trust you the most... Now, *I’ll* escape regardless. I’ll especially leave if I get the blessing. Honestly! All I ask is for this blessing, and the redsands will trot off. You can even send that big bad red one after them if you like; it doesn’t

bother me! So ... what do you say?" Kor-Thiliath wore a sinister grin, spinning the yellow sceptre on his palm as he talked.

"You'll betray me as well. That's all you do, betray, and betray, until you get what you want," Zargothrax mumbled.

"No, but this is it! You are the last thing I need! I have *no need* to betray you. End of the line! All roads lead to this," Kor-Thiliath trumpeted, still smiling.

"You'll need to release me... And when I give the blessing, you give me that sceptre," Zargothrax said, straining at the chains.

"Oh, you drive a hard bargain, my friend; you really do," Kor-Thiliath said. He threw the sceptre up, caught it, and pointed it at Zargothrax. With that, the shackles dissipated. Zargothrax stood up tall and looked down at Kor-Thiliath, contempt filling him. He leaned down and blew cold air lightly over Kor-Thiliath. Kor-Thiliath threw his arms wide and embraced the brisk winds.

"*Now, give me the sceptre,*" Zargothrax said harshly.

"Show me the vault," Kor-Thiliath said menacingly.

"That was not part of—"

"Oh, what use is this blessing if I can't use it? You could have faked it! Show me the vault, and the sceptre will be yours! Hell, I'll throw in the lives of the dragon-kin as well."

Zargothrax resisted the urge to stomp the maggot out of existence; he knew it was futile, but more importantly, he wanted the survival of his beloved dragon-kin, and so, he turned to the large entrance on the north side of the square. Without waiting or slowing for Kor-Thiliath, he stomped off. A large set of stone stairs, fit for a dragon, spiralled just out of the square grounds. Kor-Thiliath was practically sprinting to keep up. Down they went. At the base of the stairs was a large cavern, littered with green glowing pools. The radiant light illuminated the cavern brightly. The light was warming, and the pools steamed a little, making the air itself moist, but no moss or algae was seen. The walls were darkened by the moisture but remained clean. The path through was not paved, but the small strips of earth between the pools were unmarred by footprints.

"I like what you've done with the place. Very cosy. Could really snuggle up here," Kor-Thiliath remarked, giddy with excitement. They

walked amongst the pools, heading to the other side of the cavern. The water was extremely clear, and in a few pools, submerged eggs could be seen. Particularly noticeably were the large red ones. At the far end of the cavern, a large, ornamented door was embedded into the rocky wall. It wasn't stone but rather a single slab of emerald, with hinges all part of the same large gemstone. No door handle or knob was present.

"All right, does it just open? Got a password at all?" Kor-Thiliath excitedly asked.

"Step into a pool," Zargothrax said.

"It looks like acid."

"Step into a pool and announce who you are. If you are true to yourself, the vault will open," Zargothrax explained.

"That's it?! You really should think of a different system, but I digress. Okay, step into a pool." Kor-Thiliath stepped into one up to his ankles. He looked at Zargothrax, who shook his head. Kor-Thiliath kept walking in until he was up to his waist, and Zargothrax nodded.

"Born in Valeet, I am human. I am Kor-Thiliath," he said with a booming voice, which echoed in the cavern. Nothing happened.

Kor-Thiliath looked around frantically. "Did I do it right?" He twitched.

"Yes," Zargothrax said, confused.

Kor-Thiliath repeated, "Born in Valeet, I am human. I am Kor-Thiliath..." Still, nothing happened.

"You lied," Kor-Thiliath said, looking at Zargothrax with malice.

"That ... that is it..." Zargothrax said, perplexed.

"NO! You lied!" Kor-Thiliath pointed his wand at Zargothrax, but the yellow ooze had ceased. The wand had been nullified.

"This sacred place is free of magic, Kor-Thiliath," Zargothrax said. Unyielding rage boiled within Kor-Thiliath. Veins started popping from his forehead. He clenched the wand so tightly that his knuckles turned white, and clenched his teeth so hard that a tooth chipped. His eyes turned a deep black. Zargothrax turned tail and bounded quickly over the pools, climbing the stairs swiftly and launching himself into the sky. Not looking back, Zargothrax flew into the night. As he looked back, he saw his fellow dragon kin being slaughtered. One of the dragons at the debate had fallen.

Am I such a coward?

Zargothrax decided to fly down to help them. As he swooped down toward the battle, an almighty and unnatural yell could be heard from the square. Zargothrax turned to see Kor-Thiliath at the doorway to the square overlooking the coast and the city. He proceeded to crush the sceptre in his hands, it disintegrated into a fine dust with only a little pressure, Kor-Thiliath inhaled the dust deeply. A faint incantation could be heard, and suddenly, an immensely loud scream filled the world. The sound shot over the waves from the shore, rocketing into the sky, piercing flesh. It sent Zargothrax plummeting to the ground in pain. As Zargothrax hid, a red beam, as thick as a house, and dotted with black streaks, burst from the square, and with it the sound of a thousand screaming corpses. The screaming beam contacted the city at the coast up ahead, igniting all it touched. The dragons took to the sky to flee, but as they did, the light followed, striking them. They burst into black fire. It struck down every dragon. It melted the stone in the city. It left nothing but smouldering rubble and bones behind.

Zargothrax watched helplessly as everything he had loved on the island, and the council he'd established there, disintegrated into oblivion. In panic and haste, Zargothrax slunk away, belly to the ground like a snake. He then dove into the ocean; the scream followed him. As he dove, the beam of light contacted the water, boiling it instantly. Luckily Zargothrax had dove deep and out of sight. The vaporizing water just missed him, but the heat was still felt. Zargothrax fled into the depths, knowing he'd hear the screams of that beam, the cries from the dragon-kin, and the boiling of flesh, for a lifetime.



CHAPTER 17



AS THEY MAKE THEIR VOICES HEARD

Lost Personal anthropological notes (10 of 18)


Legends, myths, stories, traditions, they all stem from somewhere.

This land has so much rich lore, and in my observations, they all start from some kind of historical fact.

And in my observations, as time goes on, that fact is obscured more and more.

I've read all the legends about Sheef, the pilgrimage, the disappearance and destruction of the golden dwarfs, but how much of it is still based on fact? What has changed over the centuries? Is there information that is simply lost to time? I just hope there isn't something more sinister that has been hidden away.

~ Associate Professor Lucky Montana



Hoots ran down a damp, rocky hallway only partially lit by the glowing algae coating the walls. She wove her way through dozens of lizard-kin who were marching in the opposite direction. They were all wearing ornate vests with long purple feathers sticking up from their backs. Most of them didn't notice Hoots as she darted past, as they were all much taller than she was. Hoots managed to reach the cavern where she had been learning

from her lizard-kin teacher, Kar-Zuul, for the last few months. The older lizard-kin stood with several others, barking orders at them, and the others left in a hurry.

“What is going on, Kar-Zuul? Are we not training today?” Hoots asked as she approached, and he spun around. Lizard-kin found it hard to smile, but the corners of his mouth raised a little as Hoots’ presence.

“Oh, hatchling, I am true glad you got here before we left.” His common speech was nowhere near perfect, as lizard-kin rarely spoke it, but he put in a lot of effort for Hoots.

“Left? What do you mean?”

“You know we stayed here ... only for a while; you know we had to return to our land. The hatching of our god comes. We must heed this call.”

“What about our training? Where am I supposed to go? I can’t go back home!” Hoots wailed. Kar-Zuul lowered himself to one knee in front of Hoots, placing his scaly hand on her shoulder.

“Little Hatchling, at one stage, I thought you were an answer to all of this. In a way, you are, but not as expected. You cannot save us.”

“Save you? I could still save you! What do I need to do?”

He slowly shook his head. “I’d rather just save you from this life than see you become a part of it.”

“What life? What aren’t you telling me!” Hoots pushed his hand off her shoulder.

Kar-Zuul looked past Hoots and into the hallway nearby.

“You have to get out. You have to run. Run from here.”

“You aren’t making sense. What is all this?”

“Look at me, hatchling. Heed my advice.” He grabbed Hoots by both shoulders this time and looked into her eyes, which were darting about.

“You cannot save the world.”

“What—”

“Instead, find a part of it you can save, no matter how small.”

“Just a part? What about the rest of the parts?”

“Hope, little hatchling. Hope there are others like you. And if you can’t do it yourself, don’t do it alone. Now run, hatchling. Run. Save a part of this world. Find others to do it with.” He picked Hoots up. She looked at him,

and all around, confused. She could hear a commotion beginning to rise, shouting, movement, and screams becoming more and more prevalent.

"I ... I could save you though, from whatever is happening. I don't understand!"

"No, hatchling. I cannot save the world. I cannot save myself, but you ... you are the part of this world I *can* save." Kar-Zuul lifted her and pushed her through a small tunnel in the side of the cavern.

It was dark and clammy. Hoots tried to look back at him, but Kar-Zuul had already run back to the centre of the chamber. Hoots could hear several lizard-kin speaking in their native tongue.

"The hatching calls! It is time!" a voice echoed from the other side of the cavern.

"She is not coming," Kar-Zuul said to the other voice, which Hoots didn't recognize.

"You know the sacrifice is required! Bring her at once!"

"No," Kar-Zuul said defiantly.

Hoots began scurrying through the tunnel; it was only big enough for someone as small as she was to fit. Her movements muffled other sounds coming from the cavern behind her, but she could tell a fight had broken out. She continued though; she had to adhere to Kar-Zuul's last teaching. This day's lessons echoed in her head: *You can't save the world, but you can save a part. Don't do it alone. Run!*



"I'm... I'm so sorry to hear this. It sounds ... devastating," Trit said with the utmost sincerity. Hoots continued to translate. Zargothrax opened one of his wings, and bent his neck to it, retrieving something and holding it in his jaws. Straightening, he brought his head back toward Trit, who saw a piece of ore in the dragon's maw, with shiny blue gems protruding from it. Trit held out his hands, and Zargothrax dropped it gently into them. Trit caught it. It felt much lighter than he had expected.

Zargothrax spoke again. "That tale ... it is hard to tell, but thank you for listening. That blessing I gave you is the same one I gave Kor-Thiliath. I

want you to go to Dizstrum, and I want *you* to open the vault. I want proof that it can open.”

“What?!” Trit said, after Hoots translated what the dragon had said.

“There is no record of that vault opening. I truly gave my blessing to Kor-Thiliath. I was blinded by the idea that he would spare the dragon-kin. I negotiated with a madman, and I paid the price. Still, he could not open the vault willingly.”

“I thought dragons were supposed to be wise...” Trit muttered. Hoots looked at him with wide eyes. “Oh, don’t translate that,” Trit added.

Zargothrax continued. “I have given this blessing to a very select few people, and they did not choose to open the vault. You are pure of heart, and I sense something about you, perhaps this land is opening up to one such as yourself, perhaps you saw or felt something others have not. Regardless, I want you to go the island, inspect it, and ensure that the vault is safe. Now, take the mythrill and earn kinship with the pale dwarfs, for you have earned it. I wish to rest now, as I have been. I wish to rest until the land returns to a peaceful state, so that my kin can return, that I may see them again.” Zargothrax started to curl himself back up, getting comfortable.

“Why not help us?” Trit asked. Hoots looked at him sternly and shook her head.

“Go. Ask him,” Trit told Hoots, who reluctantly translated.

“A dragon must be bound to his hall; this has always been my duty. Only my kin could summon me to Dizstrum, but they have all perished. My only allegiance now is with the mountains, much like the dwarfs. Now only the call of Jorgunmuur could summon me from this hall, so the ancient dwarfs decree. Now go, earn the peace I so dearly wish for these lands.” And at that, Zargothrax curled up completely once again, like he had been when they’d first entered.

Hoots and Trit returned to Elaria and Carion, who had been watching and listening the whole time. Trit was still devastated by the story. Silently, they made their way out of the mine and through the hall dedicated to those who took the trial. Trit was carrying the mythrill ore. It was a bit bigger than a pup, but it was light and easy to carry under his arm. As they reached the exit, the sun was completely up, hanging high overhead.

Carion exposed the wand in his forearm, traced it, and watched as little crackles of magic erupted from it. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“That story...” Elaria said sadly. “It was hard to hear...”

“Yeah ... sure was,” Hoots added. Trit nodded in agreement.

“You heard the wyrm. You heard what ‘Kor-Thiliath’ did. You need to run, ‘Carion,’ before anything else arises from the abyss.”

...No.

“No?”

I might be the only one that can help.

*“Tick tock, ‘Carion.’
Mysrik will call for you sooner or later
and you can’t leave that hanging.”*

Then I’ll do what I can until then.

*“Enjoy it.
Soon you’ll only have me,
and I’ll only have you ... for eternity.”*

Better you in here than anywhere else.

This is where you belong.

You are my curse, no one else’s...

*“You were and always
will be a curse onto this world, ‘Carion.’”*

Yeah, I know. I know

I’m not a good person.

I’m not even a nice person,

I’m just trying to be good enough.

“Good enough for who?”

Carion looked over at his three companions.

Good enough for them...

“I do not condone slavery,” Carion said, and the three looked at him. “This mass possession, it is just slavery, and I’ve seen enough of that. I’ve done a lot of jobs in my time, many contracts. Slavery was something I wouldn’t accept but often had to turn a blind eye to. I have been thinking it over. If I do one last thing in this life, maybe it is stopping this. Maybe this is my test for Mysrik. Why else would I have been drawn all this way? Maybe...” His voice trailed off and he shrugged and shook his head.

“Oh, hey ... buddy, got to have some principles and morals, right? Baby steps, am I right?” Trit said happily. He placed a hand on Carion’s shoulder.

“Your hand is on me,” Carion remarked.

“My hand is on you,” Trit said, happily looking into the distance.

“You should take that hand off me.”

“My hand is leaving you,” Trit said.

“I do condone torture,” Carion muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Now we just have to ... get back?” Trit asked, looking over the icy tundra.

Elaria smiled at Carion for a moment. He was staring off, but somehow his face wasn’t as blank as it normally was.

“I still don’t really have a weapon,” Elaria said, her hands on her hips, looking over the tundra. “Don’t want to deal with those creatures...”

Hoots pondered for a second, then looked at the pile of debris that had been left by the death of the creature they’d killed earlier. She walked over to it and started scavenging.

“What... What are you doing there, Hoots?” Trit asked. “You’ve already got a wand.”

“I had an idea,” Hoots said. “We kinda walked uphill the whole way here, right?”

Elaria and Trit nodded. “Yeah. most of the way. Ups and downs, of course, with all the drifts and hills,” Elaria explained. “But I am starting to recognize that tone, and the look you get when you get—and I quote—a ‘bad idea.’ The last one was a little bit ... deadly, if I remember correctly.”

“I’d use the term ‘*dumb* idea,’ personally” Trit added.

“This one is safer ... I think. I can’t do much about going up, but down? That’s easy,” Hoots said, still pulling away debris and bits of the creature.

“What are you looking for, Hoots?” Elaria asked, fearing the answer a little.

“These creatures are strong, durable, but how do they move through the snow so smoothly? Well, I was thinking, it must be their skin or something, right? But they don’t have skin; they have ... like, thick shells,” Hoots explained.

Trit shrugged. “And?”

Hoots threw a large shard up towards them. It was about the size of a large table. The shard landed close to them; then sliding down the hill smoothly, and with little or no resistance, it reached Hoots’ feet once more. They all looked at her. Trit smiled, but Elaria looked as though she was thinking hard about all the possible ways this could go wrong.

Carion, without expression, said, “No.”

“Yes,” Hoots said.

“No,” Carion said.

“Even I think that looks fun...”

“YES?!” Hoots pleaded.

Rocketing down the tundra, their momentum periodically carrying them over decent-sized rises in the terrain, the four were holding on and sliding swiftly down towards the mountain pass. Wind whizzed past, rippling their skin, and making their clothes flapped wildly around them. Carion was clutching Elaria hard, knuckles turning a pale mauve against his dark-purple skin. Trit was not able to open his eyes much, as they were watering furiously. Elaria had her metal sabatons out, directing the makeshift sled.

Hoots was out front, with her arms up and a large grin on her face. “Woohoooo!” she yelled, though it was barely audible to them with the sound of snow parting and the wind going by. As Hoots said, their way back to the village was mostly downhill, and fairly steep, so they had enough momentum to get them whole way down. It didn’t take long. Sliding softly into the village, with Elaria’s sabatons and the flattening of the plain near the village, it slowed somewhat. They slid past a few houses, with people leaping out the way, dodging, and grabbing the less aware and pulling them to safety. Finally, the sled contacted the side of a nearby house, and the four flew off and landed in the soft snow.

Hoots threw her hands up in triumph. “Yeah! It worked! That was the *best!*”

Elaria stood up and began looking for her sabatons—the metal footwear having flown off upon impact with the house and their subsequent ejection. She had a large smile on her face. “That was pretty good. Not going to lie.”

“Can we do it again?” Hoots asked with childish excitement, helping her look for her shoes. Elaria gave her a look. “Okay, yeah, you’re right.”

Trit just lay there.

“You good?” Hoots asked.

“I just ... don’t want to move,” Trit answered, staring at the sky.

“Why’s that, buddy?” Hoots asked playfully. “Too intense for you?” Still pale-faced, Trit gave her a look.

Carion stood and started brushing himself off. He looked at Hoots harshly before aggressively storming off. “I need more fruit.”

Hoots smiled and watched him go.

The four adventurers stood once again side by side in front of the dwarven council. They had gathered themselves and promptly sent word out for a meeting.

“You have returned, and your entrance was ... imaginative,” Loshe started. “Before we continue, could you present the mythrill?”

Trit, with the mythrill ore under his arm, trudged forward and placed it on the table. Each of the dwarf council members inspected it closely. Yoseef snatched it and inspected it more thoroughly. He then dropped it on the table. All four of the council members stood. They then slammed

their forearms together several times in unison, humming softly. The four now recognized the plates on their armour as belonging to the creature they had faced. The slamming of their forearms against these shards made a loud clashing sound. A few of them even closed their eyes as they did it, before sitting back down. The quartet returned the favour.

"It is rare for one not born in the north to be allowed to participate in the trial, let alone *four* of you at once. And then, you all passed. Congratulations are in order," Loshe said.

"Yeah, we have a few questions about all that. First off, there was a HUGE dragon there! He could have smitten us if we didn't speak dragon! You set us up!" Trit said, pointing fingers.

"You mean '*smote*,'" Elaria corrected Trit.

"...What did I say?" Trit asked.

"I mean, he did *love* your song," Hoots added.

The council appeared confused. "You mean Zargothrax?" the baker asked.

"He speaks the universal language," Yoseef said. The four stood, shocked.

"No one here speaks dragon," Loshe explained. "He probably really appreciated you speaking in his tongue. He likes to play around with those who visit. Believe us, we've all got a fair share of his jests. Do not take it personally."

"What did you give him as a gift?" the elderly woman asked kindly.

"Trit sung him a song," Hoots said, pointing to Trit, who gave them a cheesy smile.

"He also told us about Dizstrum," Elaria spoke up. The council looked to her, very concerned. "He was there during The Screaming Night. We know what happened. Kor-Thiliath wants to enter the vaults. He was denied entrance to the one on Dizstrum, and he went ... berserk ... and single-handedly killed everyone on the island. Zargothrax barely made it out. The dragon-kin of Dizstrum are ... no more."

The council hung their heads low in mourning.

"Kor-Thiliath is now attempting to open the vault in Alitiar. We saw him ourselves, or at least a projection of him, while we were there. He doesn't just command the army of the east; he has begun a possession of those left behind in Alitiar." Elaria stepped forward as she spoke. "We liberated you

from Earthheart, took the trial and defeated the creature, and Trit even got a blessing from Zargothrax, so now hear me. Hear *us*. Alitiar calls for aid. Kor-Thiliath will reach the vault if we do not act swiftly. Maria Kai'sion has sent word to the corners of the west for aid. Will you heed the call?"

"Call for what exactly? What are you askin'?" Yoseef leaned in and asked.

"For help in taking back Alitiar. To go to war," Elaria said.

The council looked at each other nervously. "There has never been war on these lands before. Tension and skirmishes, but not *war*," Loshe said.

"Kor-Thiliath killed them all in Dizstrum. He is making his way through the west. He will reach the north eventually. It may be before accessing the vault, or it may be afterwards. Either way, he'll be here on his terms. You have the chance to act now. Maria is calling for all people still untouched by Kor-Thiliath. So, we ask, will you join us?" Elaria asked.

The council again looked at each other; they were all silent.

"If that is what you ask of the council, we must discuss these matters. We will announce our decision shortly. Please wait outside." Loshe motioned for the doors.

"Before we do, I would like to make my paladin pledge to you all. Regardless of your decision, I will be an unbiased protector of all people of Mysrik, and that includes the pale dwarfs," Elaria said stepping forward. "I will need something representing you all."

Yoseef stood, his chair screeching back as he did. "Why don't ya use this?" He presented a pickaxe made of a single piece of ice.

"Yoseef, that was your father's axe," Loshe uttered.

"And I've been meanin' to let go of the past, and who better to gift it to than my own kin?" Yoseef tossed it to Elaria. She caught it easily, and Yoseef gave her a proud and respectful nod.



Elaria committed herself to the pale dwarfs like she had done with Maria. The hall lit up brightly as she was making her pledge. The council looked pleased with this, happy to have a paladin looking after them. Afterwards, the four stepped out into the cold.

“So, can you make more stuff light up? Like you did with your sword?” Hoots asked Elaria outside.

“Well, when I get a new one, I’ll show you. I might have to train a little again,” Elaria said, nodding enthusiastically.

“We can train together! I have to try out my wand anyway.” Hoots started waving it in the air; Carion gently touched her wrist and lowered it cautiously. “Okay, sorry ... just excited.”

They all waited patiently for the decision. Every now and then, a dwarf would pass and greet the four individually and congratulate them on their success. Each time, they slammed their crossed forearms. The four had begun repeating the gesture. After a while, they felt more welcome, each dwarf happy to greet them, to thank them, and to share with them their own experiences with the trial, each tale as outrageous as the last. A small crowd began to gather, with many happy faces among them. The pale dwarfs were happy to accept the four as their own, even more so considering Earthheart. Carion ate some snow fruit but began reluctantly participating in the greetings. Time passed, and the sun passed its apex and began its descent.

“So, the mine itself, it’s never in the same place? How extraordinary” Elaria noted as several dwarfs explained their own trials.

“Nah,” a dwarf said. “The mine always moves, bein’ unearthed when the creature or creatures arrive. Those who ’ave never entered the ’all of past trials are still ’unted by those creatures. Only when you ’ave entered will you be safe to traverse the tundra.”

“And I’d imagine some people have to travel different distances?” Elaria asked.

Several dwarfs nodded.

“We’ll ’ave to get you some tattoos now!” another dwarf exclaimed.

The doors to the main hall suddenly creaked open, and the crowd fell silent and looked on anxiously. Loshe stood there and ushered the quartet in. Everyone inside assumed their original positions.

“The council has decided to reject your request. The pale dwarfs of Loft will not march to war against the redsands,” Loshe announced.

"How can you *reject* this request? You aren't going against redsands; you are going against Kor-Thiliath! Alitiar calls for aid and ... you just want to sit it out?" Elaria asked, perplexed.

"For an act of war, the council's decision needs to be unanimous," Loshe added.

"So, some of you agree then?" Trit pointed out. "Can't just a few help? Anything will do!"

"Who said no?" Hoots asked. "Let us speak with them. Maybe we can convince them to—"

"I said no," Loshe said, interrupting. The four of them looked at her, disturbed.

"We lost so many in Earthheart. I know the names and families of all the dwarfs here. That is *my* duty. And it is also *my* duty to overlook the arrangements for passing. Never before has there been such death in Loft. I mourn each and every one of those who didn't leave the mine. I am numb. Numb to the pain, numb to the grief of it all, and I can't bear more death to fall on us. I will not let more of our people die for someone else's cause." Loshe forced this out through quivering lips.

Elaria stepped forward. "Loshe, ple—"

"NO. We only just got back here. Our people are weak and our numbers less. I will hear nothing more. *I* know what is best for us, and *I* will not be talked to by those who leached their way to these halls!" Loshe belted out angrily, getting up from her chair and waving them out the door. Agitated, displeased, and downtrodden, the four left, heads hanging low.

Right outside, a large gathering of dwarfs was taking place. They had heard of the possibility of going to war and were eagerly awaiting the decision. As the saddened faces of the quartet left the main hall, all their faces fell. The idea had obviously been rejected, the chance of fighting for their neighbours gone. The dwarf crowd parted, making a path for the four out of town. As the foursome passed through town, having retrieved their horses, many of the dwarfs gave them promising nods, recognizing them as their kin. By traversing the frozen wastes and surviving, they had earned the respect of every dwarf in Loft—or all but one apparently. The dwarfs watched as they reached the outskirts of the town. As a sign of respect, one dwarf pressed his forearms together, and the gesture travelled like a

wave through the crowd, until they were all mimicking the stance. The four companions returned the salute. Even Carion.

As the crowd began dispersing, three of the friends turned away, but Hoots did not. She was not ready to let it go. She climbed up onto a nearby mound of rocks so that all of them could see her, including the council, who she could she lingering nearby, observing their departure.

“The drums of war beat, and you don’t listen!” Hoots yelled, getting the crowd’s attention easily in the silence. Hoots stood tall on the mound, and many of the dwarfs turned back towards her as she continued.

“Your neighbour calls for help, yet you do not heed! You let them scream and shout, but you refuse to listen! If the horn of Jorgunmuur was sounded, you’d leap at the chance of war! You would do it, because you couldn’t help the golden dwarfs before, and you ... *you wait here* ... like there’s a chance that they’ll call you from the mountains ... but they *won’t!* They’re gone! Accept it! There’s an opportunity *right here* to prove to these lands that you can *fight* for the people of Ma-Ural! *This time*, you know it’s happening! It’s on your doorstep! You turn away now, and you’ll *know* you turned down your neighbour’s rallying cry ... for good ... and you’ll be *alone!*”

The dwarfs of the council listened intently.

“Being alone ... it isn’t worth it. It feels comfortable at times, but I never lived until I found *my* neighbours! People to share my life with!” Hoots motioned to the other three. “*We* are going to march to Alitiar, and we may die doing so... So do me a favour!” Hoots reached into her pocket and pulled out her wand. She haphazardly tossed it at the crowd, and it landed in the snow in front of them.

“Bury it. Like the horn. One buried relic for what you couldn’t do, and one buried relic for what you could’ve done.”

Hoots finished her speech. The only sound was that of a soft cool wind that whispered over the crowd of pale dwarfs. No one stirred for a few long moments. Hoots breathed heavily. Adrenaline pumped through her veins, making her shake a little; she had never been more passionate about anything than she was in this moment. With her three companions at her back, she felt more confident and more invincible than ever.

Slowly, the dwarfs' attention turned from Hoots, like the ripples moving away from a pebble tossed into a pond. Each head turned, eyes full of hope, towards a single spot in the near distance. Soon the whole village had turned their heads to the council.

Yoseef turned to Loshe. "The people 'ave spoken, Loshe."

She looked at all of her kin, all those she had known her entire life. She didn't want to lose anyone else, not a single soul, but if she didn't act now ... would she lose them anyway? Was she simply delaying their demise? She was scared, but they had all turned to her and waited on her word. Finally, she turned to Yoseef, and with a stern face, she gave Yoseef a single nod.

A small gust blew Yoseef's fading hair back, as with a booming voice that could shatter stone and crack the hardest ice, Yoseef bellowed.

"Sound the drums!"



EPILOGUE



Lost Personal anthropological notes (17 of 18)

I never should have come here. Valoon is not what it seems. This was a mistake. If you find this note. LEAVE.

LEAVE!!!

~ Associate Professor Lucky Montana



Rays of orange glistened on the ocean spray. A trivial wave tickled the beach and was pulled back into the sea. A soft rustle could be heard as the water passed through the thousands of tiny rocks at the shore. With bare feet, the tall, thin figure of Kor-Thiliath, in water-logged and torn robes, was pulling a barely conscious Gareth, in splintered and battered armour, out of the salty water. Kor was slipping on the small rocks at the shore, doing his best in his weakened state and loss of an arm to keep Gareth from sliding back into the ocean. A small crab walking sideways passed by and watched Kor struggle to pull Gareth's hefty body up the slight slope of the beach.

"Shit, you are heavy," Kor-Thiliath spat under a heavy breath before falling backwards. Finally, Kor got back to his knees and pushed Gareth to one side and began smacking his back violently. Gareth regained consciousness suddenly, and sea water burst from his lungs as he began coughing uncontrollably. Kor sighed with relief and sat back in the sand.

“Oh, that’s a relief! What a waste that would have been!” Kor-Thiliath cried out. Gareth caught his breath and looked around. The beach was empty, save for himself and Kor, who was now leaning back with his eyes closed, enjoying the morning sun.

“...Where are we?” Gareth croaked. Kor opened his eyes and looked up and down the beach, which stretched as far as he could see. He looked behind him then to the loose tropical foliage and towering palm trees.

“I have no idea,” Kor-Thiliath answered.

“Do ... do you know who I am?” Gareth questioned.

With a troubled look, Kor responded. “No. I don’t.” He paused for a long moment, wracking his brain, before looking at the stump of his right arm. “And I don’t know who *I* am either.”

THE ISLAND NATION OF MA-URAL HAS LONG BEEN A PLACE of peace and prosperity, with vast deposits of precious gems and mythrill ore—valuable for its magical properties and heavily sought after on the mainland—but perhaps its greatest resource is opportunity. It has always been a place of sanctuary and rebirth, and host to many adventurers seeking not only their second-chance in life but a chance at immortality, as they begin their pilgrimage to the hidden city of Mysrik.

But times are changing. Ma-Ural's long-established peace has been crumbling, with tensions rising between the east and west, between races, and between simple magic users and one who is willing to stop at nothing to gain all the power of Mysrik for his own nefarious purposes.

Standing in his way are an unlikely group of companions brought together by circumstance: Elaria, a naïve and virtuous paladin, hoping to make a name for herself and honour both her training and her oath; Hoots, a runaway gnome more powerful than her diminutive form would suggest; Trit, a half-elf bard looking for answers about his family; and "Carion," a powerful demon-kin, haunted by a past so dark he might never escape it, even if he manages to live forever.



Originally from Wellington, New Zealand, author **DYLAN WEBB** has always had a love of fantasy and storytelling. His educational journey actually led him on a very different path, spending time in academia with the natural sciences.

As a native Kiwi (New Zealander), Dylan was lucky enough to be living there when Peter Jackson's Tolkien series was being shot which helped spark his imagination, bolster his appreciation of the genre, and inspire him to develop his own stories.

Although the specifics might change in the near future, Dylan currently lives in Alberta, Canada, with his loving fiancée. **THE EIGHT WINDS INTO THE WEST** is the first volume of **THE EIGHT WINDS SERIES**.

