

About the Author - Thomas Lee Ratchford

From his earliest days, Thomas had an untamed and ferocious appetite for stories. As his older brother by almost a decade, I had the privilege of introducing him to some of the greatest stories ever told: *Lord of the Rings*, *Never Ending Story*, *Wheel of Time*, and so on. From a very young age, it was foretelling to observe how much he not only loved these classics, but how much he loved the creation of new narratives. Our drives to and from school became fertile soil for brave new adventures and daring new characters.

Suffice it to say, I was more than delighted to read a draft of *The Door in the Mountain: Part 1*. Thomas has created an alluring world interwoven with magic, mystery, and intrigue. I am most curious to see what happens to Jack, Alice, Taisteal and the entirety of Petram. The storyline has caught me – hook, line & sinker – and I’m ready to jump on board to see what is to come.

On a final note, allow me a moment to boast about the character of the author. As you will soon discover, Thomas is a creative powerhouse who has been gifted with the ability to weave colorful characters into an intricate tapestry. What you will not see through the reading of this book is the heart of the man who lives a life of utmost integrity. Thomas is fiercely loyal to friends and family. If ever I had to form a fellowship with whom to take on a perilous adventure, Thomas would be an indispensable member. He is truly a world changer. And I don’t use the term “world changer” lightly. He has even chosen to donate the proceeds from *The Door in the Mountain: Part 1* to providing women, children and families in East Africa, who are often forced to share a water source with livestock, access to clean water through World Vision.

I am honored and humbled to have walked this journey of life alongside my brother, Thomas Lee Ratchford. I am equally honored that I now get to share the treasure of who he is and his creative prowess with you. May you enjoy this journey as you seek *The Door in the Mountain*.

Acknowledgements

It all started one day at a local comic book shop when two friends and I were looking for something to do. We saw a D&D starter set and decided we would give it a try. I had been a hobby writer for several years and upon running that first home brew one shot as a game master, I had found a playground for my passion of telling stories. Below I would like to thank all the players that helped me in the creation of the world you are about to enter. I am blessed to have each of these friends in my life.

- Michael as Korrin Stonefinder, J'atar, and various other characters: The only person to have shared in every tabletop campaign I have been a part of, and the first of my friends to host me as a player while being game master. You're always bringing interesting back stories, saving your fellow adventurer's lives, and never afraid to make the big decisions!
- Levi as Danzig Yohan, Jace Winthrop and various other characters: Always there to challenge my limits and flexibility as a game master, Levi brings flair and locked-in role play. From the first time you tried to steal from a sleeping dragon at level one, to saving J'atar's life in a sewer, you have helped make even my most boring sessions a blast to be a part of.
- Ward as Ulfric "Ricky the Stick", Del Hoggins and various other characters: The most reliable paladin anyone could ask for. Equally skilled at smiting dangerous creatures as well as awkward silences, you can always count on Ward for movie like dialog at the table.

- Nash as Leofaren: Another friend who spends time as a player and game master. Calculated, alert, and on task. He's the only player I know who stopped an entire army with shrubbery! How much gold did we get from the tomb? What is this NPC's name again?
 Nash knows!
- Stephen as Undine and Bracks: The friend who took over being our group's game master so I could have time to finish this book series! He's quite possibly the king of flavor with a particular penchant for rolling up violent characters that always keep you guessing.
 Read his characters' sections with caution.
- Chris as Dobro and Minanius: One of my brothers and a player that routinely makes game masters worry about player character deaths. When game masters have an NPC describe an enemy as essentially invulnerable and extremely dangerous, most players think to come back at a higher level. Don't worry, Chris will find out if that NPC was telling the truth before anyone can get an insight roll.
- Derrick as Fin: My youngest brother and a player in my first ongoing campaign. The actions taken, and specifically not taken, in that campaign proved to be extremely formative in the stories to come. He's one of the first people I shared any of my short stories with for feedback. Oddly enough, Derrick is the only player to ever play a wizard in any of my campaigns or one shots.
- George Ratchford as Perrin: My oldest brother and another player in my first campaign. George grew up with a fascination for a wide variety of stories and helped pass that on to me. I eagerly look forward to

the completion of his own original works that are sure
to come.

Special Thanks

George Ratchford, for writing the forward to this series.
Jason Dixon, for crafting the incredible artwork you see on this
cover and elsewhere.

What you are about to read is the first of two parts. Part two has an expected release of early 2025. I hope you enjoy your time beyond the door in the mountain just as much as we have.

All profits from *The Door in the Mountain* series will go to World Vision. You can keep tabs on the financials, including expenses and donations, for the book at thedorinthemountain.com.

Please go check out the great things being done by our friends at World Vision at <https://www.teamworldvision.org/>



The Door in the Mountain: The Great Ghost's Call

Part 1

Chapter 1: The Tired Meadow

In a place not that far away but quite hard to find, exists a world of epic grandeur, wild magic, and bold adventure. Here, our story starts in a quiet countryside with a little boy and a little girl...

The field was a small, lazy patch of earth mixed with lush, green weeds and a little grass. It was walled off by thick hedge rows of large, twisted oaks too big for two people to wrap their arms around. The sun hung hot in the blue evening sky with only a hint of a cloud here and there. The chest high, to an adult, thicket began to stir as something moved breathlessly through it. Jack ran with all his might pushing through the thick grass. Running several steps, then zigging this way, then that. Eventually, about half the way out in the four acre or so field he came to a halt landing on his knees, completely engulfed by the grass. "She will never find me in here," he thought.

Slipping quietly and quickly from shadow to shadow amongst the great oaks around the field, Alice noticed a stir in the bees and flying insects in one place near the field's edge. Upon a further look she noticed the weeds gently bent in one direction, cutting a small path into the field. A small wry smile grew across her face as she lowered her stance, gripping a small twig in one hand. If she had been quiet in the hedge, she was a ghost now. Slipping low through the grass, placing a hand to the ground now and then, she crept onward.

“What could be taking her so long? I guess I will have to go and find her... in a moment...” Jack thought to himself as he sat and stretched out on to his back quite comfortably amongst the thick vegetation. Looking up into the sky he noticed a small whiff of cloud and began to imagine what it looked like... “A swan, nah, two leaves falling, hmm a knight’s war eagle...” his thoughts wondered. As he peered at the little cloud the sun hit it in such a way that highlighted the cloud’s edges in brilliant orange and yellow. “A gold dragon!” Just as this thought was pouncing in his head, Alice was pouncing out of the thick weeds next to him giving him a quick strike from the small twig that she wielded like a sword.

“Gotchya!” she exclaimed.

“Ow, you did not have to hit me for me to know it!” he replied. She stood with a wide smile offering him a hand to stand up. “As long as you know I am still champion, Jack.”

“Alice! Alice, come on my lady, you will not be in trouble.” Thundered a voice from a mounted rider as he strode along the edge of the field. Jack and Alice immediately flattened out amongst the weeds.

“Did he see us?” ranted Alice. Fully armored in semi-polished plate, helmet in his left hand, reigns in his right, the bastard sword at his hip, and a green and gold tunic streaming out from his cuirass, signified him as a Knight of the Dallis.

“Not in trouble with me at least,” the man grumbled to himself as he stopped to scan the field. The two nine-year-old kids laid there quiet as a mouse until Jack broke the silence.

“You better go ahead. I will lay here; he will not see me.” They exchanged a long and knowing look for two so young. Neither had forgotten the scars Jack received on his back for ‘running off with a high-born lady’ just a year

earlier. She reached out touching his shoulder before standing up.

“I am here Sir Relish,” she said as she started toward the knight in a small gallop.

“What are you doing way out here, my lady? Are you all alone?” the knight asked as he dismounted and offered his hands as a step for her to mount his horse, still looking around with a keen eye.

“This is my favorite meadow Sir,” she replied cordially.

“You sure it has nothing to do with being so near the fletcher’s house?” he asked as she mounted the horse.

“No,” her face growing red for a moment before gathering her wit like a knife, “and you will tell my father no different or I will tell him about you and the chamberlain’s assistant.” His face grew much redder than hers as he took the reins and began to lead the mount out of the field by foot.

“Had you been born a son to your father, you would have ruled all the Dallis, my lady.”

Jack squatted there in his grey threadbare shirt and pants, peeking through the foliage as the two disappeared into the hedge on the western border of the field. He hoped he would see her tomorrow but knew it would probably be a few days. It usually was after they had stayed out late enough to encourage a rider to come and find her. He stood heading east, to his stepfather’s house, the fletcher. Perhaps he would not be too suspicious.

Chapter 2: A Few Years Later

Jack sat quietly against a large oak tree on the edge of what he had begun to call, *the tired meadow*, enjoying the brisk, fall evening breeze and a thick, old leather-bound book full of adventure and romance. He was older now with near the body of a man. Out of nowhere an arrow struck the trunk of the oak tree beside him. Panic flooded his body for a moment before looking at the arrow shaft and realizing it was a special black locust arrow, one he had made for his best friend some time ago.

“Don’t get lost in there, book worm. I need someone to go on real adventures with,” said a lovely girl some 30 yards away, wielding a long bow, wearing breeches and a long, green blouse.

“Alice, there is more adventure in this book than either of us will ever know combined,” Jack responded.

“That is something a book worm would say,” Alice replied with her wry smile as she approached. As she came closer, the two of them took a long wondering look at each other before their eyes met. Both had grown up quite a bit and both had noticed. A brief moment of tension passed before she requested, “Well...come on then. I want someone to shoot against. I always have to practice alone.”

“You mean you want someone to beat in a competition,” Jack replied, sobering up after the brief moment of acknowledging to himself that he found his friend to be quite beautiful.

“Jack, I am not going to listen to you read again. Please, you have not shot with me since before summer,” she pleaded as her tone went from playful to indigent.

“Before summer, when you beat me five shots to one,” Jack said flatly while standing to his feet. The look on her face turning a mix of perplexed, frustrated and genuine longing. Again, he found himself not focused on the moment but rather the lines on her face, the deep light in her eyes...

“Jack, please. Just a few shots,” she repeated.

“Oh, all right,” he conceded while snapping out of his study of her face.

“Where did you get that anchor?” she asked motioning to the book while they walked. “I know the fletcher did not have something like that lying around?”

“No, it was a gift,” he replied. “Do you remember the Priest of the One that came to town during summer?”

“The priest gave it to you?” she asked puzzled.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Jack there was something about him that gave me an uneasy feeling...” she pondered.

“Do you think he is a bad man?” he asked.

“No, there just seems to be something hidden about him, like he has a secret that should be obvious, but people never notice,” she replied.

“Oh, you may be right – what about that little tree? The spruce will be easy to pull the arrows from,” Jack said changing the topic.

It was a slow tournament. Always was. Their contest was to shoot her quiver of six arrows, one at a time. Each arrow was meant to strike nearest the first. This had been Alice’s favorite use of their time together for near two years

now and she almost always won. They had long since explored all the surrounding fields and hedges that they could without getting in trouble, or being gone so long that a rider came for Alice, or a switching waiting for Jack back at the fletcher's house. Sometimes their target would be a tree, sometimes a patch of bare earth underneath a low hanging oak branch. This time they chose the small white spruce a few moments' walk down the hedge from Jack's favorite reading tree.

With a thump Alice set loose an arrow dead center from 30 yards out. Drawing a line with her foot across the leaves she said with a coy grin, "Your shot, book worm."

Jack took the bow, readied himself behind the line and muttered low to himself, "Goath bogadah," before loosing the shot. The arrow landed so close to the first that it was bent slightly to one side.

"Your shot, marksman," he replied with an even bigger grin.

"Have you..." she said while taking the bow and eagerly firing another. Her arrow landed not an inch from the two that touched.

"First point is mine it seems," he said taking the bow. Again, taking a moment to mutter the phrase just loud enough that Alice could hear it. The arrow slid down the side of the first, another perfect shot. Alice eyed him suspiciously while taking the bow again.

"Have you been practicing?" she asked.

"Every day," he replied. This process continued for another round. While Alice had made six excellent shots, a pattern that could be covered with one hand, Jack had touched the

targeted arrow with every shot. All perfect shots while muttering the same phrase.

After his sixth perfect shot she exclaimed, "How is that possible? You can't practice and get that good. Jack, what is that phrase you're saying? Not a single knight in my father's fealty can shoot like that!"

Jack walked forward pulling an arrow from the tree as she followed closely and impatiently waiting an answer.

"Watch closely," he said holding out the arrow on top of his open palm. "Goath Bogadah!"

There was a quaint stir in the leaves around them, then the arrow raised a few inches out of his palm and rotated for just the slightest of moments before falling back to his hand. She stepped back in shock.

"Jack, you're a sorcerer!?!?" she asked in wild-eyed amazement.

"No, just a bit of wizardry. If I were a true sorcerer, we would have known about it years ago, ...I think." he replied.

"What is that supposed to mean, was that a spell?" her amazement in full swing.

"Apparently anyone can learn a spell or two. Just simple wizardry, learning how to do a thing with your mind and will. The priest taught me how – now don't look at me like that. I am not going to explode you know," he spoke with a bit of worry and a touch of pride in his voice.

"Jack, you cannot let anyone else know about this or they would run you out of town! I know you have read about how there are great schools and places where magic is common, but our people will say you have a demon. This is dangerous

for you," she spoke while trying to calm herself. A moment passed; the levity of the situation now completely defused by her legitimate concern.

"More dangerous than a commoner being alone with Lord Rockhurst's daughter?" he asked in a failed attempt to make a joke.

"...If the priest taught you, how long have you been able to do this?" she asked now genuinely hurt, more at the truth in his words than by his poor attempt at a joke.

"When he first taught me the phrase, I did not believe him, but I tried to do it anyway. I was embarrassed to say anything, and you and I both know you would have teased me for trying."

"Jack—" she began to interrupt before falling silent.

"Two weeks ago, I tried to use the spell to catch a falling leaf and it stopped right before my face while I sat at the reading tree," he continued.

"Why didn't you tell me then?! We see each other three or four times a week. Why would you keep that from me?!" she asked, her tone rising with a little more pain in it.

"I did not mean to keep anything from you, I was excited and surprised. I wanted to be able to show you...and now... I have. No one else knows. Even the traveling priest probably thinks I still don't believe him!" he replied sincerely.

"Well, next time you find out something like, oh I don't know... you can use magic, promise you will tell me! ...and I promise I will believe you even if it seems crazy," her words rang out sincerely.

“Even if it’s crazy?” another moment passed as they looked at each other. “...I will tell you next time. I promise,” he continued.

“Good,” she replied, allowing a brief smile back on her face.

“Good,” he replied.

It was near dark as Jack was arriving home to his stepfather’s house. The fletcher’s house was little more than an open wooden shed for fletching arrows and bending bows, with two small, enclosed rooms off the back all topped with a thatch roof. On the edge of town, it backed up to the same grove of oaks that became the hedge next to the tired meadow, where he and Alice had come accustomed to meeting up to spend time with one another. Which was indeed the most dangerous thing he had ever done in his life. He still carried the whip-made scars on his back for the one time they were caught as children. Lord Rockhurst insisted the fletcher had done the whipping because of his age, but now the punishment would be more severe and formal. As he approached, he noticed there were too many lamps lit in the fletcher’s back room.

With a knock he waited for a response. “Been reading in the dark, boy? Come in, we have company.” A raspy voice said in an alarmingly knowing way. Jack opened the door and to his amazement sat a large, regal man in a tan robe with short trimmed, grey hair and near gold eyes, next to his old, withered stepfather around a cooking pot of stew. It was the Priest of the One! “The priest, Taisteal, will be honoring us tonight. Wash up and join us for dinner,” the fletcher rasped. Jack stepped in the house; eyes locked with the completely calm stare of the priest as he shut the door.

Chapter 3 "Announcement"

A few years passed and Alice was once again slipping through the great oaks surrounding the tired meadow as silent as a mouse. More out of habit at this point than intention, for this time she came with a heavy burden to meet with her best friend. "Funny to think of him as my best friend, or childhood friend... I suppose I should not think of him at all after today," she thought to herself as she crept effortlessly through the brown, grey winter evening. They would not have much time together this evening as the long winter night would grow dark and cold quickly.

As she grew near his favorite reading tree, she began to hear a commotion. A thud, a shout, repeated... "Is he in trouble?" she thought as her quiet pace quickened, lowered and became deliberate. Hindered only by having to slightly hoist the long winter dress that she was still not greatly accustomed to. When she neared, through the dead underbrush what she saw was a strapping young man stripped down to just his pants repeatedly and angrily plunging and swiping the great oak with an all wood, hickory spear. A moment passed where she was half in shock and half admiring him in contrast with the cold dead surroundings. Warmth filled her as she remembered the evening he surprised her with a kiss. They were younger then, yet the memory was still a fond one. That evening they had both departed without saying a word and neither of them ever brought up the kiss again. For that matter, they never seemed to bring up the fact that most of the young common women in town were swooning over Jack, or that high lords would come from all over the Dallis to have their sons meet Alice. It was a growing impasse they had put off far longer than most could; however, until now.

“Have you slain the tree yet?” she called out now approaching in a normal manner. Standing straight up still facing away toward the tree he twisted his grip tight and took one hard swing at the oak's base. The spear's shaft shattering into two pieces in his hands. As he turned to face her, she noticed the wild look on his face accompanied by a few tears. “Jack,” she rushed a few steps closer to him looking him over. “I have never seen you so upset. What is wrong?”

“The orator from your father's castle. He announced it in the city today. Are you really going to marry him?” his voice cracked a little with the question. Her eyes fell from his to the ground.

“I must...he is the High King's son,” she replied looking him back in the eye. Looking over his shoulder she followed his gaze to a tightly stuffed traveler's bag.

“Do you want to marry him?” she stood silently for a moment after he asked. “Do you?” his tone growing gentler and more vulnerable.

“No,” she replied with a sinking feeling. This was going to be harder than she anticipated.

“Then run away with me. I have enough supplies to make it through the Yarden valley and enough gold to purchase space on a ship in Namel. We could live on one of the islands. You have always talked about seeing the ocean. I could still work as a fletcher or perhaps even at a city library. We could make it together,” he rambled on wanting to postpone what he felt would be inevitable.

“If it...” she genuinely was tempted but would not betray what she felt was the right thing to do. She knew a logical approach would hurt him more in the long run. Perhaps his life would be better if he ran off to the

ocean. If she left even a hint of possibility open, it seemed he would waste his life waiting for her. "My father has been at war with goblins for near two years and you would have me spurn the son of the King? His armies would secure our border in a month," she stated, trying to regain her usual cool composure.

"I have never even seen a goblin, have you?" he retorted.

"I have seen the wounds on the knights who return from battle, and I know you have noticed the orders for arrows tripling as of late," she answered.

" – and Indoctus, the High King's son, is he going to save us from the goblins if you marry him. They say he..." his harsh response was cut short by the fire building in her expression. She knew he was only thinking of the two of them and truly for her, she would prefer to run off with the young man her childhood friend had grown into. Yet, she would not betray her father or the common people of her town, Petram. She let that frustration and his selfish perspective drive what she said next.

"And you would lead us straight through their camps with a broken spear? Yarden is west, the goblin's camp is to the west! What did you expect, that I would turn down being queen? That we would frolic in the woods all our lives?!" It was difficult to hurt him while his emotions shown so clearly on his face, but it seemed like what would be best for him, so she continued, "...Or did you really think one day I would wake up..." she struggled through the sentence, "...in my warm castle, with servants to fetch breakfast and draw my bath and decide, 'I am going to marry a commoner.' No, this fantasy of ours has gone on long enough, Jack. We have to grow up," she finally got through the words she found disgusting while holding back the tears in her own eyes.

Clouded by anger and loss, Jack mustered an insult like a cornered dog does a bite. "Then may you always find grand adventure behind the walls of your castle, my Lady." He turned quickly and strode off not even bothering to grab his traveler's bag or his shirt. It was all she could do to keep her composure while he walked away. She tried to cling to some false anger to keep back the tears as she began to run back to her father's castle.

It felt like a death. She was hurt by the loss of Jack. She may never see him again but perhaps a passing glance in town. But most of all, it hurt that she was giving up on her own life of adventure. The king's son was a hard and practical man of tradition. If she were to truly win his affection and in turn, protection for the people of Petram, she would grow old and bored behind a castle wall. It was hard to deny what she really wanted just this once but denying herself who she truly was daily; she did not know if she could do it. "At least today I have done what I should," she thought to herself as the walls of Castle Rockhurst appeared above the trees. Her walk home was done.

Chapter 4 "Position"

There was only one true lookout tower in Castle Rockhurst, and it was empty most of the time. It was near the back of the castle and mostly overlooked the forest that had grown up after the castle's construction. Only a small field barely in view remained of the large grassland the tower used to overlook. Alice stood there against the stone railing of the tower in her light green and gold summer dress, staring at the small break in the trees that represented hers and Jack's field, *the tired meadow*. She had not been there since winter. Not since the announcement of her betrothal.

"You know I would not hold it against you if you did as you wished," a calm voice sounded behind her from the arched doorway.

"Father! You startled me," Alice replied. He walked up into the dying light of the day resting his hand on the balcony beside her. The two looked each other in the eyes for a moment; both with heavy, worried looks, before turning back to the view of the forest.

"Some of these trees were knee high when I was a boy. My grandfather would berate my father for not cutting them down." Lord Rockhurst continued, "But my father would always rebut, the forest will one day be a great shelter in and of itself. It will hide an advance, yes, but it would also hide a retreat out of the castle." His face softened into a wry smile, "Then they would argue over what was more cowardly, to hide in a castle from an enemy or to sneak out of a castle."

"Is this your way of trying to get rid of me father?" Alice asked matching his smile.

Becoming more serious he replied, "This is me telling you if I had to choose between the safety of Petram, or my daughter having a chance to be happy..."

"I will not make you choose." She cut him off firmly but with a tone of compassion. "I will make happiness with the King's son, even if he is not a man of my choosing."

"Well, tomorrow you will officially meet Indoctus. He may be..." her father's tone grew heavy losing its normal cool composure, "...and in a month you will be married and moved east. Either way, I will miss you."

"Don't be too troubled. Being queen of the Dallis cannot be the worst fate, and surely the queen will have authority to visit her father occasionally." She emphasized *queen* quite sarcastically to lighten the mood. "There has never been a real chance for women in the Dallis, perhaps... it's beside the point -"

He turned facing her taking her by the shoulders, interrupting her, "I will get more aid for the goblin war after his trip here regardless of whether you go through with this wedding. Indoctus is a hard man, but he is not insane. My real point is that you are my daughter. You can do anything you believe you can."

"With you as my example, how could I sway from looking beyond myself." Alice said as she leaned in and hugged her father.

"Dinner should be ready," he replied in a somber tone.

She kept her composure as the two vanished through the arched doorway down the five-story spiral staircase. It was hard to go through with 'her duty' without her father giving her his blessing to run. Though he meant well, this

conversation only made doing what she thought to be right, even harder. *If mother were still alive, she would remind me how my father is a dreamer, he is not thinking of how severely we rely on the capital...* she thought to herself. She also hated to think of what it would do to his reputation to be the Lord who not only could not defeat the goblin army, but also to have the daughter who refused the King's son.

Her rambling thoughts were soon vanquished by present circumstance as she and her father entered the great hall of the castle. Across the large room of stone walls and high arched wood ceilings, stood a man surrounded by three knights in well-worn but well-maintained plate armor. The steely gaze of Indoctus' sky-blue eyes upon them, "My Lord, my Lady," he said with a well-practiced tone that poured out like honey ...or smoke.

"My Lord," Lord Rockhurst said with a bow and surprise, "You are early. We did not expect you until morning. Come join us at our dinner table, you, and your men. You must be starved."

Indoctus replied, "Of course, we could use substance after another hard day's ride."

There was an air of immediate tension as they moved from the hall to Lord Rockhurst's private dinner table. With a word, Lord Rockhurst had his master of the house in full swing to prepare the additional food and make sure his royal company's rooms would be ready a night ahead of schedule.

Alice was quiet during dinner, uncharacteristically; only answering when asked a question. She had met Indoctus before, but only briefly and in a very formal setting. She was not sure how to act around him. He had a reputation of being a harsh warrior and a stickler for tradition, yet in this informal dinner around a small table he seemed very casual, even if he

kept her father quite nervous with questions about the goblin war. Admittedly, he was a handsome man; dark hair with a hint of grey in his long strands held behind his ears, sky blue eyes, and a jaw that looked like it could double as an anvil. Handsome, but possibly old enough to be Alice's father himself. Eventually the conversation turned from the goblin war to the eastern crusades. Those kept the bulk of the Capital's army busy fighting the Taul, or dragon men, as the common folk called them. Growing irritated with the long conversation and Indoctus' ease at turning every statement into a reminder of Petram's failed attempts to drive the goblins back, Alice spoke up, nearly by accident.

"Why then, is it necessary for the King's army to invade other lands to the east when we ourselves are invaded here in the west?" she asked the question a bit more pointed than expected. The men around the table eyed her with surprise, none more than her father. Indoctus' gaze turned from her back to Lord Rockhurst, and for a moment it seemed she would be ignored. "The goblins have attacked our land every year since I was a girl to some degree, and yet I have never heard of a dragon man ever entering our territory. Are the eastern crusades really necessary?" she continued; this time quite surprised herself to be pressing the King's son with the question.

With a glare more aggressive than she would have considered appropriate, Indoctus paused a moment and then responded, "Every interaction is a negotiation, isn't it? It is imperative to be the one negotiating from a position of strength. Your Petram... is not currently in a position of strength and that is unfortunate..., but your capital is. I believe I am quite full, Lord Rockhurst. Your hospitality has been flexible, and I have considered it," his tone remained calm, and honey coated even though his face had shown a bright temper.

“You are certainly welcome, my Lord. Shall I have the master of the house show you and your men to your rooms?” Lord Rockhurst asked.

“These knights, yes. I would enjoy a stroll around the walls. Lady Alice, will you accompany me?” There was something palpably wrong about the timing of Indoctus’ request, though by observing his voice and mannerism you could not tell it.

Alice hesitated ever so slightly before answering.

“Even so late an hour and after a long ride, my Lord?” Lord Rockhurst interjected.

“Even so,” Indoctus replied.

“Certainly,” Alice said gaining her usual quick wit and composure, “I would love to lead you around the castle.” His cold blue gaze let her know that her choice of words was not as subtle or as witty as she intended.

Out along the top of the castle walls the two walked silently. It was dark now and there was only a mounted sconce torch every so often to light the walkway atop the wall. The few guards on patrol were lit by carried torches of their own, and for a moment, Alice noticed there were no guards to be seen. Perhaps they were changing shifts or just happen to all be checking a corridor below at the same moment. Indoctus also noticed their absence and grabbed Alice’s arm. She turned to look at him in surprise and he moved closer to her. They were in a low-lit area between the torches. She backed up as he moved closer and closer until she found herself pinned between him and the rampart wall that came only up to her waist. His composure remained icy as ever as he leaned in and whispered into her ear.

“At dinner you seemed to want to learn about negotiating. I will teach you now. You seem not to understand a ‘position of strength.’ That is why we invade the Taul desert, and it is why your father should have been attacking the goblin mountains every summer as well. You see, when you have a position of strength you get what you want.”

Poised fear began turning to panic as she tried to move around him, he pressed against her harder, grabbing her other arm and lifting her feet off the ground, sitting her on the edge of the outer wall. He continued to push closer until her legs began to spread. As she tried to move away the idea of falling over the ramparts became very real.

“I’ll scream. The guards will hear me,” Alice said in what she tried to make a strong voice.

“Scream all the way to the ground,” he responded still in a whisper right in her ear.

“If you would kill me, why would you want to marry me?” she asked twisting her head, trying to find space from his.

“Kill you? I am educating you, and surely you understand.” He continued, “I will marry you, and Petram will happily continue to send food and taxes to the capital. Your father will bless my name when I drive out the goblins, and you... you will do as a I wish. Speak when I wish you to. Fill my bed and bear me a child with that same fire you have, and I will accomplish this by a position...” he leaned even closer so there was no space at all between them as he spoke, “of strength.” With that said he released her and took a few steps back. “I will find my own way to my room betrothed. I look forward to our time together.”

She slipped off the edge of the rampart wall back to her feet, nearly falling to her knees. Stifling anger quickly returned to her nearly in time to keep the tears that had formed in her eyes from falling down her face. *Did father know he was this kind of man, is that why...?* she thought to herself. Just about the time Indoctus' silhouette disappeared into a doorway, a couple guards with their torches returned into view below in the castle's courtyard. Flustered and embarrassed to have been handled in such a way she quickly struck out to her own room in a rage of tears.

The next morning Alice moved quickly and silently away from the castle in the faint early light. The forest was indeed great at hiding her retreat. Without these trees it would have been impossible to have visited Jack so often over the years. *Am I retreating from my duties ...from the people ...from him?* Alice thoughts turned to pure rage every time she had thoughts of Indoctus' hands on her. She wanted to tell her father, tell Jack, to put an arrow through him herself! Her grip on her bow tightened. *Better that neither of them know. Jack would surely get himself killed or worse, and father...* Her thoughts had been this way all night. One minute glowing anger, one minute a refrain of sorrow. She was upset to be running away and not facing the problem. Upset to be leaving her father with that monster and had been upset for some time to have lost Jack. *He has probably married some slip peasant woman who orders him around the house by now.* The thought of Jack being ordered around the fletcher's little house amused her nearly enough to smile before her thoughts once again grew dark. *Whatever my outcome now, I will not be Indoctus' queen, his puppet. I will not!*

Her years of slipping off to shoot arrows, or play hide and seek, or simply to talk to Jack were paying off. It seemed

no one had noticed her slip off from the castle. She moved quickly, donning a split riding skirt, light traveler's coat, and short brimmed hat. Her bow was strung, and she carried the six arrows in the quiver she had become so used to shooting. Her bag was small, but she had packed plenty of the one thing she knew would get her the farthest away from Petram, gold. Horseback would have been faster, but the knights could have tracked a horse more easily.

Alice was about two thirds of the way to the tired meadow; she wanted to see it one last time, when she heard the crunch, crunch of someone else walking in the woods. In an instant, she dropped and rolled behind a low, green holly bush. Her frustration at the prick of its leaves was cut short as she noticed the crunching sound intensify. It was not one person, but a group – no... an army! She laid flat and inched up underneath the bush, unfazed by the scraping of the holly leaves, her gaze focused on the line of men that were headed her way. There were other groups further into the woods as well. Each bunched together in tight lines. As the first line of men grew closer, she noticed how wretched their clothing was and that they were armed. Then, not 30 yards from her, the row of unfamiliar soldiers stopped and to her surprise, the one in the lead pulled back his hood revealing his dark green goblin head with high cheek bones, black hair and fat, round ears. *Goblins are supposed to be smaller than I am, these would make most of the knights seem small*, she thought. He spoke in a harsh tongue that Alice had studied some with her father from time to time. She could make out some of what he said. *Did he just ask for a mirror?* she thought. Their speaking was low and harsh as a few of them gathered around the leader of the column who seemed to be holding a small, square mirror that one of the soldiers had brought to him. Amongst the words spoken, she understood few of them but did indeed understand “disguises are working,” “daughter

of the Lord,” and “the young fletcher.” *...could they be talking about Jack and myself? Why –*

Her thoughts were cut short by a quick one-word shout from one of the creatures near the leader. As it took a few steps in her direction it spoke again and stood up tall, sniffing the air. A few more steps in her direction, the creature made another statement, this time with a tone of certainty. She considered knocking an arrow, but there were near 20 of them close and perhaps hundreds more in the distance. Just before she worked up the courage to jump up and run, an arrow flew straight through the chest of the large goblin closest to her. Then another near perfect shot dropped the next one back. The creatures quickly rallied, drawing their rusty blades.

“Run girl, get out of here!” Striding past her was the grizzled old knight who had found her so many times after wondering off too long, Sir Relish. Not looking in her direction his voice cracked once again as he drew the shining steel of his bastard sword and swung around the polished kite shield after dropping his bow. “Run girl, run!!!” His words turned into a battle cry as he charged forward. Alice launched up to her feet and began to run for the tired meadow. The brave shouts of Sir Relish, clanging of steel and the dog like growls of the creatures, was too soon relieved by a cry from the knight that was of pain instead of bravery. Her pace quickened, perhaps she had made 100 yards on them.

She spent the next moments moving quickly and silently and pausing here and there to see if she was still being pursued. It seemed after a while that she may have finally lost them as she started towards the clearing of the tired meadow. Intending to sprint through the exposed area, she picked up speed as she leapt through the tight knit oak branches at the field’s edge.

Chapter 5 "Found"

Jack sat on a small stool under the shed roof attached to the fletcher's old house, swinging a delicate hammer against an arrowhead and anvil. It was a hot summer day and the shade was most welcome, especially while forging broad heads for arrows. The city bustled with travel and commotion to the point where there was a crowd even on the city's edge, where his little house and shop stood. Many of the people were refugees from the west seeking shelter from the war. Many were traveling merchants from the east seeking to rip off the refugees. Some were well dressed and kept, while some who had barely escaped the fighting were dressed in wretched cloaks. There were a few royal knights present as well as Lord Rockhurst's Knights of Dallis. The goblin war had been going very sour for Lord Rockhurst. Rumor was that the goblin main army was only a day or two march from town.

Taking a breath and a break from the anvil, he thrust the arrowhead back into the small coal fire next to him with a set of polished tongs. As sweat dripped down on the tongs he remembered how over the years, the fletcher taught him this task amongst others. The fletcher never showed much love or patience with Jack but taught him everything a good father would have; he even left him as inheritor to his shop, business, and house, despite having blood relatives living closer to the Yarden Valley.

"Perhaps he did love me as a son, perhaps it was hard for him to think of my mother...to talk about something that would return her memory," he pondered out loud while staring into the hot coals.

“More pain can come from the mind than from the body,” a deep voice answered.

Looking up from his work Jack saw the large square framed priest. “Taisteal!” he blurted, surprised. The priest’s hard-set face refigured into a glowing smile as Jack stood dousing the hot steel into an oil pail and taking a firm handshake as greeting from the large man.

“I heard from a soldier that the fletcher passed. I’m sorry Jack.” A moment of silent reflection passed. “Take a lunch break with me, I have fresh fruit.” The priest said.

“Yes of course let me fetch some water and another stool...”
The two men set upon eating, talking, and watching the commotion of people going by in the street.

Jack could relate to the thought of finding it difficult to speak of someone. He had not seen Alice since the announcement that she was to marry the king’s son, Indoctus, nearly half a year ago. Considering he had done so at least weekly since he was a small lad; that strain had been as difficult as dealing with the fletcher’s death. Normally when there was a problem, she was the one he would confide in. Now in conversation with the priest, he felt like he was talking to an old friend and that was a welcome comfort. Taisteal always had a way about him that put Jack at ease. A large imposing man with a booming voice that carried weight like that of some high king from a story. Yet, his manner was always polite and calm, even when telling Jack about a spell or convincing the fletcher that knowing such a thing would be a good idea for his son.

“How long has it been, Taisteal? Does the war bring you here?” Jack asked pausing from his meal.

“It has been too long, 307 days to be exact; and no. The war is not why I have come. It is rather an unfortunate complication for many, including myself. Have you been practicing what we last discussed?” The priest answered and asked with a growing seriousness to his tone.

“Yes, and I have kept my mastery of it quite secret.” He answered.

“Mastery?!? My goodness, a good thing no one knows there is a master wizard among the magic fearing people of the Dallis,” the priest mused with only a hint of humor.

“Well, if I am not mistaken, Priest of the One, today there is,” Jack said pointing to the priest. Taisteal’s hard face warmed again to a small grin. “If not the war, then what brings you here?” Jack asked again.

“I have come for you. You are a man now and it is time you consider your destiny,” the priest spoke with a serious sincerity.

“My destiny? Is this going to be a long joke?” he responded wryly.

“No, I am sorry to not have told you sooner, but I had to be certain and still it is difficult to know for sure.” Jack’s attention was drawn in as the priest spoke. “We never spoke much of your mother or of faith in the One...there was much I agreed to withhold from you, and I am sorry for that.”

“What about my mother?” Jack interrupted.

The priest paused a moment before answering. “She did not have you Jack, she found you...in the place you call the tired meadow. She was never married before the fletcher; they moved here together that same year they found you.”

“Why was I never told?” Jack insisted.

“...You were not the only infant they found that day, Jack.
There was...”

A loud, haggard cry rang out amongst the crowd from a man. A royal knight, unarmored and in a tunic, fell face first across the street from the fletcher’s shop. A dirty, cloaked figure standing behind him had driven a rusty sword through his back. Several other cries of pain rang out from here or there.

The figure pulled back the hood of his cloak to reveal a green, high cheek-boned face with thick black hair, large round ears and bright blue eyes as panic erupted in the crowd.

“A goblin!?” Jack shouted while he stood grabbing his smithing hammer.

“No...” Taisteal spoke calmly with just a tint of anger while standing to his feet “...a hob-goblin. Grab a spear, Jack. Survival may require it.” The large priest strode out across the panicked crowd toward the creature. The hob-goblin gave a gravely smile as it pointed the sword at the unarmed priest and began walking to meet him in the street. “Coinnigh Duine,” the priest’s voiced boomed with authority as he clinched his left outstretched fist. The creature froze in place, unable to move and only able to show its immediate fear with its eyes. The priest stepped to meet the creature now towering over it by nearly a foot, taking his right hand and ripping the sword from its frozen grasp. With one quick motion he swung the sword through the neck of the goblin, beheading it, then released his clinched left fist. The hob-goblin fell limp and lifeless.

Jack was not able to take in all of what Taisteal was able to do. His attention was gripped by the clanging of steel and the shouting of a knight, as the knight quickly back pedaled toward the fletcher’s shop, while defending himself from two

hob-goblins. Wielding a sword and dagger, the knight moved skillfully as any man Jack had seen; however, the two intense faced hob-goblins advanced with growing severity until one caught the man with a sword strike to the left knee. Jack broke from his staring and scrambled to find an all wood spear. He found one and looked up to see the knight was on one knee just ten long paces away. One of the creatures was knocking the knight's sword from his hand, while the other drove his own rusty blade deep into the knight's neck and shoulder. Out of instinct, Jack threw the spear. It flew true and straight into the hob-goblin that was doing the killing. It was a fatal blow that landed dead center of the assailant's chest. Without hesitation the other creature pushed his impaled comrade to the ground and stepped over the fallen knight, toward Jack. As he backed up in fear to the edge of his shop, a rusty blade came twirling through the air landing deeply into the side of the hob-goblin. Looking across the street, he saw the priest standing with an outstretched hand. *The priest really knows how to fight...* Jack thought to himself before his thoughts bounced to Alice and became even more urgent.

The street in front of his shop had cleared. There were still citizens visible running out of town, and a few faces poking out of doors and windows from shops and homes across the street; however, the real noise and commotion was coming from further in town. The direction of the Rockhurst castle!

He quickly strode over to the downed knight and goblin retrieving his spear.

"You coming with me?" Jack asked as he began quickly toward the commotion.

"Wait Jack..." Taisteal spoke up, but Jack continued on toward the commotion, full of fear and adrenalin, realizing there were dozens of hob-goblins not 100 yards ahead in the street,

cutting people down indiscriminately. "Jack!" The priest's voice boomed once more.

"There are more ahead," his voice cracked as he looked back this time, noticing that the priest's eyes were glowing bright gold. The glow faded.

"She is not there, Jack," Taisteal said.

"How do you know?..." Jack spat.

"We can meet her in the field you played in as children if we hurry. She will be there soon," the priest answered.

"How do you – then, then we should hurry," Jack answered tightly.

"You know these woods better than I, Jack, lead on," the priest insisted.

Jack quickly ran for the wood line at the back of his shop. He was surprised at how easily the large older man matched his pace. He was more surprised that the priest seemed to know where Alice *would be*. *There is much more to Taisteal than there seems to be... has he been coming here all these years just to keep an eye on me? Perhaps not just me...not the only infant found... Alice?!?* Jack pushed the rambling of thoughts and questions out of his mind as he focused on pushing through the woods in the most direct path toward the meadow possible. Taisteal followed closely.

Chapter 6 "Reunion"

In the edge of the tired meadow it gave a small thud as Alice collided with a fast running Jack just on the other side of the tree's limbs. Both hit the ground scrambling to get back to their feet. She stood notching an arrow as Jack stood brandishing his spear.

"Alice!?" Jack shouted.

"Jack!!" She replied realizing it was indeed her best friend she had collided with, and the two sprang together in a tight hug.

A few feet following behind Jack, the large framed priest of the one came to a stop. From the priest Taisteal's perspective it was a bit comical to see Alice and Jack collide quite literally in the field they had spent so much time together in growing up. As they embraced one another he thought kindly over his time checking in on them over the years. His levity was quickly abandoned however as he picked up the steely suspicion in Alice's eyes as she stepped back from Jack, regaining her composure.

"What is he doing here, Jack?" she asked.

"I... I really don't know; but he knew you would be here now," Jack replied, stepping to face Taisteal alongside Alice. "You were just telling me about how I was found... before the attack began," Jack began asking Taisteal.

"Wait, there are goblins in the city as well?!?" Alice interrupted.

“An army of them – Did you say ‘as well?’ Is the castle under attack?” Jack replied.

“If not, it will be soon, there are plenty of them here in the woods not some hundred yards behind me. If Sir Relish had not intervened...” her words fell silent.

“He must have seen me leaving the castle...if I had not been leaving the castle, he would probably still be alive,” she thought out loud pausing for a moment.

“ ...You were leaving the castle?” Jack interjected.

Alice blushed a little and her mix of emotions was extended to Jack as well. His curiosity quickly became excitement at the thought of her not marrying Indoctus. Cutting the moment short, Taisteal spoke up.

“Hobgoblins, Lady Alice, not goblins. The difference is worse than simply their size, but their intellect. You have not gotten away from them yet.” His words drifted silent. Taisteal dropped to a knee. A crunching, marching sound was headed their way from the thick portion of the forest that Alice had come from. The other two dropped to a knee in the tall grass as well.

“Feoite titim,” the priest muttered. Over in the direction of the marching they could barely notice from the top of the tree canopy, a tree beginning to fall and crash through the woods. A chorus of growls and curses in their foreign tongue erupted from the woods. “They must have your scent. Hiding will not be an option,” Taisteal said calmly. “We must head west, together and quickly.”

“To Cole’s Crossing? That is where my father’s army is camped, we can warn them of the attack and march back to

town with them. It's only a day's ride by horse." Alice added regaining that icy strong composure that fit her well.

"Your father's army... I think the army..." Taisteal weighed his words with obvious caution.

"What of the army Taisteal?" Jack asked, now eyeing the older man nearly as suspiciously as Alice had.

"Yes, we go to Cole's Crossing. That is our best option." With that he sprung to his feet and headed in a jog to the far side of the meadow. Alice and Jack shared a look of confusion before following after him. "Pace yourself, young friends, this will be a race of endurance," Taisteal warned as they neared the woods.

The mild pace was nerve wracking for Alice and Jack for a while. Running through the flat wilderness of the Western Dallis they could hear their pursuers. An occasional look over the shoulder would reveal movement following them. The thickness of the forest aided their attempt at escape as much as it hindered. The beauty of the forest was a sharp contrast to the idea of what was happening back in Petram, or what would happen if they quit running. At one point early in the chase the hob-goblins drew near enough that Alice and Jack could have made out the creature's conversation amongst themselves had they understood their language better. After the first hour however, fatigue was setting in severely. It was easier to focus on one thing: Keeping up with Taisteal. After two hours, emotions and lulls would come and go. One minute there would be side spitting pain or sheer panic of the situation at large, and then they would find themselves distracted by the lush scenery in which they traveled. Ever still, Taisteal kept pushing forward, silently never looking back, somehow knowing Jack and Alice would follow.

Looking over his shoulder to not see any pursuit for the first time in hours, Jack spoke up. "I can't see them anymore, can you?"

"No... should we stop?" Alice asked in between the deep panting.

"We must not stop until nightfall." Taisteal said flatly without looking back. Jack and Alice shared another suspicious glance.

"How can you keep going so unaffected, Taisteal. Are you using a spell?" Jack asked.

"I know it's getting tough, lad, but this is necessary. We will be able to rest at nightfall," the priest answered again, not looking back and without any indication in his voice of fatigue.

"How did you end up with him in the meadow anyway?" Alice asked Jack, trying to lower her voice while maintaining their pace.

Jack's face grew as serious as it could while still puffing air in and out with great frequency, "He said he had come for me."

"For you?" Alice whispered in surprise. "Why?"

"Something about my 'destiny'...he said I was found as a child...in the tired meadow," Jack answered.

Alice took several long strides and then a short hop over a curved root while running nearer to Jack to ask, "Do you believe him?"

Jack answered, "I don't think he has ever lied to me. It might explain why he and the fletcher seemed like such old pals – Wait, why were you in the meadow? You said Sir Relish saw you leaving the castle...why?"

“I...Indoctus...Sir Relish died today, Jack. I am sure of it...” Alice answered trying to avoid bringing up more than she was ready to talk about.

“I am sorry Alice,” Jack replied allowing her the space to drop the topic.

“Keep up, only a little while longer ‘til dark,” The priest’s deep voice boomed through the forest still seemingly unaffected by the distance ran.

Closer to dark, the land began to roll with hills that had small streams in the valley of the hills not but inches deep. The sprawling, twisting hardwoods gave way to impossibly tall, straight trees with green needles and large combs hanging from their high limbs. Each time they came to a stream, Taisteal would travel up or down stream some distance before crossing. The stone and sand bottoms of the streams left little evidence of their crossing. Just as the last lights of day were vanishing, the land was getting exceedingly rocky. The large priest came around one such large ledge at the crest of a hill and stopped.

“We can rest here tonight,” he said still seeming as if they had not spent the majority of the day running through the woods.

The ledge facing the side of the hill in which they were traveling, west, stood about twice as high as the priest was tall. Jack and Alice both all but collapsed against the soft bed of fallen evergreen needles that had piled against the side of the rock-faced cliff. Exhaustion set in heavily on both.

Looking them over the priest said, “Stay here, I will keep a lookout until its completely dark.” Alice laid stretched out on her back seemingly ignoring the large man. Jack, leaning back against the stone cliff, gave Taisteal a breathless nod. The

large priest climbed up around one corner of the small cliff
looking back the way they had come.

After a moment had passed, she caught her breath and Alice
crawled over close to Jack sitting up next to him and began to
ask, "I overheard the goblins...or hob-goblins before they
spotted me in the forest."

"You understand their tongue?" he interjected.

"Very little, but I heard them talk about you and me, I
am sure of it. You said the priest had come for you?" Alice
answered and asked.

"Yes, but that has to be a coincidence of timing." Jack replied.

"It's not unwise to be suspicious, Lady Alice," the priest said
startling the both of them as he came and sat against the
same large rock about six feet from them. His large frame
cloaked in his tan robes took up about the same amount of
room as both Jack and Alice. Though he was as heavy of a
man as either of them had seen, he was well
proportioned. Even his head and jaw were large, and square-
figured beneath his short, neatly trimmed grey hair and
beard. As he sat, he snapped his fingers giving off the faintest
of green lights that began to fly about them. It was a firefly
whose light did not pulse but stayed lit.

"Then enough mystery, priest; what do you know about Jack
and about these...hob-goblins?" She asked, emphasizing a bit
of distaste for the creatures. He produced a plump, red apple
from within his cloak.

"You will have to split this one," Taisteal said.

"What about you, surely you need something to eat, old
man?" Jack asked trying to ease the tension.

“What about some answers, wizard?” Alice insisted.

“I will be fine Jack; I am used to the road, after all I am a wizard. Eat and I will give some answers,” he replied with his first smile since the tired meadow. The two began to eat as the priest began to explain. “I should have told both of you this long ago. However, Lord Rockhurst and the fletcher had grown very attached to you. Perhaps I had grown too attached to them.”

“My father barely knew you,” Alice interrupted.

“It was more that he *wanted* you to barely know me. He hoped that neither of you would be the children prophesied to open the door,” Taistal attempted to continue.

“The children who ‘open the door’ come from nowhere, priest; I have heard the silly prophesies of your religion,” Alice answered, getting a little louder than she intended. Jack just listened intently as the priest continued.

“That’s right, Alice...as I was trying to tell Jack before the attack, he was found as a babe in what you call the tired meadow, and he was not alone. The fletcher and his wife found two babes in the field that day. One of them was you Alice,” Taistal let a brief moment pass before continuing now with both of them fixated on his story. “I was visiting your father’s court the day they brought the two of you there to inquire whose you might be. We asked around discretely and when no missing children were reported, Lord Rockhurst decided to keep you, Alice, and allow the fletcher to keep you, Jack.” Jack and Alice looked quizzically at one another somehow feeling the truth of what the priest had said.

“Are you saying we are brother and sister?” Jack asked.

With a self-amused smile Taisteal answered, "No. Not if you are indeed the children of prophecy."

"That prophecy, along with your entire religion is a bit vague, how would you really know?" Alice objected, trying to focus on answers instead of diving into the thought of possibly being adopted.

"It is indeed vague, unfortunately vague. It is possible that you two are just very lucky orphans," Taisteal answered. "I am sorry to be the one to tell both of you this. I should have pushed your parents to do so long ago."

"Father..." Alice said abstractly as she thought.

To his internal embarrassment, Jack's thoughts kept rushing around the possibility of Alice being his sister. They did not look kin...

"None of this explains why those hob-goblins were looking for us," Alice mused.

"I think they would have pursued anyone to try and keep other armies from finding out," Jack answered.

"But still, I heard them describe us clearly before they spotted me," she continued.

The priest who had just shut his eyes to rest, snapped them open with surprise, turning to Alice, "You heard them mention you specifically? Or both of you?" the priest asked.

"Both of us," Alice answered a bit shocked by his excitement...or was it fear? It was a different demeanor from him all together.

Nervously he stood to his feet, "Try and get some sleep. I will keep watch for a while," Taisteal spoke with an uncharacteristic shake to his deep voice. He reached out

catching and clasping his hand around the false firefly
extinguishing the little light that flew about them as he turned
to climb back around to the ledge's top. Ordinarily they would
have found little sleep, but running all day made it easier to
fall asleep amidst restless thoughts of what could be going on
and who they really might be.

Chapter 7 "The Great Ghost's Call"

Indoctus stood wide-legged leaning heavily against his two-handed long sword that had the point buried in a prone, dead, hobgoblin. The fighting around Rockhurst Castle had been severe and lasted throughout the day. The strangest thing about the incident, beside the creature's organization and ferocity, was that when finally in the last light of the evening, just as the goblins were finally breaking into the castle and seemed to be on the verge of overwhelming the men, the goblins fled. Leaving the Castle and Knights as if some unseen force called them away. Breathing heavy and covered in blood and sweat, the prince surveyed the courtyard...the main gate busted and still burning. His knights that had accompanied him there lie dead with their bodies scattered about the courtyard, along with a dozen of Lord Rockhurst's men. Dozens more were the corpses of the goblins. Servants and a few surviving Rockhurst soldiers were scurrying about, putting out fires and tending to a few wounded, who still cling to life in the courtyard. Lord Rockhurst himself had been injured severely by an arrow earlier in the day. Indoctus had seen many injuries in his experience and knew not to expect Lord Rockhurst to survive the night.

Amidst the calming chaos and litter of bodies Indoctus' cold steel blue eyes spotted a small, peculiar mirror in the hand of one of the dead hobgoblins. Righting himself and pulling free his sword from the corpse, he stood and strode over the fallen hobgoblin and took the mirror. The shadows of the courtyard's fire all lay in the direction of the prince and the mirror. The shadows reached out along the ground long enough to touch the prince's shadow. In the midst of the commotion and buzz of the courtyard; the busy servants and

soldiers paid no attention to him as he looked into the mirror. At first, he saw himself, but just before he tossed the mirror back down to the ground, he notice his reflection dissipate and another face began to form. He reeled in surprise, pulling the mirror back closer to his own face.

The face in the mirror formed, revealing some ordinary looking fellow with straw colored hair, who said softly from the mirror, "I know that face, Indoctus...ready for a real position of strength?"

Chapter 8 "Coles Crossing"

Moving quietly back down from his perch at the top of the large stone that Jack and Alice had fallen asleep against, Taisteal nudged Jack gently.

"Wake up, we must be going," Taisteal said in as kind of a voice as he could make. The large man had often showed more emotion than what Jack commonly would have thought normal for a priest or cleric, but this was the first-time fear seemed to be present on him. His sense of urgency was palpable, and they roused themselves despite the soreness. It was still dark and was hard to say how long he had allowed them to stay asleep. The priest once again released the little firefly to allow enough light for them to slowly make their way through the ever-rockier terrain. Though neither spoke it aloud this new slow pace and the cool of the morning was a welcome change to yesterday's exhilarating romp through the countryside. They continued at a near slumbering pace with sore muscles and raw feet.

Near an hour passed before seemingly at once the sun crept up from behind them, revealing a misty clearing ahead of them. As they came out into the clearing, the muffled rumble of the Cole River was easily audible, and though a thick fog laid low across the ground, Jack and Alice could feel that the ground here in this little valley was solid stone.

"Cole's Crossing...we are here," Jack said quietly.

"Where are the knights?" Alice mused out loud as she began to pay sharper attention.

Taisteal paused only for a moment to turn and motion with a finger for both of them to stay silent before walking further out on to the stone shelf that formed on both sides of the

river. Cole's Crossing itself was a rock structure that formed a bridge, wide enough for two carts to pass over the river at once with a small clearing in the trees on either side. They had cut straight through the wilderness to get there where the old trade road ran all the way from Mon Dryadalis to the Yarden Valley. The bridge itself was about fifty yards long from east to west and though in times past had been a busy trade route between the dryads and humans; it was now rarely traversed by anyone. The formation was smooth and flat on top. The jagged underside of the bridge hung another fifty yards or so over the water below. The river cut deep through the hillside like an ancient flowing knife. The fog laid heavy over the bridge and seemed to be spilling off the sides. The river's slow rising mist all but hid the opposing bank.

The large priest lead the others out, though the heavy fog toward the bridge's center. Pausing to survey with great caution every few steps. Alice's steps sank into a thick substance.

Blood!! The thought leapt inside her mind as it was all Alice could do to keep the screaming thought from leaping out of her mouth as a shout. Soon after Jack noticed it as well. He jolted clasping his spear with both hands, frozen for a moment before he began to take another step. The entirety of the bridge was covered in blood. Some places where the stone top of the bridge concaved, it was pooled perhaps ankle deep. Yet, the whole rock bridge was covered crimson red. Taistael stopped suddenly. Jack and Alice followed suit as they all noticed a silhouette appear out of the mist on the opposite bank. Then another, then another. The priest remained locked in place, however when the other two looked around, other figures were gathering behind them.

A moment that felt much longer than it was, passed as the ever-rising sun was melting away the fog and mist of the early morning before one of the hobgoblins walked forward.

“Reinforcements,” the creature said in a voice they all understood, as it limped forward toward Taistéal before the other creatures erupted in a haggard chorus of laughter. “Ready to join your friends in the river, are you?” Closing in from both sides, it became more apparent at how hopelessly outnumbered the three were as they slowly backed toward each other in the center of the bridge.

“I do fancy a swim now and then,” Taistéal bellowed in reply with a deep indignant grimace. “Fight to our rear but stay in the middle of the bridge. You must survive a few moments on your own,” he whispered to his two young followers who had both backed right up behind him, wide-eyed.

Alice turned her frightful glance into a snarl, “Come on then!” She shouted as she nocked an arrow and fired it true landing in the green bare belly of an instantly dying and squealing hob-goblin.

The air of levity and bravado switched to chaos as the group of creatures began to shout and charge from both sides! Alice set loose another arrow, this one missing just wide of her target. Taistéal dropped to one knee and began muttering two himself. Jack bound forward a few strides sliding down on one knee to meet the charge as he drove his hickory spear through the gut of the leading hobgoblin. Another that ran close behind banged into the impaled creature, driving the spear all the way through the first and into the second, letting out a loud cry. Stumbling back to his feet, Jack abandoned the spear in the two bodies. He stepped back, feet sliding in the congealed blood over the rock below. He barely evaded one wild swing from the next pursuing beast when an arrow

swooshed through the creature's left eye, twisting its body limp to the ground. The next creature took an arrow in the shoulder that only managed to make it lose its footing for a moment. Another arrow this time placed in the same creature's neck. The whole lot of hobgoblins were slipping and sliding trying to rush to the three across the blood-soaked stone.

Taisteal's utterances grew louder and deeper, "Abhainn freagra ta mea, Abhainn freagra ta mea."

Alice's snarl quickly faded when she reached for her scabbard to grasp what was her last arrow while the creatures were all but to engulf them.

"Taisteal!?!!" Jack shouted trying to gather his footing enough to stand.

One bright green skinned beast that was bare chested and focused on Alice took a wild swing with a wooden club. A cry of pain unbecoming of the bravery he displayed in the moment, erupted from Jack as he intercepted and partially deflected the blow intended for Alice. His right forearm snapped like a sack with two twigs inside, under the force of the club. Another large creature rushed up and planted a firm stance right in front of the kneeling priest. Raising a rusty two-handed axe and letting out a roar of a battle cry before the stone bridge began to shake so violently that between the weight of the axe overhead and the slickness of the blood underfoot, it stumbled backward barely remaining standing. The shaking was so violent that loud cracking sounds could be heard throughout the bridge. Everyone but Taisteal was quaked down to their hands and knees. The only thing that could be heard over the thunderous banging and ripping of limbs from trees that had begun to fall on both sides, was the booming voice of the priest.

Finally, he stood and shouted a final phrase in a voice that made all clasp their ears and was felt like a crashing wave in their chests, "Ta mae ban uisce!"

White water erupted straight up in two columns near the north side of the bridge and began to spin like cyclones, each as big in diameter as Jack's little house back in Petram. The cyclones moved across the bridge on both sides of the three, sweeping a host of hobgoblins over the south ledge down into the river. After a moment, the two columns of swirling water fell back down into the river, and all felt quiet and still. A longer moment passed for Jack and Alice as their amazement subsided. For Jack, pain quickly came to the forefront of his thoughts as he looked down at his obviously broken arm. It began to tremble and was twisted nearly ninety degrees in the wrong way. Taisteal was still scanning the area intensely looking at the surviving hobgoblins who had not made it out on to the bridge when the water spirals swept across. The creatures stood surprised and halted on either side of the bridge. Then the Large priest gazed up into the sky looking for something else. He let go a heavy sigh.

"Where are the knights?!?" Alice finally spoke up, "... And how in the divines did you do that?" Taisteal seemingly ignoring her, continued searching the sky.

"A spell Alice," Jack said in a shaky voice, "...An unbelievable spell."

Not holding long to her amazement, she turned to Jack, "Your hand!... What do we do?"

"Lady Rockhurst," a smooth but elevated voice sounded from the eastern bank. At the sound of the eerily familiar voice, all the pins and needles of pure panic rushed upon Alice. Through the crowd of green-skinned creatures that parted willingly and without attacking, Indoctus with his sword

drawn, rode his grey steed out onto the bridge and dismounted about eight paces from the three. "I'll take you back...safely." He stood there with his face hard set as a rampart and his armor splattered with day old blood. His black with gold trimmed cape fluttered behind him in the mist and breeze from the river below.

Alice stood in her now soaked garments and asked tentatively, "Why are the creatures not attacking you?"

"Have you learned nothing in these last couple days? I always negotiate from a position of strength," he responded coldly as the surviving hobgoblins began to slowly and cautiously encroach out onto the bridge, this time eyeing the large priest with fear and caution.

"What about Taisteal and Jack?" she asked regaining some composure while Jack managed to stand wincing in pain. Indoctus stood there expectantly with his left fist tightly clinched around the small, square mirror, his right still masting his sword.

"Just you. That's...part of our arrangement...the arrangement your father made," he answered adding more poise to his words and directing them to Alice.

"Where is my father?" Alice asked frantically.

"He is safe back in Petram," he answered. Something terribly off putting about his demeanor was becoming apparent to Alice. Something worse than even the night atop the walls of her father's castle. His eyes always seemed cold and demeaning but now there was a wildness to them that was superiorly frightening. Before she could inquire further, she felt the large hand of the priest rest easy on her shoulder.

“Interesting mirror,” Taistéal stated. “Who exactly was this arrangement made with, prince?”

Indoctus glanced down at the mirror before a manic but assured grin filled his face as he put the mirror away under a plate of armor on his chest. Drawing a long, narrow dagger with his left hand while he answered, “I bet you know.”

Taistéal’s face displayed a brief panic before he composed himself like a strike of lightning, yelling a phrase that slid into silence as the world around the three of them became like a bright white vapor. For a moment Jack and Alice had the feeling of falling into pure light, then it sated as they found their footing in what felt like a soft bed. The world around the three of them seemed to be paused in place. Even Indoctus’ cape and steed behind him seemed frozen in place.

Turning to the two, Taistéal spoke swiftly and seriously, “You will have to jump into the river. I will hold them.”

“Your mad!” Alice replied.

“The water is deep enough; you must follow the river southwest to Yarden. Speak only to the Golden Paladin there named Arturius. Tell him I am sending you to the door.”

“There is no door in the mountain!” Alice protested.

“What about you!?” Jack interjected.

“And what about my father?!?” Alice added.

“We will all have to take our chances. Regardless of your beliefs Alice, evil is after you and you are the children prophesied to open the door,” Taistéal said. “I can’t hold this pocket dimension for long. I am growing weak from the strain; we have only seconds. You’re going to have to choose to trust me or him,” he continued pointing toward Indoctus.

Her face glowed with anger at the thought of going with the prince. "If I survive, I will meet you along the way and tell you everything I know." At his words, Alice's face softened. She realized that there must be more truth than deceit in a man that was seemingly going to die to protect them. "I am sorry I had not figured this out for sure sooner...or told you sooner, but you must hurry!" Taistéal insisted.

"Thank you," Jack said sobering up from the pain of his broken arm as he took Alice's hand with his undamaged left hand and took a step toward the ledge.

"Where will you meet us...and my father?" Alice asked giving somewhat of a warm but sorrowful look to Taistéal.

"I don't know..." Taistéal replied with a touch of defeat in his voice as he looked back to the foe frozen in time.

"We will find this Arturius." Alice stated gaining composure.

"And I will find you along the way; now go!" Taistéal said regaining the usual confidence in his deep voice.

The two took their leap over the side of the cliff and just as they hit the water that had seemingly frozen in place with the rest of the world, the same white light falling feeling washed over them again. It was quickly ended by the cold, turbulent flow of the river water around them. Holding onto Jack tightly after a few rolls underneath the surface in the cold water, Alice kicked hard to the surface and their heads bobbed out above the fast-flowing water. The current carried them swiftly away.

In an instance the world was back to moving as normal. Only Jack and Alice had vanished. Indoctus' face was like embers of rage as he glared around frantically before resting his gaze on Taistéal, who stood there calmly but seemingly drained.

“Where are they? You wizards cannot cast spells continually!”
Indoctus growled without his usual polish.

“I’m sure there is something to torture it out of me back in
Petram,” Taistea responded with all the forced humor he
could muster while putting his wrist together in a gesture of
surrender.

“Of that I am sure you are right, old man,” the cold-faced
prince replied, sheathing his dagger, and fetching the little
mirror back out from his armor. The hobgoblins surrounded
them both, seizing the priest.

THE END OF PART 1

AN INTERLUDE INTO THE PAST

(Part 2 begins on page 91)

It was a hot, busy day in the city of Petram. The city streets were a mad dash of refugees fleeing into the town from the nearby villages and farms. The Single Moat was not exempt from all the commotion. At nearly twice what would be comfortable for the little three-story pub and inn, it was packed to say the least. The barkeep and the wait staff were running full speed between all the customers. In the tightly packed and mostly dark first floor, their chief concern was finding customers who could actually pay. They had taken to cooking outside over open fires and keeping only the minimal number of sconces lit inside because of the summer heat. The exposed framework with thick thatch and plaster walls usually were a welcome comfort, but between the crowd, summer heat and nearly no breeze, the Single Moat felt like an oven.

Below in the dark cellar filled with kegs of ale and barrels of wine, was one of the few places around that was cool. The crowd above could only lightly be heard until the door opened.

“Bibliomane, Bibliomane, are you down here?” Rita called out standing halfway down the stairs into the cellar in her usual displeased and hefty voice. “...If he doesn’t show up before night fall, I’m keeping half today’s earnings for myself and saying the migrants must have stolen drinks...some proprietor he is...” the thick set woman huffed to herself as she turned to walk back up the stairs closing the door behind her.

After it was clear she was gone, a small, clay bowl was raised revealing the light from an oil lantern and the pub’s owner, Bibliomane, reclining on a sack of rice perched between two wine barrels with a multitude of books stacked atop one of the barrels. “That was lucky, I think I’ll go up to

count earnings though...in a minute...or maybe an hour," the thin, middle-aged man thought to himself as he sat the lantern on one of the barrels next to him. Opening the old leather-bound book that laid in his lap, his focus was drawn in on the ornate handwritten marks of the old dwarven tongue that had been penned some one hundred and fifty years ago.

"The Typhoon Council"

Recorded by Korin Stonefinder

Chapter 1: "A Ship Under Water"

My bunkmate, one named Ulfrick Del Hoggins, struck me as an honest enough man from the beginning. Perhaps a bit arrogant, but certainly that is common for a human. However, this other traveler aboard the ship, Danzig, there was something off about him from the beginning. He must have been intoxicated in every interaction we had so far, yet he seemed more comfortable deep under the ocean's surface in the little submersible wooden ship, than even myself. I remember clearly that last morning as we arrived on Rauthlous Island.

"A gracious morning to you, master dwarf." Ulfrick greeted me in his usual boisterous, albeit cordial, way.

"Good morning. I see you're putting on your armor today," I replied. Ulfrick was half dressed from the waist down in his heavy mix of polished plate pieces and chainmail, with his other pieces strowed across the tight wooden room with two bunks on each side.

“Indeed! Today is the day we make landfall, and I am going to be prepared for whatever Rauthlous has in store for us,” he replied.

For a moment I was distracted as some sea water leaked into the cabin from the deep blue through a crack in the one small, round porthole window in our room. The water seemingly evaporated into nothing before the bead of water hit the floor. The truth was that I had indulged more heavily in my books than usual that week at sea to help pass the time in the wooden box, gliding through the deep water. I was happy to have escaped the six mast ships of The League of Nations, but eager to see the sky again.

“That’s good...I fear that preparation will include more eggs,” I replied.

“For sure, let’s get to them before the drunk tries to dry himself up with more than his share,” he quipped while speeding up the process of donning his articles of war.

We exited our room, stepping into the now familiar but cramped hallway of the ship. The few crew members aboard were already awake and scrambling up and down the one main ladder in the center of the hall. They seemed to be making preparations of some sort. One crew member dressed in long black robes, Ingrid I think his name was, came out of the door to the rear of the ship.

“Your friend’s already dining,” he mentioned in a dry wheeze while sliding by Ulfric and I in the hall to get to the ship’s ladder and descend.

Heading into the mess room, we were greeted by this Danzig.

“My fast friends. My kindred refugee spirits...” he said with a loud burp before continuing, “...come! Join me for breakfast

eh,” he spouted in his seemingly forced and heavy accent I could not place. I still to this day never found out if the way he spoke was real or a cover.

“Indeed, we have, friend. Where are the chairs?” Ulfric replied, noticing as I did that the chairs and small tables all aside from the one holding the eggs, ale, and pitcher of water affixed to the back wall of the mess room, were gone.

“One of those barefoot ship hands already battened them away somewhere. The fellow said surfacing would be more turbulent than diving,” Danzig said while taking a swig from a mug undoubtedly filled with ale. “I bet you’re going to miss being down here in the deep, eh, Korin? A lot like being under ground?” he continued.

“Not all dwarves live underground,” I replied. The three of us awkwardly went about getting breakfast.

Perhaps more awkward than usual due to the lack of chairs, but especially once Ulfric asked, “So it’s obvious why a couple men..., or persons of the faith...” gesturing to me and himself, “...are not welcome where the League of Nations holds sway. Why again are you a... refugee, Danzig?”

Danzig sat down his mug and eyed us both quite seriously before spinning around planting his feet wide and collapsing his hands to a tight, double fist. When he opened his hands a small flash of fire emanated from his palms and quickly extinguished.

“Because no one with the arcane touch are welcome in The League of Nations,” his poise quickly left him. He paused, held up one hand and leaned his head over. After a gaging sound or two he spewed a wretched mix of regurgitated eggs and ale across the floor between the three of us. “I think all the motion has gotten to me,” he continued. I include this only to

share the burden of my situation on this journey through the sea in a coffin they called a ship.

Soon enough I endured my final frustration in the Ocoee as it rushed and jolted up to the surface. I was second up the ladder to the deck behind one crew member. The light was intensely bright as my eyes adjusted. The fresh breeze of the ocean felt kind against my skin. I looked around seeing the marshland quickly approaching ahead of us. The Ocoee glided more swiftly along the choppy ocean surface than it cut through the deep. Dead ahead was the mouth of a large lazy river dotted by small fishing vessels, with only a few large enough to boast a mast and sails. Just on the north bank of the river sat what appeared to be a large stone and white bones sticking up like stumpy ribs. As we got closer, it became obvious that we had indeed reached the teak wood buildings and imposing fort of Rauthlous' namesake and Capital.

As I noticed the two long, stone piers reaching out to greet us, with green cloaked soldiers dotted along them, I sighed with relief, "We have made it."

"Only to the other side," remarked Danzig. Looking over at him who had joined me atop the deck, I noticed his gaze fixed behind us. Far in the distance, at the far edge of what I could see, sat a row of large ships with crimson red sails going out of sight to both the north and south – the blockade of the League of Nations – the reason why this submersible ship was our only hope for escaping the mainland. They sat looming out in the ocean. Approaching the busy pier, I couldn't help but feel a sense of déjà vu from the last city I had been in. In Port Aequor I was besieged on all sides by land. Here, on this island, I would be besieged on all sides from the ocean.

Chapter 2: "A City of Stone and Teak"

Soon we were off the ship and onto a crowded pier. There was only a brief inspection of refugees like us flooding down the two piers to see if each person coming onto the island was indeed a mage or person of some religious persuasion. Over the bustle of the crowd, discharges from weak evidential spells from other refugees rang out, echoing off the water. Barefoot dock hands worked diligently unloading crates from the Ocoee and other ships. Amidst it all, I noticed two distinct things: Danzig used the exact same simple fire spell he had shown us on the ship as proof for the inspector, and the exquisitely unique construction of the pier we walked along. The pier and the large fort just to our south were of the same construction. Both structures were like one huge piece of stone, carved or molded like clay in a giant's hand to the shapes they now held. The work of some old magic. Perhaps the legends of Rauthlous being an ancient forgotten Dryadalis kingdom held some truth. The large black tubes, some called cannons, sat above the walls of the fort. According to rumor, they were one of the reasons the League of Nations Navy had decided to simply blockade Rauthlous rather than invade the small island. I had never seen one "fired" but was both fascinated and hesitant to see for myself if they were as powerful as rumored.

"Well since we are short of coin after the good captain so charitably took ours in exchange for getting us out of Port Aequor, how about we look for some work? I still think three is better than one for people in a new land. What say you?" Ulfrick asked turning to the two of us after getting out of the crowd of people that surrounded the first city block or so from the port.

"I agree. There is strength in numbers, and I would rather have coin to pay for a meal and a dry bed than hunt in the wilderness," I replied. The seemingly buzzed man made all

inclinations of being disinterested in our conversation as he studied our surroundings.

“Danzig? Danzig??” Ulfrick insisted for an answer.

“We’ll see,” he replied flatly.

“Ok...” Ulfrick answered before attempting to flag down a couple locals passing by in the cobble-stoned street. The first few looked at the three of us all carrying weapons, and two of us heavily armored, and scrambled on with little more than a head nod. Before long though, one barefoot and barrel-chested man heading to the docks with a corker sack thrown over his shoulder stopped.

“You three are certainly fresh off a boat,” the man stated, plain-faced.

“Indeed we are and freshly low on coin as well. Where would three able-bodied persons such as ourselves find work to make some well-earned wages?” Ulfric asked with even more polish than usual. He paused for a moment stroking his thick brown beard with his free hand.

Looking us over and noticing our weapons and then the two of our holy symbols dangling around our necks the man replied,

“Captain Roley with the city guard hires out mercenaries occasionally...and with the recent vanishings...I would go talk to him.”

“Vanishings?” Danzig interjected.

“Yeah, vanishings,” the man replied.

“Locals or refugees?” Danzig continued.

“I... I really don’t know. No one I know, but it’s the talk of the town,” he answered.

Ulfric spoke up asking, "Ok. Where do we find this Captain Roley?"

"Right down this here street, inland 'til it runs into the wide road that runs north and south out of town. The barracks is a stone building on the south corner. Can't miss it."

"Much obliged Mr..." Ulfric politely responded fishing for a name.

"...Ray," the man replied after giving a quick head nod and started to walk towards the pier.

Ulfric took the chance as he seemed to every time a chance to introduce himself was presented, "Well I am Ulfric "The Stick" Del Hoggins and these are my two compatriots, Master Korin Stonefinder and Danzig." The man turned back to listen only briefly while continuing on his way, now with a puzzled look.

As we walked along the main road toward this barrack building to find Captain Roley, there was an air of tension in the city. Locals had thick drawn-out accents and dressed in very simple clothes that were often sleeveless or short in the legs. Many of the men that fished or worked the docks or pier went barefoot along the cobbled stone street. Most refugees stood out as sorely as we did, and the streets seemed more crowded than they were built to be. While there were several guardsmen out near the pier, we only saw one walking through town. There were, however, two tall men walking slowly and confidently clad in full plate armor, in town surveying the street. Each had a drab grey cloak that stood in sharp contrast to their meticulously polished armor. Perhaps these were the famed Knights of Rauthlous I had heard so much of. However, the teak wood structures were most fascinating to me. Many newer buildings ...

....

Bibliomane looked up from the book shaking his head.

“How slow can this man write?” he protested out loud as he began to scan down through the text. *In the midst of the War of Freedom with the League of Nations and he is writing about what the buildings were made of...* the old man thought as he scanned through the ornate text. “There!” he spouted as he found something that caught his interest.

....

Ulfric lead the conversation again, but the points that stuck in my mind were that the city guard was indeed spread thin, and that three people had gone missing over the last three days. All the disappearances had occurred at night, and all around a place called “The Stilts.” “These were a series of docks on the south side of town just behind the fort and along the river, which I learned to be called...

Bibliomane let out a heavy sigh and began scanning ahead until he came to the next chapter.

....

Chapter 3: “Night in the Marsh”

We were quickly about our business the next day surveying the series of docks known as “The Stilts”. The docks closest to River Street had a series of pergolas and gazebos, under which many different vendors and sellers stationed their goods. As with most of the town, there were far more people than what the place was designed for. Many refugees had taken to catching shellfish and cutting seaweed in effort to acquire something worth trading. Their situations were very dire, and I suppose so was mine. Yet some fine items were available such as silks and kegs of lager that had been cold fermented in sealed barrels on the ocean floor. One

Dryadalis vendor had an assortment of weapons, mostly fine daggers. It was this elf, named Kelnear, if memory serves me, that told us about Homer, a local who was telling stories about a monster grabbing people off the docks. According to Kelnear, Homer was the town dunce and spent most of his time waiting on a handout around the fish markets.

Further down the docks out from the markets, "The Stilts" eventually all curved together and made one long walkway out across the wide marsh before stopping at the main flow of the river. The marsh was the largest I had ever seen! Stretching several miles across and following the river inland on both sides. Far inland past the marsh, some gentle green mountains could be spotted. Across the river the marsh dominated by grass and grey mud, went as far as the eye could see. The view of the ocean was dominated by the river's delta and the stone fort capped off with its massive black steel cylinders, called cannons.

About two thirds of the way down this larger single dock, we came upon a man matching Homer's description, sitting on the edge of the walkway. A slightly pudgy human man, with balding red hair and cheap clothes. His feet dangling off the edge of the walkway barely touching the tops of the marshland's tall grass, he stared into the distance of the marsh.

"Good morning. You would not happen to be the man named Homer would you?" Ulfric asked. The man looked at us with cloudy, plain blue eyes and nodded his head.

"Hom...Homer," he responded and patted his chest.

"Ok...well, we heard you saw yourself a big ole monster," Ulfric elaborated quite patronizingly.

Putting both hands up mimicking claws, Homer replied, "Rwarr...M...Mon...Monster. Grabbing the m...mmm...man off the dock."

"Grabbing a man off this dock, Homer?" Ulfric asked.

Homer simply nodded his head and went back to looking back out across the marshland. We all looked in the direction he stared. A couple miles along the river in the middle of the marsh, on the city's side of the river, was a small knoll with a few trees dotting the landscape. Homer held his gaze not looking away. There was something about him that made me uneasy. He certainly seemed slow in the mind but there was something about him that felt dishonest. An awkward moment of silence passed.

"Well, thanks for helping us, Homer," Ulfric said before walking a few steps further down the dock. Ulfric took in hand the symbol that swung from the necklace around his neck. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths, letting the warm, salty breeze flow past as he focused.

"Sense anything?" I asked.

"What are you going to sense with your eyes closed?" Danzig interrupted.

"Anything divine, or anything overly vile, or..." Ulfric paused looking back to Homer opening his eyes. Homer looked back at us and then back to the marshland. "Undead!" spat Ulfric.

He cast his gaze back to the marsh, intensely back in the direction of the little knoll. "I think Mr. Homer here is telling the truth, guys," my armored friend stated as he cocked one eyebrow, giving me a look of excitement and concern.

"Can you pinpoint its location?" I asked. He pointed to the ominous little dot of trees in the marsh.

“In that direction...cannot tell the distance,” he answered.

“Undead? Like a mummy?” Danzig asked sarcastically.

“Something like that,” Ulfric mused back.

“And you can tell by holding your necklace?” Danzig continued with suspicion or scorn; I could not tell.

“People of his faith can sense such things. I have long read about it,” I answered.

“Oh good, you can read, and you had a feeling. We will find a monster in no time,” Danzig continued.

“So, you agree about a monster but scoff at the term undead. Seems a bit inconsistent to me,” Ulfric argued.

“Whatever,” Danzig banted back and continued, “Are we really going to track through the mud and sawgrass on the account of your feelings now?”

“You have a better lead?” Ulfric responded, “I’m all ears for a better plan if you have one to pour out of that bottle of yours...”

“There is a boat pulling up,” I interrupted. The three of us dropped the banter and approached the end of the dock. A river skiff too small for a sail was docking with two fishermen aboard. This end of the dock out on the edge of the main run of the river was empty, aside from us and the two fishermen who were now eyeing us suspiciously as they tied off their craft. The river, especially the delta, was dotted by other small fishing vessels. Looking further out to sea, the reminder of why I was here dotted the horizon. Each ship of the League of Nations blockade stood guard, flying a large red flag.

“Good morning gentlemen. How much for a boat ride a little way upriver?” Ulfric asked.

Tying off a sack filled with fish the older of the two spoke up, "See how low we are sitting in the water?" The vessel's edges were only a few inches out of the water and began to rise as a couple sacks of fish were tossed onto the dock.

"I do," Ulfric realized.

"My skiff here is no good for five grown folk. Sorry," the man continued as he was helping the other man tie off a couple sacks of fish. "Later in the day I am sure one of the larger vessels will be willing to take on passengers for a short tour," he continued before Ulfric asked.

"Well, perhaps we could rent your skiff for the day. I have experience with ships and by the look of it, you guys have been out most of the night."

"Or perhaps we could just take it," Danzig interjected. The older man stood straight up like a cat that just heard a dog bark. Ulfric and I each gave Danzig less than satisfied glances before he continued while placing a very calm hand on my shoulder. "Surely you know Captain Roley? You seem to be a local." The man slowly nodded as Danzig continued. "We are on official business of the city guard investigating the missing people. As I said, we could take your boat. You could run to the guard only to find out I am telling the truth and get nothing, or you can let us pay you to 'rent' it now." The older man eyed us, then the younger lad in the boat with him, and took a brief second to look around finding only the five of us within some considerable distance on the end of the dock.

"I guess it's a deal...but I would like to verify with the guard; what are your names?" We exchanged names and a few coins and were soon shoving off on the little vessel. I was coppers away from being broke at this point! A far cry from what life had brought me to expect up until this point.

“That was impressive for someone so well along in the drink,”
Ulfric mentioned to Danzig while we each took positions on
the ship.

“Well, I got us the boat. Now you lead us to your feeling,”
Danzig replied sarcastically. Ulfric took the rutter as Danzig
and I set into rowing. The current was near still as the tide
was coming in slowly. “How well can you swim in that
armor?” Danzig asked me while rowing along.

“Hardly at all,” I answered while eyeing the black brackish
water. “I am not sure what would be more dangerous, trying
to swim in it or fight without it...” I remember pondering
aloud.

“Have a lot of experience with heavy armor, Danzig?” Ulfric
chimed in.

“I have a lot of experience watching people in heavy armor die
when they make bad decisions,” Danzig replied in a dark
serious tone.

“Is that so?” Ulfric continued. “Sounds almost like a threat.”

Danzig stopped paddling for a moment and leaned over,
sticking his ore down into the river as deep he could until his
arm extended down elbow deep in the dark water. It was well
deep enough to drown in.

“Looks threatening...” Danzig replied with a bit of levity this
time. We sat in the boat coming to stop while we paused
paddling all together for a moment.

“I think the drunk has a good point,” I said matching his relax
in tone and began taking the heavier bits of my armor off. My
paladin friend reluctantly did the same.

After some time of hard paddling, we made it up the river and up a small water way about a thousand feet from the small cluster of trees. I will avoid the details of how difficult we found it to beach the boat in the narrow water way with barnacle covered mud and tall sawgrass. Suffice it to say I was quickly soaked and filthy. Taking another moment, Ulfric confirmed that the feeling was still coming in the direction where the small knoll of land was. Of course, it was Danzig who most protested the trudge through the deep, dark mud and grass but I believe it was I who was most out of my element. For one, we had decided it best to leave the bulky armor in the boat, carrying mostly just shields and weapons. Beyond that, the grass was taller than I, severely limiting my visibility. At times as we trudged through the marshland toward the trees ahead, there would be a small slew of water to cross. Between the mud and water, I was several times up to my neck in muck with the grass going up again twice as tall!

As we carefully and quietly approached the edge of the knoll, the soil got firmer, despite it being covered by about a foot of water. The sawgrass grew more sparsely around its edges as well, allowing better visibility, at least up to the edge of the trees that had their bases surrounded by plenty of bushes and shrubs. The trees were a mix of tall thick barked evergreens and a couple sprawling wide, low trees with small green leaves. Only about a dozen in all, this little knoll was barely larger than a modest farmhouse. We stopped about 80 feet from the trees' edge crouching while Ulfric again took a moment with his medallion. He stood quickly looking back over the two of us in the way we came with axe and shield at the ready. A wild look was on his face. Danzig quickly but calmly turned and drew his thin double-sided blade. My mind poured over the different incantations I had spent so much time memorizing. I knelt there motionless, looking, and

listening. The only sound was the gentle rustle of the grass in the soft breeze.

“Well?...” Danzig posed a question while holding his attention to the narrow path in the grass we had left behind us.

“It’s behind us and close,” Ulfric stated.

“Who is hunting who?” I stated.

“Let’s fall back to higher ground,” Ulfric replied.

We kept a diligent watch while moving up into the foliage on the knoll and thankfully onto dry, sandy ground.

“Bones,” Danzig stated. In the center of the knoll, a small clearing no bigger than a den with a tall, straight tree in the center showed signs and tracks of a large creature that had been rummaging about. Amidst a strown assortment of humanoid bones stripped clean and bloody, ripped clothes, Danzig found a small satchel with a few coins in it. “I take it back Ulfric, your feeling has led us to a monster,” the spindly man added.

“Indeed. And I have no intention of joining the contents of that pile. One of you keep watch. The other help me prepare,” Ulfric confidently stated gathering himself from the feeling of being trapped and focusing on the task at hand. We quickly set in, making a few staves from small trees and cutting a few bushes. We pulled them to the edge of the knoll and the marsh, setting up a thick mesh of bramble and palisade-like stakes to our rear and flanks. Danzig took a place about 15 feet up the tall evergreen tree that stood a few feet behind us. The waiting began.

The mid evening sun gave way to evening and the sun began to set. The evening had been spent anxiously waiting with only a few words spoken after setting defenses and getting into position. I began to wonder if our plan to wait it out was a foolish one. Going back through the marsh in the dark with this unknown creature lurking in the sawgrass seemed insane.

“To our left. I hear it,” we heard Danzig whisper just loud enough for us to make him out. A quick tense moment passed. I heard a small twig snap.

“It’s close...do you see it?” I asked Ulfric quietly.

“You can strike it from a distance, yes?” he asked softly and seriously.

“I can,” I replied. I watched a bit surprised as he stood and slowly began out from our hedge of spikes and bramble. He slowly entered the edge of the marsh in front of us holding his axe overhead, ready to strike hard.

Draoidheachd diúracán repeated in my head. I was ready.

Right as Danzig began to yell out a warning, a louder squelch belted out from the marshland as not 10 feet beside Ulfric burst out a wild, fast, long beast! I watched in shock as it closed the distance in a stride and was driving Ulfric to the ground. Its two distortedly long, clawed hands slashed across his shield. It was like a man but taller, thinner, and dark. The dying evening light barely framed the creature while it slammed and clawed at my companion who barely managed to keep his shield in his hand, and between himself and the beast. To my shock a glint of light passed by me as a dagger twirled though the air and sank into the creature’s side. It screamed like a screech owl as it frantically turned and saw Danzig in the tree. The paladin took the distraction and swung his axe laterally with all his might, but the tall figure ducked

the blow and lunged past both me and my defensive cluster, up the tree after Danzig. I saw a splatter of red as the creature already halfway up the tree to Danzig caught his leg with one claw.

“Korin!!” I heard Ulfric yell out and I snapped out of my surprise, drawing focus on my training and studies.

“Draoidheachd diúracán!!” I shouted standing, holding both my palms open and at my sides. The familiar diamond shaped darts of intense blue light left my hands, three in all, and swirled wickedly though the air as they slammed into the creature. It lost its grasp and began falling from the tree. An old dryad curse flew from the mouth of Danzig as he, to my surprise, leapt from the tree falling on top of the creature just as it was landing on the ground. Rolling off the creature onto his knees, he drew his rapier with outrageous speed and drove it deep into the dark center of the beast. By now Ulfric had closed the distance on the wildly thrashing creature, this time bringing his axe down into the creature hard. It winced only for a moment. With one foot, it kicked at Ulfric slashing his left leg and then clung to it like a talon. With one hand, it reached out grabbing and gorging Danzig’s gut. Standing with the other leg, it dragged both my companions to the ground next to it, rising tall like a pitch-covered distorted statue. I took a few steps forward drawing the creature’s gaze and grabbed the chamber stick shaped emblem around my neck as...

A loud thud and haggard yell came from above as Bibliomane jumped, nearly falling off his perch on the sack of rice he had become so comfortable on. Another crash followed by a crowd of panicked screams. His heart raced as he was

snapped back to the present and out of his reading. *Too serious for a bar fight...* he thought. His wondering was interrupted by the door above bursting open with something – no someone, tumbling down the stairs! He quickly snuffed out the oil lantern he was using to read. The door above shed dim light down the stairs and across the far end of the room from Bibliomane. The screams continued above as a thick green bare-chested figure filled the doorway with a dark sword drawn. Bibliomane sat in the darkness, terrified, not making a sound with only darkness between him and the sweaty, bloody hobgoblin at the top of the cellar stairs. The blood on the creature was bright red and he knew enough about goblins to know that their blood was not red! It sniffed the air. The room was rich in the smell of wines and ales. It spirted off a conceitful sounding remark in a gruff language the store's proprietor did not understand before it turned to leave, rejoining the sounds of chaos above.

Bibliomane sat still for a moment before he quietly crept over toward the body that had tumbled down the stairs. It was Rita! The panic that had ensued since being disrupted from his book had caused a cold sweat to break out, but now the sweat was being joined by tears. Guilt passed through his mind. He should have been helping at the bar instead of hiding away with his book. He nearly smirked despite the turmoil as the thought occurred to him in the form of Rita's scolding. He owned the pub. However, if you had only seen their interactions at the bar; you could have easily mistaken it to have been the other way around. The rush of emotions was quickly overcome by fear as another death cry and crash could be heard above. He slinked back into the shadows. *If I had been upstairs that would have been me*, he thought to himself. It had been a long time since he had truly been afraid. Now memories of his days as a subscribed Dallis foot soldier were returning. He had first learned to cook in a

makeshift mess hall on a now dead king's campaign into the dragon men's desert. *If I survived them, I can survive this*, he thought. He knelt in the darkness watching the door and waited. The sounds of panic and turmoil were moving away. After a few moments he thought, *Now's my chance. While the fighting is still new*. He moved quietly and daftly with far more poise and grace than most would imagine the "old book worm" capable. He put one hand on Rita's and paused only a moment before ascending up the stairs. The bar and common room were empty and trashed. Only a few bodies and even one dead hobgoblin remained.

Peeking outside, the heat and bright light of the sun beat down heavy as his eyes adjusted. He surveyed the dirt street through one of his windows. He noticed only the late fletcher's son heading into the woods the far side of the street with some large, grey cloaked man. *Is that the Priest of the One with him?* He puzzled in his mind. The street seemed empty. He swiftly moved out through the front door in the light for just a moment before pressing himself into the little alley between the Single Moat and the next building, just further toward the heart of town on the same side of the street. The morning sun cast long shadows that went from his building to the next, cloaking his position in darkness relative to the bright street. He noticed a few knights, some hobgoblins, and some refugees he didn't recognize, all lying dead in the street. From the sounds it was obvious the fighting was headed toward the castle. Glancing downtown toward the sound of fighting, the street was empty. Back out of town, a few people could be seen fleeing by foot along the east road out of town. Bibliomane turned and slowly moved down the shaded alley to the back road that separated the row of buildings the Single Moat was a part of, from the last row of buildings on this southeastern part of Petram.

He barely inched his head out of the alley to glance both ways. A loud wooded crack rang out from across the street. The second story shutters of Mr. Eamon's house slammed shut nearly sending Bibliomane fleeing back down the alley. He held still, regaining composure. The only thing he saw in the street here was another dead knight clutching his polished bastard sword with a jeweled hilt laid next to a slain horse. *They haven't stripped the bodies yet... They will be back if they win!* he considered. Noticing the only thing he was clutching was Korin Stonefinder's, *Typhoon Council*, he quickly but silently turned and headed around the back corner of his establishment into the small cloister with the exterior of the back rooms on his left and a few small columns on his right. Beyond that was a row of empty crates between him and the building next to him. He entered through the back door and quickly made his way through the common room and up the stairs to the small back room he kept for himself. He packed quickly. Slowing only to labor and strain over stringing his old bow. He had not fired it in years and by the struggle it was to string it, he was not sure if he could still fire it true. He swung his knapsack, and a mostly empty scabbard over his shoulder, notching an arrow regardless.

Moving back outside through the back door he left open, a small rustle followed by a faint "shhh" proceeded from the larger crates. He stopped, eyes wide, and slowly approached the crate. A faint whimper emitted as he took one hand and flung off the loose lid. The whimper turned into a loud but fleeting scream as he saw crouched and stuffed into the crate, Keera and Rosheen.

"Quiet down!" Rosheen scolded Keera with a jab to the ribs. Keera and Rosheen were young women who Rita hired a few years ago when all four of their parents died with fever. They had grown up around that side of town and he had known

them since they were children. Never marrying, the two undoubtably helped his business. Many of the local young men came around for a drink just as an excuse to ultimately get turned down by one of the lovely ladies. Bibliomane always assumed they were smitten with the late fletcher's son who worked and lived across the street. The three of them shared a brief look of concern, surprise, and relief.

"How did you two get in there?" he asked hoarsely trying to keep his surprised voice from cracking.

"We were already back here when they attacked," Keera said before being jabbed by Rosheen again.

"How did you survive?" Rosheen asked. Bibliomane thought somberly for a moment with his thoughts slipping between guilt and practicality.

"I was in the cellar. Come on, both of you," he replied as he began helping them out of the crate. "We need to get out of town before they come back," he continued.

"How do you know they're coming back!?!?" Rosheen asked sternly while panic began to flood over Keera's tear-streamed face.

"They haven't looted anything yet. They're just killing. We have to go while we have a chance," the ageing, frail man stated regaining a steely composure that neither one of the young ladies were used to.

"What about the others?" Rosheen asked, now her voice becoming softer and more somber.

"I didn't see everyone. Some others may have escaped or..." his thoughts grew grim thinking of some of his staff and patrons being captured. Everyone had heard the terrible tales of what goblins did to captives...

“Rita would want us to make it out alive,” he addressed them in a softer tone, placing a hand on each of their shoulders.

“Rita...?” Keera asked in a shaking voice. He shook his head. Tears began forming now on Rosheen’s face despite her obstinance.

“There’s no time to waste. We have to be quick and silent,” he continued now taking a step back, readying his bow once again. “Follow me.”

Looking back over the small bluff just south of town, most of Petram could be seen. Bibliomane had led them quietly and safely out of town, but it was by the soft spoken and very shaken Keera’s suggestion that they hide there. It was indeed a good suggestion as the forest thinned just below the bluff’s exposed limestone base and flanks back toward town. As long as one of them kept a vigilant watch they shouldn’t be crept up on, and they were close enough to town to see what was going on. Flames rose at the base of some of the larger buildings in town. Occasionally the shouts of beast and men from the castle that dominated the west side of town were loud enough to be heard. He handed a wine skin to the two of them and sat down against a large spindly beech tree.

“You two keep watch,” he mentioned as he rummaged through his knapsack pulling the old leather-bound book out.

“You cannot be serious?” Rosheen asked harshly. He began thumbing through the pages ignoring her tone. “You’re going to read; even now?” she pressed stirring some agitation.

“No, I am going to dwell on the soldiers fighting and worry myself sick,” he answered giving her an indignant glance. She turned back toward the bluff as Keera tugged gently at the side of her skirt. The two of them sat at the edge of the stone cliff, turning their attention to the action back in town. The

contrast of anger and sorrow in their faces clearly displaying the differences in the two women's personalities. Looking back to his book he thought to himself, *There is nothing else we can do but wait...now where was I?*

We kept a diligent watch while moving up into the foliage on the knoll and thankfully onto dry, sandy ground.

"Bones" Danzig stated. In the center of the knoll.....

"No. Not there," Bibliomane thought... "Ah, here we are!"

By now Ulfric had closed the distance on the fast, wildly thrashing creature, this time bringing his axe down into the creature hard. It winced only for a moment. With one foot it kicked at Ulfric, slashing his left leg and then clung to it like a talon. With one hand it reached out grabbing and gorging Danzig's gut. Standing with the other leg, it dragged both my companions to the ground next to it; rising tall like a pitch-covered distorted statue. I took a few steps forward drawing the creature's gaze and grabbed the chamber stick shaped emblem around my neck as I closed my eyes, and formed in my mind a large, pointed quill with a blue feather. Opening them now to see the quill of my imagination form ethereally in reality a few feet above the creature's head. I brought it down, driving the quill tip first through its pitch black disfigured skull. The quill vanished from its skewering point, along with the dim, blue glow it was giving off. The

creature fell limp to the ground and Ulfric quickly recovered and cleaved another blow, deep into the creature's head for good measure. Danzig quickly took our attention as he was trying to slide on his back away from the beast with his legs. It had done a number on his core, and it was a rough sight. He was trying to hold some of his insides in with one hand and still griping his sword with the other hand.

"Hold still!" Ulfric sternly ordered as he placed hands on and steadied Danzig on the ground.

"Korin! Do you have the strength left to fix this?" he asked looking to me, revealing the juxtaposition of concern on his face with the determination in his voice.

"I do," I answered sternly keeping my composure. Again, taking a hand around my necklace, I knelt next to Danzig. Placing my free hand on him I began to visualize his wounds closing. I could feel him struggle beneath my hand, and Ulfric struggling to hold him still. It was draining for me but painful for him, truly. After a few agonizing moments of squirming, the two of them got still. When I opened my eyes most of the blood was gone and Danzig's gut was mostly healed. His torso appeared now to have old wounds beneath his slashed shirt.

A moment passed as I am sure the amazement on my face was similar to what I saw on Ulfric's.

Looking around and sitting up on his elbows, Danzig asked flatly, "So now what?"

"Are you ok?" Ulfric asked dumbfounded.

"Is this the first time you have seen someone cut open and healed back together?" Danzig asked while standing and stepping over to where the dead creature lie.

“Never from so grave an injury...not your first time I take it?”
Ulfric asked joining him, looking at the creature.

“Me, oh I am as green as the day is long,” Danzig replied with not-so-subtle sarcastic overtones while running his hand across his freshly healed wounds. “You’re good,” he quipped my way. The two of them continued in conversation while my mind drifted and spiraled over the last few moments. I had healed before, but never to this extent. I had used magic in a fight before, but never to deal such precise destruction. My knowledge had increased with my studies, and I now had proof that as my knowledge increased, so would my power. I was hungry to continue my journey of understanding and belief.

A few unsavory cracks and thuds brought my mind back to the present. I jumped a little as I noticed a filthy Danzig standing, holding the severed head of the creature next to a nearly as filthy Ulfric.

“You got something to put this in?” Danzig asked. The distain on my face must have been glaring as I pulled loose my cloak for a makeshift sack. “What?” Danzig smirked, “We need proof.”

Korin’s Notes:

A Wendigo: From my own experiences and much research after having an encounter, a wendigo is a horribly cursed, undead individual. Usually standing one to two feet taller and generally that much thinner than the original person. They undergo horrible distortions. Their skin becomes dark, thick, dry, and taunt. Their fingers, jaw, and teeth each stretch to form fearsome claws and fangs. Their most dangerous aspects are their radical speed and insufferable need to gorge

themselves every night with the flesh of whatever type of creature they used to be. Moreover, and to my personal misfortune, they can only be killed by fire. I, to this day, have not learned the exact arcane means by which they are turned, but do know the circumstances. When a humanoid undergoes extreme hunger and gives in to cannibalism, particularly cannibalizing on a living person of close connection, the conditions for the curse are met.

Chapter 4: "New Friends"

After a long, arduous trek and boat ride in the dark, we found ourselves back along the wood clad dock where we had earlier met the strange man named Homer. A curious feat how a man so challenged in the mind pointed us in the right direction to find the beast. As our wet boots clanked and sloshed against the wooden boards in the waning hours of the night, I noticed Ulfric studying a small necklace. He noticed

my eyeing him and we both noticed Danzig had made some distance on us up ahead. We had some privacy.

“Here. Won’t make you feel good but might help you figure out what happened,” he said as he handed me a thin chained gold necklace with a locket. Inside the little oval was two intricately, tiny painted pictures. A human man and a human woman. They had the look and dress of Rauthlous locals, albeit a little more colorful. “It was around that creature’s neck,” Ulfric said with a little dejection.

“You think one of these was the creature?” I asked surprised.

“I don’t think it was decorating itself with trinkets from victims...” he said looking at me seriously with obvious moral concern. Most of the rest of the way to town was spent in silence.

Soon we had made our way to the stone barracks where we had received the charge to uncover the mystery of the disappearances. Light was just breaking over the forest and mountains east of town. As we approached, there leaned against the side of the building next to the front door, was a young human-looking man with dark hair and greenish skin. He was dressed in ruff leathers and armed only with a very tall wooden staff that grew larger on end, like an overlength club.

Seeing us approach, he spoke up in a quick, tight-lipped manner, “They are still locked up. You three look like you have had a long night.”

Danzig set right in, “Look we are here on official business; stand aside,” as he grabbed the brass ring handle of the barrack’s front wooden door and gave it a strong pull. The door did not budge.

“I hear you speaking my language, but I am not sure you hear it when I speak,” the green-skinned man replied. Danzig stepped back in obvious displeasure both with the door and the newcomer.

“I am not going to wait around to collect my reward. I am going for a drink,” Danzig proclaimed.

“After last night, that’s what you’re thinking?” Ulfric asked.

“What happened last night? By the state of your attire, I’d say you three were in serious danger,” the young man retorted.

“I’m sorry my good man, but we don’t know you and you have not stated your business,” Ulfric replied.

“I am tracking a dangerous creature from the swamp in the south. A terrible creature. I followed it near here and wanted to warn the local guardsmen,” he answered.

“Oh...we may have good news for you, as well as our local authorities,” Ulfric answered and proceeded to ask, “What did this creature you were following look like?”

“Tall and thin, fast and sharp, dark as coals; and ravenously hungry, always. A wendigo,” the green skinned man stated solemnly.

Ulfric smiled while he proudly took the cloaked head from me. Unraveling it to be visible to the man he said, “Don’t worry yourself, we have already taken care of that beast.” The man looked at us astonished and a bit fearful.

“Did you burn the body?!?” he asked. The three of us eyed each other with a mix of frustration and concern.

Needless to bore you with the trifle of having to defeat the same creature a second time but such was required. The things of note were the wendigo capturing and

nearly eating the barmaid from whom Ulfric had gleamed some information a couple nights before, a substantial reward from Captain Roley; and that young, green-skinned man turned out to be a powerful shapeshifting creature known by the name of Leofaren. His true nature being that of a Rauthlous swamp being. Standing over seven feet tall, he was covered in fine purple fur. His long facial features matched only by his naturally slow and deliberate way of speaking when not transformed to disguise himself as something else. It was a surprise to me, but Leofaren would become a true friend and powerful companion for many years. Additionally, there was the fame that followed in the pursuing days. Bolstered even more by Ulfric winning a fight in what was simply known as “the fight pit” beneath a pub. An event held monthly in the basement of the pub that most knew of, but nearly all kept silent about, as the guards turned a blind eye to the violence of it. All together we spent just over a week that time in Rauthlous, but lasting connections were made. We each requisitioned our primary weapons be enchanted while in town as well. Danzig spent more time drinking, Ulfric befriending the knights and guards, and I, myself, learning about the copper lords, the monks from the far north of the island who were the ones to develop and maintain the cannons. Hearing of their towers devoted solely to books and learning; I was fascinated and hoped soon to see these towers for myself. However, by far the most life changing acquaintance any of us made, came when a Lord Hattaway requested our presence at his manor just north of town.

The enormity and polish of his estate was matched only by the army of embellished staff. However, nothing of his possessions grabbed my attention as much as the grand ole dryad himself. I recall that first meeting as if it were upon me

today. The ceiling in his counseling room was frosted glass panes, making it the brightest room in the mansion. The floor and wall were tiled in huge diamond-shaped slabs of white marble, with bits of orange and grey striations that also seem to give off a slight hint of light on their own.

Words flowed out of the tall figure beyond the central table like smooth liquor, "Good morning, prestigious friends, I am sure. Join me at my table and let us discuss things to come."

We each moved around the table and took a seat, as did he.

There were no other doors into the room and the one we came through seemed to shut on its own. If the quality of the structure around us was second to none, then that much more was this man's attire. All black velvet and silks with only the collar of his long jacket being an ivory white. His tall, robust figure was accompanied by a flawless, and shaved face set with long, black hair and dark eyes. He looked like a high-born dryad in complexion, but his features were like that of the most rugged of humans. The bright light of the room seemed nearly to silhouette him.

"Surely as you have established in your minds, I am Eliakim Hattaway. Proprietor of many things but relevantly now, the gold mines in the Hot Mount Ridges, south of Seanville."

"Gold mines?!?" Danzig interrupted abruptly.

"Yes Mr. Yohan," he answered in an amused way. "It is in these gold mines that I need your...expertise that you have so clearly demonstrated this past week," he continued. "A few weeks ago, I lost contact with my mines and sent one of my best men, Elrand, to investigate why no news or shipments of gold were coming our way. I have not heard from him or the mines in near a week now."

Leofaren interjected as politely and slowly as possible, "Why would you trust four people you have never met before to help with something like this?"

"My colleague makes a good point sir," Ulfric added. Danzig's displeasure with these comments was apparent as he stirred in his seat. Hattaway sat back reclining a bit more in his chair at the head of the table and eyed us over knowingly. His gaze made me uncomfortable as I, myself, did not understand him making such a request of strangers.

"I am searching for something of far more value than gold," he replied.

"And what is that?" Danzig snorted.

"Allies," Hattaway replied. "Gold from those mines is what made me rich. However, the very reasons why you are here on this island surmount any concern of riches. The blockade around our island...the League allows only slaves of different terms. Under their Protectorate's watch, there is no freedom. It matters not how much wealth one possesses."

"If you are looking for allies against the League of Nations you certainly have that in us," Ulfric stated proudly.

"As you said, 'your colleague made a good point.' Prove to me you can be trusted with my gold and then we can trust each other with such a thing as...freedom." The Dryad replied while Ulfric nodded.

"You can certainly trust us with your gold," Danzig said with a tone probably more sarcastic than he intended.

"And with my wine no doubt," Hattaway answered, making Danzig more uncomfortable than the comment probably should have.

“Master Stonefinder, you remain silent. What say you to this task?” he asked me directly.

I took a moment looking over my colleagues at the table and answered, “I have been fortunate in just a short amount of time, finding allies while escaping the League of Nations’ grasp. It would be nice to make another.”

“Excellent, then let us concern ourselves with some details,” Hattaway said while leaning in.

The jest of the mission was simple. Leofaren, Danzig, Ulfric, and I were to travel south through the farms where many of the refugees had fled, past the river town of Seanville, and on, to the mines. Only a few days of travel. We were to investigate the mines for any problems, solve any concerns if possible, and hopefully return to Hattaway with an overdue shipment of gold ore. He promised we would be rewarded in excess of our expectations. Apparently, the guards at the mines were of his own private fighting force and led by a fearsome but loyal warrior, named Undine. Elrand, the man Hattaway had sent one week before, was also to be found. We were all eager to set on the task that seemed worthwhile; however, there was one concern I kept private from my new comrades. Why did the richest man on Rauthlous need a few new allies? I thought the whole island was eager to stand up against the League of Nations. Perhaps it was just due to the desperate nature of such a small island being pitted against a despot with ten times more troops. I figured I would find out his motives in good time. At least for the meantime, we had found a task we were all interested in, even Danzig, which pleased me, as Ulfric and I were both keen on maintaining the strength of our numbers.

Korin’s notes:

Elder Knight Wilnick: A thick, older man, he carried a lot of clout around Rauthlous. Becoming a knight in his late teens, he had served the citizens of the island longer than any other knight or official on the island. He would later prove to be a warrior and leader in keeping with his mammoth reputation. He was always accompanied by a couple grey-cloaked archers who followed behind him at a distance with notched arrows.

Shai Peldehar: A snake of a person but a fine enchanter. I met him our first week in Rauthlous but that would not be the last time. If it was not for Leofaren's wise perception of arcane intricacies, we would have all probably been duped out of our coin and weapons by Shai's use of some spell that made us inclined to be an irrational "friend" to him. As it turned out however, Leofaren caught the subtle spell and we were able to leverage him into supplying our weapons with powerful enchantments. Leofaren's club staff was granted the power to draw a bit of life out of what it stuck in anger. Danzig's swords could set things ablaze if they sliced into them. My axe was imbued with the power to freeze liquids it split, including those in a creature. Ulfric's hammer that he bought with his fight pit winnings was imbued with the power of a clap of thunder.

Lord Eliakim Hattaway: Truly one of the most powerful and influential people of my age. If it were not for his fortune, knowledge, and connections; the League of Nations may have never been defeated and these books of mine never written. One of the great honors of my life was the day, years after meeting him, that he acknowledged, "Today you surpass me in all ways of knowledge, Master Stonefinder."

Chapter 5: "Through the Teak Forest"

Only a day had passed, and we had procured four horses for our journey south. A heavy fog hung over the highway that day and was slow to begin burning off in the early morning sun. Getting an early start, we had hoped to beat the daily migration of refugees south. We had only made it a couple hours out of town... ..we had only made it a couple hours out of town when the silhouette of a person became visible up ahead in the mist. At first...became visible up...ahead...at first...

Bibliomane struggled to continue reading in the dying light. Night had all but fallen. Finally, he sat up from the book, turning his attention first to the two women at the cliff's edge, and then beyond to Petram. Keera and Rosheen whispered too softly to one another for Bibliomane to make out. In the distance, fires could be seen glowing here and there in the city and from the castle. It was a grim sight, watching the city he had called home his entire adult life, on fire. He felt for the two young women who accompanied him.

Even surviving physically, this would take a long time for someone that young who grew up only hearing of war to get over, if ever. Then to his surprise, he noticed the glow of a fire

near the castle dim and go out. A few moments passed and then another fire in the city dimmed and went out. He slapped the book together more aggressively than he meant, making a little thud. The two women turned to face the sound. It was only for the dark that he could not see the contempt on Rosheen's face. He moved forward and crawled out to the edge of the ledge next to Keera.

"Look!" he whispered pointing to the castle.

"The fires are being put out. We may have won!" Keera clasped her hand over her mouth trying not to make a noise in her excitement.

"We should go back," Rosheen said quickly and softly.

"In the dark?" Keera added. Bibliomane surveyed the horizon for a moment and then glanced back down through the woods around the bluff.

"I think we should wait 'til morning. We should be able to clearly see for sure then," he answered.

"If fires are being put out, we won, right?" Rosheen worried out loud.

The forest was growing very dark. A light twig seemed to break in the distance. The crickets began chirping louder. He thought to himself about the skirmishes he had been a part of long ago. Rarely had the matter of battle been decided in a single day.

"Do an old man a favor. Help me keep watch tonight and wait until morning with me," Bibliomane said quietly. Keera grabbed Rosheen's hand and turned toward Bibliomane.

"We will wait for daylight with you," she answered.

A PAUSE IN THE INTERLUDE

The Door in the Mountain: The Great Ghost's Call Part 2

Chapter 1: Hall of the One

The rain clattered heavily against the fogged windows of Arturius' study inside the dorms surrounding the Hall of the One. The small room was a sharp contrast from the wet, billowing storm outside. Heavy and ancient dark timber beams span the ceiling while shadows from the brick-lined fireplace danced across the plastered walls. Gleaming next to the fireplace on a small wooden stand was his set of plate armor and the incredible, tall, sheathed sword with a handle long enough for four hands to hold it at once. He sheepishly called the sword, *Fang*, but few knew that. Sitting shirtless at his well-organized desk lit even more brightly by a modest brass candelabra, the middle-aged man sat intently, reading through a series of scrolls. They looked older than the dragon-melted stone tower just outside in the courtyard. His fierce green eyes came across a familiar passage that he had heard and read dozens of times.

"The one creator of our world, being once created himself; opened the door in the mountain and so appeared all that is and once was. But know that all things have a limit. Time will run out and all will turn utter dark. Things and memories, all that is great and small, will vanish. But let hope remain yet. For out of nothing will come forth two children. Vessels of their own creators and different in each of their minds; they will simply exist. These vessels must open the door in the mountain for no one else can, and only then can creation continue. Beware, though, this hope of survival remains; the Great Ghost seeks to stop the door in the mountain from ever opening again. He alone desires to be our god and in him alone all would fall to utter darkness. Steel your people's

heart! For his influence shall slink from one shadow to the next; even I have felt the call of that darkness. Cling to what is right and just. Ignore your pride! Help those in need. Defend those who are oppressed and weak. Keep yourself from the selfishness that is evil and above all else, stay vigilant for when the Vessels may arrive. If the door is never found and opened, nothing shall stand against that coming dark, not even I.”

~As told to priest Caod by the Great Gold Dragon, Logos.

His attention was pulled away from the old text by a small puff that came from his fireplace. Turning to it he saw a small, flaming piece of parchment float out away from the fire and slowly quit burning as it spiraled to the floor in the center of the room. He moved calmly to pick up what he saw to be a folded note with Taisteal’s signature on the outside. His movement grew from calm and peaceful to quick and deliberate as he read the note and promptly sat it on his desk. Striding across his small room, he grabbed a loose shirt, a belt with a dagger, and headed out his door and down the hall to an older man standing guard in gold-trimmed armor that matched the suit in his room.

“Gather the priest... Taisteal has found them.”
Arturius spoke with the reserved urgency of one experienced in chaotic times.

Chapter 2 The Yarden River

After what seemed like an eternity of kicking and paddling in the cold water, the current of the Yarden River was calming enough for Alice to pull Jack to a relatively flat pebble beach on the northwest bank of the river. They had been in the water for close to a half hour and floated over a mile downstream.

“Come on Jack. You must move now...” Alice shivered the words out as she stood in the shallow, less violent water near the bank, trying to pull Jack to his feet. Jack was even more of a shivering mess after being balled up and clinging to Alice for so long in the cold water. It was a cool morning despite still being in the warm season of the year and that was not in their favor.

“It’s hot near the forge’s fire...” a rambling thought and half audible mutter came from his lips.

“Jack...” she continued as he began to try to get his feet underneath himself, still looking around half-dazed. “Jack! Look at me,” the stern compassion in her voice snapped his mind to the present circumstance as he stood still, holding on to her with his left hand and clinging his twisted right hand to his chest.

“Alice,” he replied as the two locked eyes briefly before both looking down at his trembling, broken arm.

“Let’s get you to the shore... I’m not carrying you on land,” she mused with compassion in an attempt to force a bit of humor.

“You tired of leading me around that quickly?” He replied with his own attempt to be amusing, despite the circumstances.

“I didn’t say that. Just don’t plan on me carrying you all the way home,” she replied as they both found a seat together against a large spirally oak tree about twenty paces from the river. A moment passed and both rested there snuggled together quietly shivering in their soaked clothes, slowly warming. Alice was exhausted from the long run and fighting the river’s strong current. It had been all she could do to keep a hold of Jack and keep the two of them from crashing into the large rocks that dotted the wild river. It felt good for Jack to be able to keep his arm from moving about, even if it was twisted in the wrong direction. His relief was short lived as his hand began to warm up and throb. After a few moments Alice broke the silence.

“I lost the bow ...and the gold I had packed in the river,” she said distantly. Jack briefly made eye contact with her at the mention of packing, before looking back to the river. While he was deciding to ask about her running away again or to leave it be. She continued, “We are going to have to set that,” she said looking at his arm and gently touching his shoulder. At first, he winced away from her instinctively before relaxing a bit.

“I know...” he answered somberly. “You said ‘carry me home’ earlier. What about going to Yarden?”

“...My father... I should not have... I need to know he is ok,” she stated a little louder than intended.

He nodded to her, measuring his words before he answered. “What about the door in the mountain? We agreed to Taisteal that we would go find this Paladin...”

“The Door...” she sighed with a roll of her eyes and continued. “Those prophecies are nonsense and for all we know the priest is dead, Jack,” Alice replied, instantly realizing the harshness but honesty in her voice.

“Alice, for all we know everyone in...” Jack caught himself from finishing the thought out loud. It was obvious Alice was on the verge of tears. He knew his comment was not a fair one.

“...Lie here. I’ll find a stick that can be a splint...” she said beginning to stand. Taking his left hand, he grabbed her ankle as gently as he could while being quick enough to stop her. “It’s ok, Jack. I’ll be right back,” she comforted. He let go and reclined back against the tree. The glance they shared was one they were more familiar with than either would have preferred. It often followed when one, or both of them, had said something too honest before thinking through their words.

Real smooth. I should probably propose when she gets back. He thought sarcastically to himself. Thinking over the last couple of days there was much to consider but there was one question that dominated his thoughts. *Why was Alice leaving the castle before the attack happened?*

It took her a few moments to find a fallen limb that was sturdy enough to brace his arm yet small enough for her to break into the right length. Finally, she found a wiry limb that snapped into a length she was satisfied with. Returning to Jack, she took off her belt and knelt beside him. As she did, her thin, wet blouse billowed outward like a balloon without the support of her belt. He visibly started to say something; and judging by his smirk, she assumed it had something to do with her belt, but a sharp sting of pain while sitting up straighter, took the comment from him. She gently placed one hand on his broken arm, and he released it from his waist, allowing her to take it with both hands.

“Are your ready?” she asked, trying to sound as confident as possible. He feigned a smile while shaking his

head 'no,' before his face grew more serious. He gave her a nod as his breathing intensified, and he looked away.

"Do it." He grunted. Alice took one hand to hold his own while the other slid to his elbow and held on firmly. She had seen this done before in the castle infirmary and spoken often with the physician there. She pulled as hard as she could and began to rotate. A ripple of pain erupted from Jack's mouth before he forced himself silent, aside from the heavy breathing. He couldn't keep from looking at the two bones in his forearm. They visibly rotated under the skin and muscles back closer to the position that they should be in. Alice felt the tips of the broken bones scrape over each other like chalk sticks over stone. They were close to being lined up.

"Hold your elbow!" she ordered as she released it to place the stick against his forearm and wrap her belt around both it and his arm. A dull growl or whimper came from Jack as she tightened her leather belt into place. Immediately after, followed a louder and more sinister growl not too far away. They were struck, wide-eyed with renewed adrenalin as they began to scan their surroundings. Quickly, they both spotted the large hobgoblin waist deep about one-third of the way into the river from the opposing bank. The creature stopped right about where the river deepened, and the current became much more dangerous.

"The reinforcements!" The haggard voice was familiar. They stared at it while it stood in the water surveying their side of the riverbank. "Where is your sorcerer?" The creature spoke again with a growing smile revealing sharp yellow and brown teeth. It pushed forward into the current and began to swim across the river.

“Get up, Jack!” Alice exclaimed as she helped to pull Jack to his feet. The panic of the moment helped him ignore the pain of his freshly set arm and pop up to his feet.

“Which way are we going?” Jack asked frantically. Alice thought quickly before answering.

“Down river... into Yarden,” she said excitedly but without being loud. The two began to race away as the creature struggled slowly to swim across the powerful river. The pace they kept was alarmingly slow to Alice. The banks were steep and covered with fallen leaves and large stones soaked from the mist of the turbulent river. Some areas were difficult for Alice to traverse even when using her hands to grab small tree trunks and grip the corners of large boulders. Even with Jack’s resilience on full display he still set a slow and stumbling pace down the steep, wooded riverbank. After struggling on for perhaps an hour, Jack was slowing. He stopped for a breath, holding his arm to his chest and leaning against an impossibly tall evergreen. Jack tried to scan the area but was puffing air like a bellow in his forge.

“Do you see it?” He asked barely loud enough to get Alice’s attention. She paused and returned the distance she had made ahead of him. Grabbing him gently by the shoulders, she guided him around the west side of the large tree trunk to hide.

“I don’t see anything but forest,” she answered, peering around back in the direction they had come. “Doesn’t mean it isn’t close....”

“I’m slowing you down. We both know the way to Yarden...” Jack started before he was interrupted.

“I don’t. You know I have never been to Manefold or anywhere in Yarden,” she interjected.

“Neither of us have but we have both seen the maps. Alice, just follow the river until it meets the old trade road,” he answered a bit unbeguiled by her answer.

“I am not leaving you, Jack” she answered softly. His breathing was building heavier. Tears were forming in both of their eyes. Glancing at his hand, revealed it was red and swelling, throbbing with pain. She rubbed her hand against his arm ever so lightly, desiring with all her consciousness it could be better. Her touch was soothing and repetitive. His tense stance relaxed, and he began to slide down the tree as if to sit before she gripped his shoulders tightly again and held him standing up.

“You are coming with me, Jack,” she demanded and continued, “we are both going to make it and this pig won’t dare come near the warriors of the valley!” A heavy twig snapped in the distance making a loud crack. Looking around the corner of the tree, she saw movement. It was the creature limping up over a large stone that jutted out into the water. As it looked up, she and the hobgoblin locked gazes only some 50 paces apart.

“How polite... Waiting for me,” the hobgoblin called out in a grating but frightfully playful manner. Jack heard the putrid sound of the creature and righted himself the best he could. All three began to move at full speed, but Alice easily out sprinted both Jack and this limping hobgoblin. It was a wild game she was forced to watch slowly unfold while occasionally giving her friend a helping hand up over a fallen tree or past a steeper section. At some times it would seem the creature was gaining and at other times Jack would seem to be making ground away from the creature. She spent much of the next hours sprinting ahead and watching her injured friend being relentlessly but calmly pursued by the mostly green, but completely menacing, figure. The hobgoblin must

have lost its cloak and weapons when it was washed into the river. Shirtless, its heavy muscular figure supported a heavy, plump mid-section.

A deep crash of thunder echoed down the valley. Cold, fat drops of rain began to fall at sharp contrast to the bright sun the day had brought. Soon they were surmounted by a torrent of every kind of drop imaginable. The deluge was occasionally buffeted by a sharp gust scattering a stinging spray, harsh enough to make them turn their faces away from the gust. After taking a longer pause than usual to scan behind them, Alice could not spot the beast pursuing them. When he caught up to her, she pulled Jack's good arm up over her shoulders and they began to move steadily together though the downpour.

"Glad the land is beginning to flatten out," he stated as they began traveling closer together able to talk without being loud.

"Damn, this cold rain. I was just getting warm," she replied.

"Ok, *princess*. Can you see it still following us?" He emphasized 'princess' before his question returned to a serious tone as they continued to walk together.

"...No... Why did Taisteal 'correct me' by calling them hobgoblins?" She asked with a touch of loathing in her voice.

"I thought hobgoblins were just a scary story from one of Taisteal's old books," he started. "The goblins from the Knobs of Teras are only about the size of a ten-year-old child. No match for one of our knights one-on-one, but..."

"I know that!" She answered a bit hastily and more harshly than seemed necessary. They all but paused briefly

from walking and glanced at each other as a tiny smirk appeared on his face that was matched by one on hers. Jack had learned years ago that Alice arbores being corrected or spoken to like she was ignorant, even if she was, on a particular topic. “Your arm must be feeling better, book worm,” she added breaking the brief silence.

“...It is. This splint of yours has really helped. ...I didn’t know you could set a break like that,” he answered.

“There is a lot you don’t know about me, Jack,” she quipped with a sense of levity. His mind wondered over the last few months for a moment, indulging on the thought that there were indeed things he did not know about her before snapping to the present.

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Alice.” Jack said, matching her tone.

“Things like you flirting with the barmaids at The Single Moat?” She replied quickly, holding in her amusement. Despite the circumstance they were in he began to blush a bit and look away before he noticed the upturned corners of Alice’s lips.

“Things exactly like that!” He answered while pulling his arm back from around her shoulders to give her a playful nudge. The two fell into a brief hushed bit of laughter before their eyes locked with an altogether different, but serious, intent. “Why were you leaving the castle before the attack?” He asked softly. Alice picked up speed walking, and he matched.

“I am not going to be with Indoctus. No matter what.” she answered with all the amusement of their playful exchange leaving.

“Because he is somehow in league with the hobgoblins?” Jack asked.

“No, well... I didn’t know about that... Do you think he truly is in league with them? What would that mean?” She replied.

“It sure seemed like he was on Coles Crossing... but he and his father have helped the different lords of Dallis fight against goblins for years. Not to mention their campaigns against Taul in the eastern deserts,” he attempted to make as an answer.

“He definitely seems to hate the dragon men,” she added.

“Did you see him at the castle before the attack... Did something happen?” He asked discerning something off about Alice’s demeanor around the topic.

“He...” she paused with a brief sense of defeat before daggering the notion and continuing, “he seemed too angry my father was not doing better at repelling the goblin advance this year. There was no talk of these larger goblins or any indication he would be in league with them,” she looked at him for a moment before continuing, “Jack, after we get you somewhere safe, I will have to go back for my father. I cannot leave not knowing if he is ok.”

“...Then at least let’s meet with this Arturius first. He may have answers; may even help your father. Regardless, you and I can return together,” he answered after considering his words heartfully.

“Ok...or he may try and keep us from returning,” she replied.

“Well, then I will just beat him up,” Jack responded while making a fist with his good hand and flashing a muted smile. It was a bit amusing for her to picture her friend filthy, soaked and holding his splinted arm tight to his chest, punching some fully armored self-righteous paladin in full armor. The two continued on being more deliberate not to trip in the growing mud being produced by the storm. The river grew wider and calmer as they continued. The Cole had now joined the larger lazier Yarden River. Before long, the land around them was all but flat with even thicker vegetation. The tall evergreen trees were giving way to large, low sprawling trees that neither of them recognized. There were large clusters of some sort of nuts weighing heavy in their limbs. Then Jack spotted something he did recognize, blueberries. They promptly tore off handfuls of the sweet surprise and ate while they continued on. It would be dark soon.

“Think it is safe to rest for the night?” She asked.

“Taistal said these things had a great sense of smell. If it finds us in the dark...” he answered letting his words trail off as he recalled some of the details from the book he mentioned earlier.

“What about that island?” She asked pointing out a low-lying bush-covered dot of land in the river some long paces from the bank. It was all but dark and setting up to be a very dark night indeed, as the rain seemed to have set in. He nodded in agreement.

“That should be impossible to spot in the dark,” he answered. The two waded through the river and found a thick set bush to sit down under on the little, low island.

“I didn’t let you finish about that book earlier. What did it say about hobgoblins?” She asked quietly in the now

pitch-black and rain-soaked night. He paused a bit before answering.

“There is a chapter in an old book from a Yarden man titled, ‘Why the Goblins Come.’ It claims that long ago some goblins led by a legendary goblin king, Fors I think was his name, captured some dryadalis during a raid. The goblins forced themselves on their captors both male and female night after night. One such dryad was a sorceress, albeit not all that powerful, but apparently powerful and furious enough to devise a curse that took hold. After several nights of being subject to this torturous treatment, the curse allowed the dryad women to conceive. Fascinated by the phenomenon, Fors kept them alive until they gave birth. Supposedly, those were the first hobgoblins. Said to be more cunning and larger than their fathers; some even rumored to use magic and cast spells. The story goes on to say that the hobgoblins hated their fathers and when they grew up, they slaughtered the smaller goblins in droves. King Fors was killed by his own sons. The book claims many fled south from the Knobs of Terra creating the conflict we and the people of Yarden have had with the goblins for several generations.” After his answer Alice moved a bit tighter to Jack, gently taking his hurt arm in her hands.

“Sorry I asked,” Alice answered. The story of the women conceiving an unwanted child was all too close to home for her last few days. She was glad it had become too dark for Jack to see the mixture of grief and embarrassment on her face. She pushed away her despair quick enough before her thoughts truly spiraled to muse, “You need better books. No wonder you always needed cheering up when we met in the tired meadow.” They both smiled in the dark rainy night without being able to see each other or much of anything else.

Chapter 3: Offer

The ceiling was high and clad in bright white timber planks with larger, dark supporting beams making an eight-pointed star when viewed from below. The walls were heavy set square-cut limestone in thin mortar with one shuttered and arched window. A door and fireplace finished out the circular room; construction becoming of a once powerful and independent kingdom. It was a room Taisteal had never seen before but by its looks and the accent of the men outside his door, it was easy to deduce that he was in Rockhurst Castle – in the east tower somewhere if he had to guess. No hobgoblin voices could be heard, nor could he smell their stench for that matter. They must have parted ways with Indoctus somewhere in the forest. He was blindfolded along with gags and fetters while being transported back through the forest and walloped on the head several times along the way for good measure. Consciousness came and went on that bound trip and only his blindfold had been removed since awakening in the room. It had been his cell for only a few hours, but they had been most unpleasant. The only furniture in the room was the tall-backed wooden chair he sat tethered tightly to by heavy leather bindings. His hands sat bloody and bound to the arm rest, in pain with thin shives of wood shoved beneath his fingernails.

The door swung open quickly. Taisteal glimpsed the face of a green caped Petram Knight while the door was open. He looked familiar... *Perhaps that is Nescius...* he thought to himself. The thought was quickly stifled by Indoctus carrying a small table, single parchment, and quill into the room. The door racked shut behind him. He sat the little table right up against Taisteal's chair to where his hand could just reach it. Sitting the quill in an ink well, next to the parchment close to the large, gold-eyed priest's right hand on the table. Indoctus

locked his steely slate blue eyes with Taisteal as he slowly pulled the splintery slivers of wood from underneath the priest's nails. Only the slightest and deepest of grunts gargled from around his gag. While barely loosening the bindings on Taisteal's right arm, just enough to write, the frustratingly calm and smoky words poured out of Indoctus, "I doubt you have had enough time, but write down where I can find Lady Rockhurst... or your suffering will become much more severe." Taisteal noticed Indoctus shift uncharacteristically uncomfortably in his armor for a moment after making his demand. "The hobgoblins are checking the roads to Yarden and Mon Dryadalis. Men of Petram are searching in the winding oaks and I have sent riders west to look while my banner men from Compita and Annoa are soon to arrive from the east," the prince stated, regaining his icy demeanor. Taisteal's face became a bit flatter in expression, nearly completely apathetic to the idea of torture, but laden with the concern of the sheer numbers Indoctus was rallying to his search.

"Yes. I see it on you. Know your failure... ...write down where they are going and when I find them, the young fletcher can die a quick death. No torture. At least save him this suffering. You know I am a man of my word," Indoctus continued, but the priest simply looked at him blankly ignoring the quill and parchment.

"Then I will..." Indoctus shuffled awkwardly in his breastplate once more while continuing, "get the gift the hobgoblins left me." Continuing to fidget while finishing his words, Indoctus fished the little jagged mirror out from behind his armor and turned his back to the priest. He looked closely and tightly into the mirror and began to gesture and comment as if he were having a conversation, though Taisteal could only hear the prince's side of it.

“No, I understand... Truly... ...Him?” He looked at the priest with a wicked grin while continuing, “To think how far you have fallen...” turning to Taisteal and moving closer while pointing the mirror at the priest’s face, he spilled out the words with obvious delight, seeing what he could only assume to be fear coming over the gaged face of the priest. “He wants to speak to you.” Taisteal averted his eyes for a moment as something like panic was gripping him. He struggled in his bindings making the heavy wood chair creak under the strain before looking into his reflection in the small mirror. Before long, his reflection blurred into the face of the simple looking man with straw colored hair. The large priest’s face went through a myriad of displays while Indoctus stood there, growing impatient, not being able to hear what the Great Ghost may be saying to him. Finally, Taisteal took the quill and began to write while looking up to the prince with newfound poise in his large, golden eyes. Indoctus pulled the mirror back and looked on the emerging text eagerly with a deadly smile on his face. It read:

He offered me my old self.

Indoctus’ face began turning red with rage as he read. Taisteal stared at Indoctus with a growing sense of belittlement while writing further.

What do you think I will do to YOU when...

The prince became furious at what Taisteal had written and may yet continue to write. He knocked the table over violently and stuffed the mirror behind his armor. The glare he gave Taisteal could light cold embers. He stormed out of the room not saying a word. In his hurry he left open the door. The priest’s eyes revealed little relief at seeing the vile prince so unnerved. The green-cloaked knight that apparently was standing guard, began to close the door when

again he and Taisteal made eye contact. It was indeed Nescius who gave the priest a curious head nod. Taisteal nodded back looking as longingly as he possibly could at the knight's water skin that was tied to his belt. Nescius hesitated at the door remembering all the different times Taisteal had come to the castle as Lord Rockhurst's guest. The priest was always kind and always seemed to have the perfect advice for the knights when one of them was brave enough to ask the large man. Looking around the bare room and the rough state of Taisteal's hands, he had compassion on the priest and stepped into the room unbinding his mouth for a drink of water. The large bound man happily accepted the water and after taking a big swallow responded in a deep low voice, "Seol shil le tine."

Nescius, never having heard words used to cast a spell, looked at the priest a bit confused, not noticing the small piece of parchment flutter from the floor where it had fallen into the fireplace nearly instantly being consumed by the flames of the fireplace behind them.

"Is that a Dryad greeting?" Nescius asked.

"No," Taisteal responded gently, looking over the knight who gathered the confidence and poise to ask out right.

"Taisteal, did you really abduct Lady Alice?"

"I am not sure what would be the safest thing for you to believe Nescius," Taisteal answered before continuing in his low deep voice, "...Never admit to speaking to me now and put this gagging back over me. Your King will return soon and in a worse mood after thinking things over."

"My king?" The knight asked puzzled. Taisteal nodded with what seemed like apathy at his question.

“Hurry and get back to your post,” the priest insisted and Nescius heeded him. Setting the binding back in place and tightening the bindings on Taisteal’s loosened right arm before returning to his post, shutting the door behind him. The large man sat there looking at the backs of his hands. *I have refused once more.* He thought as his gold eyes darkened like one watching something tragic.

4: Courage

Dawn had come without either of the two noticing. They were wound tightly together, leaned up against a short bush with a wide trunk, still fast asleep. The weather had warmed in the early hours of the day and the chill from the continuing rain was less discomforting. Jack slowly opened his eyes looking down at Alice, snuggled onto his left shoulder. She held on to him tightly with one arm around his back and the other cradling his hurt arm. It throbbed with pain, but not near as much as he expected. He hesitated to pull his hand free from her touch. *Who is holding who?* He thought to himself while a natural smile grew across his face. He had spent many nights wishing to wake up to such a sight, but never imagined it under such circumstances. Sitting there with the gentle, clean rain, engulfing and dripping off her cheek, chin, and lips; he considered the moment.

“...All my best moments include you,” the words he spoke were as soft as the sound of the rain on the river water around the small island they were on. Alice began to stir ever so slightly.

“Jack...” she stated softly while gaining her wits sharp. She began to survey the coastline thoroughly before asking, “Were you saying something?”

“We slept past daybreak,” He stated after a brief pause.

“May be for the best. I have heard soldiers say goblins can see better in the dark than we can,” she added. He nodded before slowly shutting his right hand into a loose fist.

“Jack don’t...” she began to interrupt excitedly before collecting herself and asking, “How are you moving your hand like that? Does it not hurt?”

“It hurts when I move it...” he answered while opening and stretching his fingers, twisting his palm face up ever so slightly, “But not near as much as it should.”

“You’re complaining it does not hurt enough?” she asked with a short-lived smirk. In truth she was just as surprised as he. *A severe break like that should be near unbearable without some tonic or ointment and take weeks to even begin healing.* She thought, thinking over setting the limb.

“No... We should get moving though,” he answered. They shared a nervous glance before slowly getting up and starting into the river to wade back to the main shore. They moved slowly and deliberately looking in all directions. The hobgoblin could be waiting anywhere.

They traveled on, cautiously, downstream like this for about an hour. The large sprawling trees on the bank of the ever-widening river became thinner until they gave way to large fields crossed by small hedge rows. Soon the Old Trade Road came in from the north and began following the river west. The road was a messy mix, mostly of dark mud with a little gravel. There were deep ruts from carriages that ran down the center of the road, but nothing fresh enough to retain any details from before the storm. Some of the endless flat fields went on as far as the eye could see, into the heavy curtains of grey rain. They were covered with some viny plant, holding large beans. It reminded Alice of the plains she had seen on trips to Compita with her father. Thoughts of whom, she was still wrestling with. On one hand she was furious with her father about Indoctus and on the other, she was fervently worried about him.

“Can you see anyone?” Jack asked.

“No one. Do you think that creature is still following us?” She responded.

“No idea. We have got to be close to Yarden’s big city. ...Maybe another hour,” Jack answered.

“Surely it turned back. Manefold has more fighting men than we do in the Dallis.” She concluded as the two continued to travel west, now out in the open of the road. After a few moments, the two could begin to see some large, low structures far to the west – storage houses for farming. The wide, slow river shimmered a grey-brown from the thousand raindrops that fell in it. Ahead of them stood one large tree on their side of the river. A low slung oak with a wide trunk and huge sprawling limbs at the end of one of the wispy hedge rows. As they walked by its base, they froze in the road; shocked to see the hobgoblin that had been pursuing them. It squatted over a freshly slain dark-skinned man, wrapped in a ripped open white shirt. The creature looked up, chewing. One hand was holding a pint of ripped flesh; the other still stuck into the fresh corpse before it. All three were locked in amazement, before the creature swallowed and boasted.

“Can you believe this one confronted me without a weapon?” The words bellowed out of the creature in a sound as foul as the smell.

“We have to run, Jack,” Alice said tugging on Jack’s good arm. The two of them began to accelerate as quickly as they could in the slick mud. The creature barked out laughing as it raced to its feet, chasing them in a fast-limping gallop down the road. They barely made it fifty feet before Jack slipped, not able to catch his balance with the awkwardness of his right arm. Hearing the splat of his fall, Alice who had outrun him by a few paces, slid to a frantic stop to see the

horror of her best friend stretched out on the ground with the creature diving on top of Jack's legs.

"Don't stop running! Go!!" Jack cried out in a serious and strong tone while the hobgoblin seized his legs with its talon-like fingernailed-clad hands. Its bright, wild blue eyes looking up at her above a red blood-soaked mouth. She glanced back to Jack's determined face before turning to run. Her steps were sure and fast. The sound of Jack's protest to keep running were soon overpowered by shouts of agony, heavy thuds from fast falling fists, and the creature's hideous laughter. The rain on her face mixed with tears of panic and fear and rage. She stopped in her tracks. Thoughts of Indoctus touching her, Sir Relish fighting the creatures while she fled in the woods, and her father under siege back home rushed over her.

"I am done running!" The thought leaped out of her as a soul-hurtling shout. The woman turned and dashed back like a bounding bull. The creature looked up surprised by the fierce sound of her yell, just in time to see her plant a kick right to its face. The blow knocked it off Jack and over on to its back. She gave but a passing glance to see her friend's surprised, and freshly bloodied face, as she leapt over him and onto the creature!

"Alice?!?" Jack murmured as she flew overhead. She landed, pressing her right knee into the dumbfounded creature's gut and railed her fist into its head with all her might and speed. Once, twice, three strikes before the hobgoblin began to cover up and twist onto his side. The creature then grabbed her by her right wrist and began to roll. Her light frame could not hold the beast down as it pulled her over and down deep into the mud while posturing up on its knees. She squirmed and screamed with all her might, but it

was futile under the heavy, green hands pressing down on her.

“Oh, how noble. Brave enough to die proper. Worthy to know death by name. I am Dolor and there will be songs amongst my people of the brave princess of humans!” Dolor spat with a mix of amusement and surprise, combined with the hatred he had for all fair creatures. As he raised his right hand off her chest, still pressing her face deep into the mud with the other; he turned his nails to her belly. Only separated by the thin soaked material of her blouse. “Gutting you will be easy,” the creature continued as he started to press the claw-like nails fiercely against her. Just before her skin tore, Jack stood behind the beast. He slipped his left arm around the creature’s neck and despite the pain and fresh dizziness of being beat in the head, he locked in a tight choke, gripping the inside of his right forearm with his left hand. He pulled hard using his back, wrenching the creature off her and over on to himself. Dolor thrashed as they rolled in the mud and gravel, over into a small puddle. Immediately, Alice was up on her feet diving into the mix of chaos and blood, bare knuckles first. The creature weighed nearly as much as both of them, but his airway was cut off by Jack’s tight grip. It reached up, seizing and pulling down on the young fletcher’s right arm. The pain was immense, but Jack continued to pull, giving a ferocious yell over new cracking sounds in his arm. Alice grabbed one of Dolor’s fingers with both of her hands and pulled it back away, twisting and breaking the digit of the creature. None let up. Alice pulled, scraped, and pummeled the beast while Jack squeezed and twisted the beast’s neck, until eventually the lump of green muscle and fat quit moving.

“Alice?!?” Jack shouted in surprise as she stood and stumbled a step away. He was not confident the creature was fully defeated and still held on. Looking around she quickly

found a stone on the edge of the road about the size of both of her fists put together.

“Move, Jack,” she commanded. He let go and struggled to get up from underneath the creature that seemed to inhale when released. She raised the stone and began to bash the thing’s head in, repeatedly. The rain continued to fall heavily. The fresh kicked and stirred marks in the mud were mixed with red blood, and now a dark pitch-black blood from Dolor’s head.

“It’s dead Alice,” Jack stated as he placed one hand on her shoulder. “It’s over.” She stood, wild eyed with tears streaming over a face speckled with red and black blood. His voice trembled like his freshly retwisted and mangled right hand as he continued, “It’s over Alice. ...You saved me,” she moved in, embracing him in a full hug. They held each other for what seemed like a long moment before he winced.

“Oh no,” she queried stepping back just enough to look him over, still embracing him. As he pulled up the trembling hand and twisted forearm, he secured it tight to his chest with his left hand.

“Are you ok?” He mustered while she placed a gentle hand on his. “I’m... I’m totally fine,” he continued.

“Your totally stubborn!” She answered.

“Me? You were supposed to get away,” he retorted with his words growing softer and more appropriately serious as they came out. They both looked at each other deeply, then to the dead creature. “We can worry about me in town,” he said nodding to his clutched wing.

“Very well. Let’s keep going,” she agreed as they began east once more.

Chapter 5: Manefold

On the east edge of Manefold, Arturius led his dark chocolate horse by the reins toward a Yarden officer. The two men stood in sharp contrast from one another. The paladin was tall, donning a grey cape and clad in full shining plate armor with gold accents. The other man was shorter wearing a purple sash, tan pants and a leather cuirass that left his dark, muscular arms exposed. The street was mildly busy with foot and mounted traffic, going between open air booths, the various shops and out to the fields. The land was soddened from the deluge that only just recently subsided and a west wind loudly rippled a large purple and gold flag overhead.

“I bet this breeze feels good in all that insecurity you’re wearing,” the man jested with a big smile as he flexed the five-foot shaft of his long-bladed spear over his shoulders with a creak from the wood.

“Not everyone can move as fast as you Captain Oren, some have to wear armor,” Arturius answered without much of a smile.

“Uh, oh, seems like you’re up to something serious today. What has you so focused?” Oren continued with a waning smile.

Arturius smirked and lightened the hard-set lines in his broad jaw before answering, “Am I that bad at spy craft?” Arturius’ words brought Oren to a loud rolling laughter.

“My boy, you couldn’t have lied to a League of Nations inquisitor asking where you got your dragon necklace from.” Oren stated retaining his big smile.

“Then at least you know you can trust me,” Arturius answered and continued, “Any news from the east? From the mountains or the plains?”

“Lots of news... but lots of the same news. Groups of... goblins...” Oren continued while relaxing his spear and stepping closer to the paladin to speak more quietly. “Groups of goblins and hobgoblins keep moving in between us and our neighbors. Some villages in Petram have been raided hard.”

“Hobgoblins can pass for men when hooded,” Arturius answered.

“Exactly!” Oren started, “That’s why every refugee is being welcomed face-to-face outside of town, on either road!”

“Yarden is no doubt well protected. Is there any record of these refugees?” The paladin asked.

“No reason. They all pass through to the coast, dryad or plains folk. No one ran off their lands by violence could afford to stay in Manefold,” Oren answered as a joke.

“Right...” Arturius feigned a smile the best he could before continuing, “Well, I have some business down the old trade road today...” Arturius’ words trailed off as two muddy and soaked refugees walking quickly past caught his keen green eyes.

“You’re looking for someone?” Oren asked not noticing who amongst the crowd Arturius had focused on.

“...Yeah. An inquisitor for the League of Nations,” he answered sounding serious, causing Oren to laugh heavily once more, “I’ll see you around Oren,” Arturius mounted his steed and gave it a quick nudge to quicken its steps back into town, behind the two that he noticed. Oren shook his head while his laughter trailed off. Smiling wide again, he stepped

away greeting a well-dressed man walking into town from the fields, carrying a small wooden basket.

Alice and Jack's eyes swiveled across town quickly as they walked close together. For two that grew up in Petram it was a lot to take in. The buildings were low and large, a mix of stone and wide timbers painted every color one could imagine. Soon after moving into town, the street went from mud to a paved stone highway that had an intricate stone fountain at the right side of the road as it changed to stone. Water sprayed up from the square stone fountain, fell and flowed across the street in a wide grooved stone gutter that cleaned the feet of those that traveled further into town as they walked through. The river could scarcely be seen on their left behind the row of brightly colored warehouses that backed up to the water's edge. Many had complicated rope and pulley cranes running through the middle of them. A horse behind them splashed loudly as it came through the fountain's gutter.

"What are we even looking for, Jack?" Alice asked as she leaned in even closer to her miserable looking friend, holding his hurt arm tight to his chest.

"They say the Hall of the One here was melted into shape by a dragon," he answered objectively and louder than she would have liked him to.

"Do you think they painted it like a flower as well," she jested half to amuse, and half to dismiss the style.

"It should be easy to spot," Jack answered flatly continuing to push on at a quickened pace.

"You can't miss it," a strong, direct voice added from behind them. They both stopped and turned quickly. Alice grabbing Jack with one hand, obviously readying herself to run

and pull him along. Arturius turned his towering horse to an angle and pulled reign, stopping a few feet from them. They all three looked each other over suspiciously. The sharpness in Jack's eyes was dulled by the pain he was carrying. The tall, strapping paladin slowly dismounted, leaving his long-handled sword sheathed on his steed along the saddle.

"Who is Taisteal?" he asked being diligent to observe their reaction. They stood there quiet, with obvious discomfort for a moment before Alice answered.

"No one we know," she tugged slightly at Jack who quickly spoke up and stayed put.

"Arturius?" Jack asked. The paladin's strong squared-off face showed genuine surprise.

"The color of his eyes?" The paladin asked in a serious tone as Alice relaxed her posture a bit.

"Gold," she answered. He stood in shock before continuing, more composed.

"Lady Rockhurst, sir; both of you should come with me immediately," Alice backed away a long step from him, and Jack lowered his good hand making a fist as Arturius reached out to offer her help mounting his horse. He nodded and continued, "You're right to be slow in trusting, but none of us want to make a scene. Not even here in Manefold."

"Let me guess, 'we are not safe here,'" she retorted with more than a touch of sarcasm.

"By the look of you, safety is not something you have seen in some time," Arturius lowered his voice and stepped closer before continuing, "The Council of priest are expecting you. Taisteal got a message to me. I will take you to them,"

he continued while extending a hand to Alice once more, with a sincere amount of courtesy.

“I’m not riding your horse,” she answered curtly.

“Ok,” he replied, “Sir, you’re injured. Rest while we travel to the Hall,” he continued directing his comment to Jack, who quickly eyed Alice’s disgruntled face before looking back to Arturius.

“I don’t need a ride,” Jack responded. With that the paladin’s attempt at making a kind face subsided with a heavy sigh, losing a bit of the formality and courtesy that he had mustered.

“Ok, then walk,” Arturius stated while turning and mounting. “It’s a half hour to the Hall of the One, on the far side of town,” he continued as he encouraged his steed forward without looking back. Jack and Alice stood there for a moment and gave each other an inquiring glance before looking up to see that the armored man and beast had stopped ahead of them to look back and see if they would follow. Arturius seemed embarrassed in his lack of confidence they would comply with him. They slowly began to follow behind and he started to head further into town.

The size of Manefold was surprising to them both as it was much larger than Petram, despite none of the buildings seeming to be half as old as the ones in their hometown. In fact, many new buildings were still under construction amongst the town. Still far from their destination, they would occasionally catch glimpses beyond the buildings of a black pointed tower up ahead. Eventually, they crossed through a market near the heart of town where a few heavily bearded dwarves from the north were arguing with some local merchants in a foreign tongue. That surprise, however, was overshadowed by seeing a couple of Dryads walking down a

street. There was a near glow to their presence and the wide range of green-hued striations in their skin and hair made them stand out all the more. Even more so than how they looked was how they moved. It seemed surreal. It was swift and smooth; every step and gesture like that of a dance. Even the conversation they were having in their own tongue as they passed was like a gentle song.

They continued on, silently behind Arturius and his steed. While Jack's astonishment at the different peoples and structures was apparent, Alice maintained a close and suspicious watch on their new guide through town. She mostly ignored everyone else, even the Dryads. What could not be ignored by either, however, was the Hall of the One that stood high above the other structures on the far west of the city. Tall and slightly triangular, the tower rose well over five hundred feet from its wide base. The stone that capped the top seemed squished into a thin blade-like tip. It was one of hundreds of dark, ancient boulders that made up the tower; each one larger than a horse-drawn carriage and molded together at the seams in a rising spiral pattern. From the front, no doors could be seen. Starting about a hundred feet up, there were perfectly round windows filled with silver-stained glass, each positioned in the center of the large bouldering stones. The tower was flanked by a long, tan plastered U-shaped building with a dark, exposed timber frame and slate roof.

As they crossed the road and approached the short but sturdy iron gate that separated the Halls' grounds from the public, Arturius looked over his two wet, bewildered and amazed new acquaintances.

"See? You can't miss it," he stated plainly. Dismounting, he turned his attention to the two grey-robed men opening the front gate for them. "The One knows you, brothers. Could

you clean Fit here and get ready two more steeds...?” Arturius asked nodding to his horse. His words faded from notice to both Alice and Jack as they stood in relative amazement, looking up at the impossible structure.

“Men cannot make such things,” the words came out of her aimlessly.

“Perhaps with magic...” Jack answered half to himself and to her. One of the robed men led Arturius’ horse through the gate and around the tower, as the other and the paladin stepped back to the two.

“You are correct, my lady, men did not build this,” Arturius interjected and continued, “This is Bodhar. He will see you to some of our guest quarters so you can clean up, eat and rest, if you would like.” Alice snapped out of the near trance that she was in observing the tower and took a step back.

“How are we to trust you?” She directed the words strongly despite her exhaustion. Before Arturius responded, Jack interposed in an all but completely defeated tone.

“Alice...” Jack’s eyes were heavy, and the color had begun to leave his face. They were both filthy and completely broke, having lost her belongings in the river. It had been two, going on three long days with nearly no food or rest. Her strong gaze softened as she looked at him. Arturius, too, took note of Jack’s arm and noticed for the first time how improperly twisted it was.

“Bodhar, can such a break be fixed at one time?” Arturius asked the dark, older man with short, shaved stubble who simply smiled pleasantly and nodded.

“It will hurt, young sir, but I have seen our priest do what seems impossible,” Arturius directed his words to Jack.

“So have I,” Jack answered looking at the two strangers.

“Of course; you must have,” he responded to Jack before asking Alice, “Do you trust Taisteal?” A small moment of silence stirred amongst them.

“I had little option not to,” she answered poignantly.

“Then I hope your fortunes improve soon, Lady Rockhurst, but right now it seems they have not,” Arturius answered with a bit of harshness to his tone before softening and continuing, “For any comfort it may offer, the first time I trusted Taisteal I had little say in the matter either. I was much younger than either of you then. Many years of he and I trusting each other have passed since then and that trust has served us well. Come, there are four other paladins lodging here today. It is the safest place you could be now.” Looking around the outskirts of the city behind them, she wiped away a quick tear before turning back to any of them, hoping no one noticed.

“Very well,” she answered. Jack’s body language deflated even more as he visibly relaxed and slouched his shoulders. The two entered the gate with Arturius and Bodhar; the huge tower looming overhead.

Chapter 6: Ascertain

Jack sat alone in the large stone tub looking over his now fully functioning right hand and arm. The warm room was dimly lit by the fireplace on the far side. Low notes of nearby priest chanting filled the room ever so slightly. The words were in the same language of spells, supposedly the ancient language of dragons. The paladin had not lied about the healing being painful, yet it was short lived, and the relief instant. Studying Jack's face while his arm was pulled back into place under the words of Bodhar and one other, Alice had reacted stronger than he did, nearly attacking Bodhar. It all felt like a dream as he reclined into the bath that was far better than any he had ever experienced before. His thoughts wondered...

This sure beats a cold bucket of water back at the house – even beats the baths at the 'single moat' that Keera used to draw for me... The Fletcher never understood the joy of a clean, quiet bath with a book to read. He thought to himself, looking as the light and shadows from the fire danced on the ceiling, 'Why do you spend your wages on such?...' the words of his father replayed in his mind. He would have never believed I got those for free. All it cost was keeping her secret... His thoughts continued, now considering the secrets he had kept about the spells and words Taisteal had taught him over the years; moreover, the secrets his father and Taisteal had kept from him... and Alice. I bet Alice is less impressed with her bath... The thought of her scoffing at such a nice and inviting tub brought a smirk to his face. It took little lingering on thoughts of his best friend in a bath before a blush of embarrassment was on his cheeks. I must be mad, he thought to himself. I have enjoyed these past few days more than the entirety of last year and it's all because of time spent with her... One of the vessels? The other child of prophecy?

...Taistea I hope you survived... his thoughts continued as he reclined.

Alice had tried to relax in her bath, but comfort was hard to find. The last couple of hours of 'rest' were hardly such for her. She had bathed quickly and dressed even quicker in the clothes and boots the priest Bodhar had provided. *At least this riding skirt and shirt fits properly...* her thoughts turned from anxious thoughts to a mix of annoyance and amusement as she considered how her friend in the next room would tease her for being too spoilt to enjoy her bath. 'Not good enough for the princess?' he would have teased back when she was just a lady; before Indoctus' proposal. Before her life had been turned upside down. *My father could not have known what type of man Indoctus really is. He never would have agreed to the proposal if he had known.* The thoughts rambling in her head were painful in a myriad of ways. Her father had kept the truth from her about being adopted or rather, found. For appearance's sake he and the fletcher tried to keep her and Jack apart. *Jack...* his name resounded in her head. The temptation to run off to the coast with him was as strong as ever. *Perhaps we could slip off from this paladin and the rest of these zealous chanting fools.* Her thoughts continued. She mused over a way for Jack and herself to slip out together, over her father, and over the handsome man Jack had grown into. Considering the last few days of running, her thoughts settled on fighting the hobgoblin, Dolor, in the mud and surviving.

"Am I done running?" She muttered softly before continuing, more determined "...I am done running and Father can answer for himself when I see him." The thought nearly brought more tears considering she did not know if her father had even survived the hobgoblin assault. Her thoughts were interrupted all together by a gentle knock at the door that

startled her only for a moment before she answered in a soft but firm voice, "Come in, Jack."

"How did you know it was me?" He asked while entering and shutting the door behind him. She smiled slightly with her eyes glowing in kindness, looking him over.

"It just sounded like you," she answered.

"Know me that well, do you?" He asked while admiring the way the fresh clothes fell about her figure.

"Honestly..." she began to answer as the two locked eyes, "Not as well as I would like to –" she paused looking over her friend with a smirk. "...Your wearing armor?"

"...I look *that* out of place?" He asked hoping the question was rhetorical, and continued, "Arturius gifted me this leather gambeson from their armory."

"It looks good on you," she answered as his smirk grew even wider, but she cut him off before he could joke. "It's fitting of your courage," as that his smile softened to one of gratitude.

"They want us to join a meeting with the 'council' of priests tonight," he stated.

"I am sure they will 'want' a lot from us," she answered unamused.

"But I know what you want," Jack said while moving closer to Alice.

"Do you know what you want, Jack?" She asked in a soft tone. He nodded his head sincerely as he placed his renewed hand on her shoulder.

Arturius lead the way across the dim courtyard from the outer building to the great tower as the two followed behind. The sun had all but set and firelight glowed orange out the rear and only door to the tower. Out the silvered windows of the surreal tower, the firelight cast beams of color like that of pure moonlight shining out into the night sky. The tower seemed even more impressive at night and while it was a sight to behold from the outside, the tower's grandeur only grew in spectacle as they entered. As they did, Bodhar shut the tall, arched-top door behind them. The interior wall was the same dark boulders from the exterior. About every thirty feet up, singular, large square beams of steel were forged into place across from the walls. Looking up at them created a visual spiral as each one was placed what would have been about fifteen minutes further around the face of a clock than the one below. They seemed to be polished, and reflected the firelight from below in countless directions. Surprisingly, there was only a ground floor. No stairs led up into the vast open ceiling overhead. Around the hot and bright fire in the center of the room was a circular table seemingly carved from a single stone. At the high-backed wooden chairs around the table, sat eight older priests all in tan robes like the one Taisteal wore. They sat peering at Jack and Alice though the shimmering heat waves from the fire in the center of the table. Arturius slid one chair back for Alice and gestured for the two to take a seat. He soon joined the three other paladins standing guard near the single door of the tower. There was an immediate air of tension in the room.

"Please be seated with us. I hope you have found your accommodations favorable Lady Rockhurst and Mr." One of the priests with a white beard and tall pointed ears spoke with a loud but frail voice, before allowing the statement to trail off into a question. Jack and Alice shared a confused look before taking a seat.

“Jack Fletcher,” he answered with a straight face. Alice revealed a slight smirk before concealing her amusement at the juxtaposition of the priest’s seriousness with Jack’s sarcasm.

“We understand you have had several hard days and you have our condolences for the grief befell you these days. Arturius, will you read aloud the note your received from our ‘traveling’ brother, Taisteal?” The white-bearded priest continued as his voiced cracked like thin ice under a heavy burden. Arturius walked up beside Alice at the table and revealed a small parchment that seemed to be burnt on the edges.

“The vessels’ come. Lady Rockhurst is one. Seek the door. Great Ghost in the Dallis.” The paladin spoke loudly with the words echoing up through the tower. Immediately several of the priests began talking in angst voices amongst themselves. The older white-bearded priest sat still, eyeing the two before one spoke up.

“How could Taisteal possibly know Lady Rockhurst is a vessel? We all know of her father, the Lord of Petram. Are they not supposed to be found? To be orphans with no lineage?” A pale priest with bright blue eyes spoke up. Jack shifted uncomfortably in his seat with the eyes studying the two of them. “Are they not?” he mused rotating a palm upward, while turning to his companions who shuffled hushed comments back and forth. The fire between the council and Alice made it all but impossible to understand clearly their distant discourse. Her face grew hotter like the fire, in contrast to the nervous concealment on her friend’s face next to her.

“What exactly is the purpose of this meeting?” Alice asked sternly interrupting the murmuring priests.

“To ascertain your fates,” the white-bearded priest answered a bit curtly while the others became silent.

“And your expectation is that you will be the ones to do that?” She pressed, continuing to speak strongly.

“It seems Taisteal has already done thus,” one dark-skinned priest answered in a robust, but gentle, voice. A few ramblings escaped some of the other priests bemoaning their confidence in Taisteal.

“Drem, let us deal in fact and not in one brother’s presumptions,” the white-bearded priest answered. At that, the others set in, agreeing with the older priest’s answer.

“Our faithless brother at that...” a priest with short red hair stated while unintentionally making eye contact with Jack.

“What does he lack faith in?” Jack asked the man, surprised that his question came out loud.

“Do not be too dismissive, Ahdom,” the white-bearded priest continued, “Taisteal is as well-versed in the old wisdoms as anyone here and more versed with the current comings and goings of the world. For every good prophecy there is a good skeptic.”

“You mean to say he doesn’t believe the prophecy of ‘The Door’?” Jack pressed.

“Who could know. He always does as he pleases, with no explanation,” Ahdom added to the amusement of a couple other priests. Alice and Jack shot each other suspicious glances.

“We are not here to debate the messenger, but the message,” the white-bearded one stated.

“Agreed, and if there is even a chance they are the children of prophecy, we must escort them to the Sky Cap Mountains with haste,” another priest with a scared face and a committed expression added.

“If there is a chance?” Drem interjected to a few raised eyebrows by his fellow priests.

“To the Sky Caps? Straight north through the Marcelano civil war?” Ahdom asked disgruntled and continued, “It is not even settled which mountain range ‘The Door’ resides in, and you would lead them through the bloodiest civil war since the League of Nations held power?”

“Taisteal, and others are confident it is somewhere in the Sky Caps. I believe it myself,” Drem responded.

“Oh yes; again, our world-wise brother,” Ahdom replied sarcastically. Jack noticed the ever so slight annoyance growing in the corners of Alice’s face at being discussed more so than being included in the conversation.

“Brothers,” the white-bearded one spoke up, silencing the crowd once again before asking, “Great Ghost in the Dallis,’ does that mean anything to the two of you?” At this Alice’s eyes skated past the stares from the priest with a touch a fear thinking of Indoctus, while Jack’s gleaned with a touch anger.

“Indoctus, the prince of the Dallis, is in league with the hobgoblins that attacked Petram,” Jack answered.

“...Not the prince, the King,” Drem interjected and continued, “Word came from our people in the east. The King was killed by one of his trusted guardsmen. Indoctus is King now, even if he doesn’t know yet.”

“Then that settles what must be done now. We cannot keep ‘the vessels’ so near a hostile kingdom and we must warn the Yarden Council here in Manefold,” the scared-faced one answered.

“I will not be kept or sent anywhere. Jack and I will return to Petram and ‘ascertain’ the fate of my father,” Alice answered forcefully.

“...and since none of you seem concerned, Taisteal’s fate as well,” Jack added trying to match her tone.

“If Taisteal is right, you would be heading straight into the Great Ghost’s mouth!” Ahdom stated, dumbfounded while the other priests each began to interject their own thoughts.

“Brothers!” The white bearded old man shouted to bring them to silence once again, “My Lady, understand that we desire good for you as well as for your people in Petram. Same goes for the locals who have so accommodated this council ever since the fall of the League of Nations. Far be it from us to disrespect the sovereignty of the Yarden leaders. I am sorry, Lady Rockhurst, but there are followers of the one on their council. They will want a say. ...We should all meet with them in the morning,” he added with a bit of pride in his old voice. Alice glared at the lot of them. Jack glanced around at the exit to see Arturius and the other paladins speaking to one another in hushed tones.

“Keeping Lady Rockhurst against her will? Far be it from us to disrespect the Sovereignty of a Dallis leader either,” Drem spoke up, looking at his fellow priests with a hint of perplexation. Some eyed him back in confusion at the consideration of Alice being a ‘leader.’ “Tell the council what we think we have discovered, but the Lady and her companion must be allowed to do as they wish. The Yarden council will

surely understand. We cannot hold a foreign noble against her will," he continued.

"You would allow them alone back into a kingdom ripe with hobgoblins, and who knows what else? What of opening the door?" The white-bearded one asked pointedly.

"Not alone," Arturius stepped in, "The young man is right; someone must investigate the safety of our brother, Taisteal."

"I will go with them as well," the paladin standing nearest Arturius interjected and continued, "Our 'traveling' brother may actually know how to find something outside the library." The priests looked about each other and to the paladins.

Drem looked as if panic came and went on his face before he spoke up, "Well then, it seems all our fates are ascertained," his dark eyes lay heavy on Alice and Jack. The others in the room looked around with mostly unsettled faces.

"So be it. I will see you off in the morning," the white-bearded priest said flatly to the surprise of most of the other priests before standing up. "We are adjourned, brothers."

The mood of everyone was a mixture of confusion, frustration, and suspicion while everyone began to exit the large spire. Some brothers quickly clumped together, walking out having muted conversations. Some lingered giving long thoughtful stares at the two potential 'vessels.' Jack and Alice noticed the older, white-bearded priest quickly pacing across the yard alone, toward the sleeping quarters of the Hall.

"Where is he heading so fast?" She asked both Jack and Arturius who had stayed behind near the two, as they were slow to exit the spire.

“Fealltóir has never been one to enjoy not getting his way,” Arturius answered.

“You could say that several more times,” the other Paladin who agreed to escort them and search for Taisteal, answered. Drem walked up slowly to the group as they exited the single door of the tower, his dark frame hesitated behind them for a moment before he stepped closer.

“Have you ever noticed the other brothers being so quick to quarrel and murmur?” He asked not waiting for an answer, “Dilis, you and Arturius have only been back in Yarden but for a few weeks. Something is seriously wrong here,” Drem added while doing a quick motion with his left hand, while looking around flightily.

“What is that?” Alice asked, watching his hand motion. He continued the motion being sure to keep his body between himself and the few other priests still in the courtyard. He finished by bringing up the same hand and putting one figure over his lips and whispering, “Príobháideach.” He glanced around quickly and continued, “What I say now, only you four will hear and I will be brief. Just before our meeting I saw him in my mirror and he said to me, ‘keep them there for me if they come.’ I don’t know which of the other priests here may have gotten the same message, but I am sure if you do not slip away now, you will never leave Manefold.

“Who spoke to you in a mirror?” Arturius asked in a hushed tone.

“...The Great Ghost,” Drem replied after a brief pause with a look of panic coming over him. Jack, Alice and Arturius quickly glanced over each other, with the tension of the conversation rising. One of the other paladins was still standing in the courtyard with Bodhar, lighting exterior

sconces with flint between the U-shaped building and the tower in its center. They seemed not to pay them too much attention.

“Are you sure?” Dilis asked, remaining calmer than the three others around him.

“There could be no mistake. Just as it is no mistake that all the other priests here know for certain that you two are the vessels to open the door,” Drem concluded with a mix of nervousness and authority.

“Then we should not delay,” Arturuis answered, seemingly much to Drem’s approval.

“But you cannot go to Petram. That is expected by the priests now and indeed dangerous if Indoctus has fallen to the shadow.” Alice went to protest but Jack grabbed her gently and quickly by the arm and gave her a look she did not quite understand. “You must head east to the coast. ...So you can sail north around Marcelano, avoiding their landlocked civil war and get to the Sky Caps.”

“What will become of Taisteal...?” he paused with his green eyes darting downward. “Understood. We will do what we must,” Arturuis said glancing back up and feeling, what must be curious eyes, from beyond the windows of the priests’ resting quarters and libraries. Drem visibly relaxed. Dilis seemed calm despite all the revelations of the last hour. Arturuis continued, “Dilis, prep your horse. You two, follow me,” he gave Drem a nod of thanks before they all quickly departed in different ways. Alice, again, went to protest but Jack gently pulled her in the direction Arturuis was striding off, before she had a chance.

“Trust me,” Jack whispered.

It was not long before they had slipped away from the tower. Its light display painted the sky silver behind them as their steeds carried them ever further away. They may have been strangers to the horses Arturius had gotten for them, but the steeds were well trained and easy to ride. Even so for Jack, who had spent very little time in a saddle. Arturius and Dilis were both surprisingly good at being discrete, despite being clad in reflective, polished heavy armor. The priests' apparent confusion at the outcome of the meeting must have helped their slipping away. The four continued on, crossing a tall, complicated bridge over the Yarden river just a little way back into town. It was hard to see how tall the stone and timber bridge stood above the water aside from the reflections of torches on the river's dark surface that seemed way too far below. Jack was surprised to have been so fascinated with the tower that he missed seeing such a bridge earlier. With Arturius leading, then Jack, Alice, and Dilis trailing, they crossed over the wide, sturdy structure onto the south bank. There were few people on the streets at that hour, mostly soldiers of Yarden. They easily identified the Paladins and let them all pass without more than a nod of respect. Most of town had been intermittently lit with torches and sconces on poles, but the large well-rutted dirt road they arrived at on the south edge of town was dark and empty. It was the trade route that ran all the way from the west coast back to Hortus, the Capital of the Dallis, east of Petram and the plains. Arturius lit a torch with a strike of a flint stone and turned his horse west toward the ocean. Jack turned east and upped the speed of his mount with a slight bump from one of his heels. Alice followed, not sure exactly what the plan was, but eager to head in the direction of her father instead of toward the coast.

"Arturius," Dilis said just loud enough to get his attention. Looking around seeing his young acquaintances

heading the wrong way, he scoffed and turned his horse back in a gallop. He quickly caught up beside Alice and Jack. Dilis followed the lot of them, leading his steed with a calm, slow hand.

“What are the two of you thinking?” Arturius asked harshly and quietly.

“Heading to Petram for her father and Taisteal,” Jack said self-assured. Alice’s smile was nearly big enough to be obvious in the relative dark, only lit by Arturius’ torch.

“The priests will expect us to have gone this way when they realize we are gone! We just agreed with Drem...” he scolded.

“Drem expects us to go the other way, to the coast... If only one of them had bad intentions for us, he may not have been able to keep us from going. If all of the priests had wanted to keep us there, do you really think we slipped away against the will of eight master wizards?” Jack asked, keeping his confident tone. Dilis rode up alongside Arturius making a surprised gesture as if to say he agreed with the young lad. Alice’s smile grew to a curious look, as she wondered if she should be impressed by her friend’s calculation.

“He has a point,” Dilis said calmly before asking Arturius, “How well do you know Drem or the other council priests in Yarden?”

“None as well as I know Taisteal,” Arturius answered as they all continued to ride.

“Same for me,” the older paladin added.

“Taisteal does not trust them,” Jack interjected.

“How do you know that?” Alice asked.

“He kept you and I a secret from them for years,” he answered.

“... and how long have you known Taisteal?” Dilis asked objectively with an air of innocence in his question.

“Ever since my mother found us in a field and presented us to Lord Rockhurst,” Jack answered to the perplexation of Alice, who did not share his surety that revealing that detail to the paladins was a good idea. The two armor clad men spent a moment amazed at the layered but subtle revelation.

“Fair enough. We make our way to Petram and Taisteal,” Arturius said with more confidence in what Jack had said than he would have preferred and spurred his horse to the head of the column, heading east to Petram.

“You are the ones of prophecy... I never imagined I would see the world’s end,” Dilis spouted out in a hushed tone before he followed along in haste.

Chapter 7: Steel and stone

Sad notes carried into the air from a group of men dressed in black and playing shawms that lead the procession out of Castle Rockhurst. Behind them followed a tall banner of green and gold, then a cart laden with all the types of flowers the area produced this late in summer. The crowd was as large as any ever seen in Petram with knights bearing both local banners and ones from as far as Hortus. There was only one explanation for such an occurrence.

Alice sat upon the steed surrounded by Jack and her two new paladin companions. It was a bright day but the shade of the large oaks on the far west edge of town cast a long, dark shadow over them. They were close enough to make out details but not faces amongst the crowd of black that parted through the scurrying refugees that tried not to get stuck in the crowd of somber locals. Jack encouraged his horse up alongside Alice's. She wiped tears from her face and looked away as he placed a hand on her shoulder. Jack's empathy was clearly written on him. It had not been long since he had lost his father, the Fletcher. She struggled to keep composure and so did he as he felt his friend tremble at the distant sight of what could only be her father's body being carted out of their home.

"There are a lot of knights out there," Dilis stated calmly a few strides further into the shadows behind Alice. "Are any to be had as our allies?"

"Doubtful, with what these two have reported about the new king... Very doubtful," Arturius answered, eyeing the numbers of armed men amongst the funeral crowd.

"The shadows seem wrong here..." Dilis added looking up to the mid-day sun. The two paladins took in their surroundings with keen eyes. Indeed, the shadows seemed to

lay toward the castle from all directions, despite the position of the sun rising overhead from the east.

“I have a plan,” Alice said in a shaky voice. She turned her mount to face the two paladins. Her eyes red and freshly wiped dry. “It will work...” her words becoming sharper and focused, “...but you three are not going to like it.”

Taistal sat there shivering, not from cold but from pain and hunger. He had not been fed and had barely been given water since being captured. His mouth was dry and gaged with a flax cloth, tied in by a leather strip. A blindfold was tightly twisted around his eyes and his hands tied to the heavy wooden chair behind his back. Recently, Indoctus had been ‘working’ on his legs with the gift from the hobgoblins. He could not see what was being done but could certainly feel it. Some sort of steel or other type of metal was clamped on his ankles. There was so much pressure, he could only tell he was bleeding by the sticky feeling on the bottom of his bare feet.

I have endured worse humiliation before; but everyone has a breaking point. How long will I last...will this be the time I give in? He thought briefly before pushing the thought out of his head and returning to a memory from long ago. *...I remember...there...right there...* he thought. The sun-soaked breeze was warm but just enough to keep the chill away in the high valley surrounded by tall snow-capped mountains. Most of the wildflowers in the valley were only revealing spring buds but some deep purple thistle and tightly wound white roses had already started to bloom. The blooms stood in sharp contrast to the deep green of the valley. His friends, a man and woman... their names... Tavish and Atoosa were running – no, frolicking toward him through the thick, waist deep foliage and pointing up into the sky behind him. The stone cup that he brought mead up to his lips with was

smooth and the mead sweet. A cold gust of wind blasted around him for just a moment swirling the grass and flowers. The gust was immediately followed by four heavy thumps impacting the ground. *How did you beat me here?* A vast and regal voice came rolling soft and comforting from behind him where the swirl of air had originated. He looked back seeing a most beautiful, two-hundred-foot-long, thin-framed dragon. She was made all the more alluring by the elegant apple seed-shaped and silvery white scales that cloaked her figure. The dragon's emerald eyes glistened in the sun as she stood, wings folded back and head held high.

"What!!? Here too?" Necscius shouted just outside the door of the room where Taisteal was being held. The large priest snapped out of his deep memory, flexing against his bonds. Clattering of feet and more shouts followed with a couple clangs of steel. "Hold up right there! Don't come any closer!!!" Necscius continued frantically, "... My lady??" He asked.

"Stand aside Necscius!" A strong, delicate and familiar feminine voice commanded from the other side of the door. The sound of more hurried steps... the door slammed open, and soon his blindfold was removed to reveal Arturius. Alice was also coming into the room, wielding a bow and another Paladin that he recognized but could not place his name, stood with his sword drawn at the door. Neither of the paladins were in their armor. As his gag was released, Taisteal shook his head in disbelief.

"Foolish youth," he mustered in a dry voice; partially frustrated but mostly relieved. Arturius and Taisteal shared a look of respectful appreciation for each other before the priest's eyes darted over to Alice. "Hurry with the bindings, we must hurry."

“Yes, we must,” Dilis replied keeping the tip of his long, two-handed sword pointed at Necscius, who stood dumb-founded just outside in the hall.

“Taisteal, your feet!” Alice exclaimed. Looking down he also noticed what she and Arturius had. His tendons had all but been completely severed above his heels by two-piece steel clamps that had been tightened onto his ankles. Black iron screws running between the two sharp pieces held the contraptions in place. Some sort of inscription was etched into the blades, but Alice could not make out its meaning.

“Can you stand?” Arturius asked as he quickly cut the bindings, securing the large man’s hands. Taisteal began to stand up only to jerk in pain and start toppling over forward. Alice grabbed onto his shoulders and tried to keep him up, but the priest was far too big and heavy. Crashing forward, over onto his hands and knees, the big man looked around the room.

“Apparently not... where is Jack?” He asked with a tight, deep voice.

“He will meet us with horses out front,” Alice answered quickly. The big man nodded in relief at hearing Jack was alive.

“That’s good,” he replied. Looking up to Arturius with a grim, serious face he stated, “You will have to choose to slay me or carry me; but you were right to come back for me either way.”

“Are you sure these two are the ones that can open the door?” Arturius asked surprising Alice and Dilis by avoiding an answer to Taisteal’s dark statement. Moreover, the paladin matched Taisteal’s cold, calculating demeanor concerning the present circumstance.

“Yes,” Taisteal answered after a moment of intense silence.

“I’ll never get them to the door without you,” Arturius answered and continued, “Dilis, I am the better swordsman. You carry Taisteal.”

“That may be, but you also have the younger and stronger back. The lady here is not going to carry that anvil of a man either,” Dilis answered keeping his usually cool demeanor while glancing over his shoulder at the two of them with a smirk. The Petram Knight took a step forward, intending to take advantage of what seemed like the paladin’s distraction. At that, Dilis took a quick step sideways while slapping the wrist of Nescsius’ sword hand with the flat side of his long sword. Nescsius railed in panic dropping his own sword. “You better run for help,” Dilis berated as the recently unarmed knight quickly complied and ran away down the hall. “A good time to hurry,” the older paladin encouraged. Arturius complied and pulled the large priest up onto his shoulders, grunting as he stood under the weight of the heavy priest, with Alice’s most sincere attempt to help.

“Which way out of here, Lady Rockhurst?” Arturius asked heading to the door.

“To the right!” She answered. They all moved with haste. Shouts were coming from various places throughout the castle. Smoke was building in the opposite end of the hallway that was just outside the room Taisteal had been held in for several days. Alice led them quickly down the levels of the castle she grew up in. Arturius kept up with the other two, but the strain of carrying such a large man down three flights of stairs was apparent. They strode quickly though the main foyer, only slowing briefly for Alice to thank an older maid who had helped them in through the small back door she had

used so many times before, to slip out of to go to the tired meadow. The main double doors that led into the courtyard in the front were already open. As they stepped outside into the bright sunlight, two black-and-gold-caped soldiers from Hortus sprinted in from the front gate to meet them. Alice hesitated only for a moment before nocking and setting loose an arrow that sank deep into one of the soldiers' thighs. It was a splendid shot that slipped in between the plates of armor. Dilis stepped forward while the other soldier that approached slowed to face him. They quickly began to circle. Dilis calmly stepped in close, within striking range and held his sword low with both hands. He pointed the tip of his blade toward the opposing soldiers left foot. The man lunged in to make a stab at the paladin's unarmored chest. His blade came a few inches from piercing Dilis before the old paladin swung up at an angle, deflecting the stabbing attack while also slicing deep into the man's left arm in the process, with the tip of his blade. It was a perfect master strike that wedged its way between the enemy's steel shoulder plates, and gave evidence to the damage with a new veneer of red on the blade. The soldier fell to his knees crying out in pain. Dilis broke off from the attention of the downed knight and continued to lead through the courtyard, as they all avoided the frustrated and hobbled soldier with an arrow stuck in his leg.

As they neared the exterior gate, a green-caped knight of the Dalis ran into the threshold through the open gate, drawing his sword looking over the group frantically.

"Lady Rockhurst?!?" He exclaimed.

"It is. Stand aside, Sir Bonum!" She answered. Looking up at the large priest who had been Indocuts' prisoner being carried by a stranger and another with a bloodied long sword, he shook his head in response.

“Step away from Lady Rockhurst you rabble!!” He commanded broadening his stance in the thresh hold and raising his sword overhead.

“Sir Bonum, you are either with me and my companions,” Alice said firmly walking in between Dilis and the man who had been knighted by her father when she was a child, barely old enough to remember, “or with the traitorous new king and his black-caped scoundrels.” Looking past the lot of them into the center of the courtyard he saw the two wounded and hobbled soldiers that were a part of Indoctus’ reinforcements. They had only recently arrived in town.

“Traitorous King?” He asked, lowering his sword noticing an arrow in one of the black caped knights and then looking to Alice’s bow.

“Traitorous to the grave of my father,” she answered with a mixture of perplexation, grief and strength that showed on her face as clearly as it did in the items upon the Rockhurst banners that fluttered overhead at the courtyard’s entrance. His eyes flashed with surprise, then a comprehending anger.

“Then you are the Lord of Petram, my Lady,” he replied, eyeing the other men suspiciously before joining alongside them, heading out onto the street in front of the castle. To their right, far in the distance beyond some townfolk still dressed in black, they could see Jack and a crowd of horses racing in their direction from the edge of the forest that bordered town. To their left, back to the east, came an eerie and familiar voice accompanied by the clatter of hooves.

“Lady Rockhurst!?! Who are these champions that have returned my queen? ...and nearly in time for her father’s funeral!” Shouted Indoctus in rapturous surprise, as he quickly stopped and dismounted his horse several long strides before

meeting them. As soon as his plate-covered boots hit the dusty street, he began slowly stepping toward them, eyeing Taisteal and the lot of them. Two other armed men in the Hortus colors of black and gold, stayed mounted on their horses and began circling around them, while peering at the would be escapist through the slits in their closed armet helmets. Behind Indoctus on the far east side of town, rose a billowing column of smoke from the fire Jack successfully had someone light for him earlier. There were a dozen more mounted men headed toward them from that direction as well. "What would be a fitting reward from your king for saving his Queen?" He continued directing his words at the Knight of Petram. Sir Bonum eyed Alice who shook her head in disgust.

"You are no King," she shouted.

"Emperor... perhaps would be more fitting..." he replied haughtily.

"You killed my father?!?" She continued half asserting and half asking.

"I fear he was simply too weak to survive this world my love," he answered with words like burning honey in an iron pan.

Infuriated and thinking of her father, she drew and sent an arrow at Indoctus. Without much more excitement coming over his expression he ducked the shot meant for his head, letting the arrow fly past. At that, his two soldiers spurred their horses into the group swinging their swords wildly at the paladins and Sir Bonum. Arturius quickly stepped back attempting to avoid attacks against himself and Taisteal whom he stilled carried with great effort. Sir Bonum failed an attempt to parry an incoming blow. The mounted black-caped knight's sword slashed though Sir Bonum's exposed neck and

collar bone; he fell, gushing red. Dilis again swung his sword from a low guard parrying the incoming attack and stepping right up against the horse the attacking knight rode. He followed that by delivering a single-handed riposte stab through the mounted knight's torso and dragging the wounded knight off his horse with his free hand. Arturius could barely keep his distance, back-pedaling from the advancing mounted knight who had just struck down Sir Bonum.

"Ainmhí fiáin!!" Arturius shouted while staring into the eyes of the horse carrying his attacker. It neighed and began to buck wildly. The knight was thrown to the ground. The scuffle of men and beast kicked up dust amongst them all. Without hesitation, Dilis pulled his sword from the fresh kill, strode over and once again, finding the gaps in plated armor, drove his sword through the thrown knight. The black-caped man struggled to stand under the weight of his own steel cladding that was meant to protect him.

"Impressive friends you have been making, my dear," Indoctus toyed out the words with smoke like fluidity, as Alice stood her ground. He slowly drew his dagger and bastard sword. She fired another arrow at him not ten feet away. This time he slashed the arrow with his sword, reacting impossibly fast. The two swirling pieces of the arrow glanced across the plated armor on his chest. His steely blue eyes took her in a wild gaze as she stepped toward him with signs of fear leaking through her attempted demeanor of resolve. He drank in the hints of panic and fear like a fine wine.

"Lady Rockhurst!" Arturius exclaimed. She snapped out of the near trance-like stare he was drawing her into and began to stride away from the king. Without hesitation and still calm, as if he had not just slain two well-trained soldiers, Dilis stepped around her and took his low guard stance once

more to face Indoctus. Their shadows lay long in the direction of the king. The knights behind Indoctus were closing in and Jack was just arriving amongst the fray with five saddled horses from the other direction. Indoctus stepped in with a heavy overhead swing from his sword. Dilis came up with an attempted master strike, deflecting the King's first swing but having the advance of his own sword's tip deflected by Indoctus' dagger. The two separated and circled but for a second, before the iron-jawed king attacked again. Dilis was able to deflect and parry the blows but this time it was a fast combination of attacks with both his sword and dagger. After four loud clashes of steel, they separated again for just a second. This time they circled the opposite way. Alice had backed away to the horses that were just arriving for them. Arturius and Jack were both struggling Taisteval up onto a horse. Indoctus' wild gaze looked past his opponent for a second to glimpse the horses and the threat of his captures escaping. Looking back to Dilis he stepped in harshly and quickly. He deflected one, then two attacks from the paladin as Dilis tried to keep his distance. The king was too fast and fierce, even in the weight and protection of his armor. He closed the distance completely and collided shoulder to shoulder with Dilis, whose long sword was glanced to the side. The steel-clad King drove the older man backward as Dilis backpedaled to stay standing. Indoctus then shoved his dagger hilt deep into his opponent's unarmored chest.

"Dilis!!!" Arturius cried out just after getting the priest mounted. Indoctus then drove his sword through the man's chest also as Dilis dropped his sword and went limp impaled twice over by the King. The mounted knights were arriving behind Indoctus. Jack, Alice and the rest were little more than thirty feet from the deadly king.

“Just remember who the ghost preferred, boy!” Taisteal’s voice boomed at the vile man as he leaned back into the saddle of the horse he had been placed on. Indoctus’ wild glance and sure attempt at a vicious comeback of words was cut short by the priest’s thunderous one-word shout.

“Mionbhruar!!!” The word bellowed from the priest as if there were a dozen of him saying the same thing. The ground shook and the front walls of Castle Rockhurst began to shatter and crumble into large slivers of stone. “Mionbhruar scaip!!!” At that, the pieces of stone began to fling clear across the street between them, and Indoctus and his arriving knights. They could see some stones knock down the arriving knights, both horse and rider, and into the buildings on the other side of the street. One stone about the size of a carriage could be seen landing beside Indoctus through the intense dust and splattering dirt. Behind the stone rolling across the street, the king disappeared into the cloud of dirt and debris. When the commotion was over; the dust settled in heavy, limiting visibility. The front walls of the castle were stripped bare to the foundations and scattered in chunks over the road in piles six feet high, all the way to the exposed wood-framed buildings across the street. Arturius took a few steps toward the rubble, being the only one not yet mounted on a horse and ready to go.

“Pladin, we must leave!” Taisteal prompted to Arturius.

“I need to make sure he was crushed,” he answered in a fit of rage.

“Whether the man is destroyed or not, the Great Ghost is here. Right here!” Taisteal insisted and continued, “Are you going to kill the whole army of the Dallis? Fight the shadow itself,” the enraged paladin seemed not to hear.

“Arturius!” Alice interjected in a loud voice that seemed to carry more than it should. At this, Arturius sighed.

“Goodbye, Dilis,” he uttered under his breath in a defeated tone, before turning and mounting a horse that Jack was holding by the reigns for him.

“Which way?” Jack asked as the paladin mounted.

“Follow me,” Taisteal answered. Alice, Jack and Arturius followed him in a gallop west out of the smoking and billowing town of Petram and back into the forest.

Chapter 8: "Trust"

They rode straight through from the calamity of mid-morning at Castle Rockhurst into a night that was dim, brisk, and dry. A crescent moon hung overhead giving off just enough light for everyone following Taisteal to see. His horse lead down the mostly straight and flat dirt road. The pace they maintained on the horses kicked up enough dust so that everyone had dust sticking to their sweat, that now felt cold against the night air. He would occasionally ride up alongside Jack and Alice's steeds to say a few words with an outstretched hand. Each time at this, their mount would seem to be renewed. Jack recognized the words, "Anáil athnuaite", which meant something along the lines of renewing breath. They were in the tongue of dragons, the same language the spell he had practiced had been in. Luckily the unmounted horse that carried Arturius' and Dilis' armor followed with little fuss or attention from the riders. Arturius spent some time up at the front of the column riding beside Taisteal and filling him in on what had happened in the Hall of the One. After some time riding into the night, he asked.

"Are we to ride these steeds to their death?" he asked the priest.

"No, we need them to make tracks after we move to the river," the large man answered, obviously fatigued. Arturius was not accustomed to seeing Taisteal in such poor condition. He had been around the two younger compatriots long enough to see through their tough faces as well. They were all beginning to tire like their horses, despite the spells.

"Then soon we should halt somewhere with a ship. I have gold enough to buy a ship even at this hour," the paladin stated over the clatter of hooves as they continued.

“Very well,” the priest answered in between heavy breaths and continued, “But it would be better for whoever owns the boat if we steal it.”

“Steal?” he replied.

“Mekomi, a fisherman up ahead, he has a twenty-foot skiff he is proud of, and a healthy suspicion of his neighbor. We are getting close to his cottage,” the priest replied with plenty of exhaustion in his voice. Arturius raised a brow at the notion of stealing but had little argument for a better plan.

The night wind was weak but, in their favor, along with the Yarden’s current; it carried them swiftly west, back to Manefold. Arturius was just as surprised as Jack and Alice at Taisteal’s notion to steal the single mast boat. Doing so from the little community dock surrounded by a few wood-framed houses proved easier than scattering their horses. Both were especially easier than carrying Taisteal aboard. Not a soul stirred as the moonlit water carried them away from the clump of houses along the shore of the river.

“I cannot believe you had us steal from one of your friends. Alice protested when they had gotten sufficiently out of sight from the owner’s house. She, Jack and Taisteal all laid low along the edges of the boat while Arturius had taken to guiding the ship by the sole rutter at the stern.

“I cannot believe you came back for me,” Taisteal replied, making his best attempt at a kind face to Alice, despite the pain. It was dim but light enough for the big man to notice a tear streaming down her cheek. “...It has been a long time since I have had so many surprises. I will miss your father as well, Alice,” he said solemnly. She quivered a bit and shrugged as Jack tried to place a comforting hand on her shoulder. Moving to the bow of the ship, she peered down the river thinking over the past few days. Jack eyed her

mournfully, wishing he could do something to ease what he suspected was a mountain of pain within her. A moment of silence passed for the three men closer to the rear of the ship. "How did you pull off my rescue? By wise calculation, we should all be dead," Taistéal asked looking back at Jack and Arturius.

"It was those two's idea. Actually... it was his fault," the paladin answered nodding toward Jack while continuing to guide the ship. The large man eyed the two younger companions, letting his gaze come to rest on Jack.

"Well?" he insisted.

Jack hesitated for a moment before he started, "I knew we had to check on her father... I don't think we could have ever moved on without knowing..." Jack answered, pausing for a moment looking up at Alice in the bow, seemingly not paying them any attention, "...And how were we to reach the door without your help?" he asked with his words becoming a pointed combination of confident and playful.

"...I am not completely sure how you will reach the door with my help. I am grateful you came back for me though. You have my word that I will try not to make a martyr of myself next time things are dire," Taistéal answered.

"The castle was mostly empty due to my father's funeral, and we bumped into an old friend who we persuaded to tell us what had happened to you," Alice interjected rejoining the group with dryer eyes than before.

"You're surprisingly good at persuading others, Lady Rockhurst. Not sure anyone else could have convinced Dilis and myself to drop our armor off in the woods and blend in with the funeral crowds..." Arturius paused thinking of the

blades sinking into Dilis' unarmored body. He tried to redirect with a bit of positivity in an up swept tone, "It was the only workable plan any of us thought up. Attacking from the onset would have been suicide."

"Maybe, it worked right up until we ran into soldiers from Hortus in my home that I could not talk our way past. Thankfully your flaming sword scared them off," Alice added in a strong but relaxing manner to ease the tension.

"Wait... your sword lights on fire? Some sort of spell?" Jack asked with a smidge of jealousy but mostly with genuine curiosity.

"Yes. Rarely useful when fighting... but when facing Knights that fear magic..." Arturius answered and continued, "Not as useful as you lighting your house on fire at the other end of town. That distraction was as necessary as the disguises," Arturius added, again trying to stay positive over the outcome of the day.

"You burned down your house with the fire spell I spoke to you about?!?" Taistal asked surprised.

"No..." Jack answered coyly.

"How did you start that fire and get back so quickly with horses?" Alice asked.

"I had help," he answered flatly.

"Tavern friends?" she asked with a growing smirk, to which Jack nodded with a smile of his own and only a modicum of blushing. Taistal and Arturius missed what must have been amusing about her comment.

“At any measure, I am thankful to all of you,” Taisteal added and asked, “Arturius, can you navigate us through Manefold at night?”

“Yes. All the way through?” the paladin asked.

“All the way through, indeed. It seems like we should trust the instincts of these two,” Taisteal answered motioning towards Jack and Alice.

“What about your legs? I think I can back these clamps off with the nut right on the back...” Jack asked and explained before the large priest caught his outstretched hand like a hawk’s talon seizing prey.

“I will bleed to death if we remove them now,” Taisteal answered.

“You cannot heal your wounds?” Alice asked.

“...the inscriptions on the blades?” Arturius asked.

“I cannot read it...” she answered, inspecting the lettering on the clamps but not touching them. Taisteal was possibly the strongest-willed person she had met but it was obvious he was still in a lot of pain. Jack relaxed his hand and leaned in for a closer look in the dim moonlight.

“‘...the wounds... herein.... never shall...’ I cannot make out all the words. It’s similar to the tongue of dragons,” he stated.

“How can you read that?” asked Arturius.

“The wounds imparted herein shall never heal so long as the sun rises and sets,” Taisteal answered and continued, “It is the old script. A tongue before dragons. The language of the Great Ghost.”

“Then what must we do?” asked Jack.

“I have a friend in Namel who may help. Sailing to the Sky Cap mountains will indeed be the safest route anyway,” the large man answered, looking away from his haggard ankles.

“...and this friend is more trustworthy than your ‘brothers’ in Yarden?” Alice asked.

“Truly, all of us would give into the temptations of the Great Ghost before Leofaren,” he answered. The ship drifted swiftly and silently west along the wide, flat Yarden river.

The end of Part 2

Another interlude into the past

(Part 3 begins on page 188)

It was another hot day in Petram and the tradition of wearing black did not help. The crowd was an odd mix of locals dressed for mourning, and refugees from between there and Manefold. The outsiders mostly tried to stay out of the way of the local lord's funeral procession that ran from the castle right down the main road, toward the plains in the east. The goblin attacks on human settlements had seemed random but had grown in intensity and frequency. Now, with Lord Rockhurst slain defending his very own castle, nowhere felt safe. The air of tension was made all the more palpable by the large arrival of the King's soldiers from the plain cities of Hortus and Compita.

"I hope that new King leaves soon," Keera uttered meekly to her friend as they walked down a back street away from most of the funeral's crowd.

"Hush!" Rosheen snapped loud enough to get the attention of a few men they did not recognize, dressed in black ahead of them. Keera eyed her friend, a bit shocked before she continued stepping closer, rolling her eyes at her companion.

"Everyone hangs on his words like he is the city's savior. Surely you realize how weird this all is. How weird he is," Keera said quickly and softly with frustration in her voice.

"Of course, I do," Rosheen answered a bit more composed and without being so loud this time, "That is why we must watch what we say... All these people new in town, the goblins attack, Lord Rockhurst killed... Is it just coincidence all these eastern soldiers show up just in time? I am afraid of who may get to replace Lord Rockhurst."

“Surely it would be Lady Alice ...or least whoever she marries,” Keera answered.

“But where is she? Too distraught to attend her father’s funeral, that seems unlikely,” Rosheen answered.

“Finally ran off with Jack?!?” teased Keera. It was enough of a break in the tension to get laugh out of them both. “He would have wished for nothing more... I do hope he is ok,” Keera lamented in a more somber tone. The two were drawing near the Single Moat. There would surely be locals wanting a drink between the funeral and the pyre service tonight.

“I don’t think... Jack is fine,” stated Rosheen abruptly and flatly as they turned the corner into the pergola at the back of the inn.

“How can you be sure?” Keera replied watching her feet as she walked beside Rosheen before getting nudged in the arm by her friend. Looking up in surprise she saw Jack standing there by the Single Moat’s rear door. The two rushed toward him. Keera gave him a big hug, while Rosheen greeted him with a big smile she rarely displayed to anyone but Keera, followed by a firm handshake.

“Glad to see the two of you ok,” he said while accepting their embrace.

“Are you wearing armor?” the larger of the two ladies asked in surprise, seeing his gambeson underneath his black funeral cloak, “...that looks expensive...” she continued.

“... ah, I am sure it was,” he answered a bit awkwardly before continuing, “Look, I don’t have much time. I need a big favor.” Jack held out one hand and opened it revealing at least three years’ worth of wages in coin.

“You don’t have to pay us for a favor, Jack ...unless it’s for drawing a hot bath on a day like today,” Keera answered humorously and sweetly, not noticing how much gold he was holding.

“Jack! ...where did you get all that?!?” Rosheen asked.

“From the guy who gave me this armor ...You should take it,” he answered quickly but with a smile that hinted at levity.

“...Well, if I should...” Rosheen snagged the plethora of gold coins from his hand.

“Rosheen!!” the slender-figured young woman scolded, noticing how much money it actually was. She turned her attention back to Jack asking, “What is going on Jack? Are you in trouble?”

“I need you to burn down my house,” he answered with a deadly serious demeanor. The two women looked at each other and back to him with growing concern.

The cellar below the Single Moat’s main floor was dry and cool as usual. Bibliomane’s favorite place to recline was already set up and waiting on him. The smell of sweet wines and the dark of the cellar was a relief after the hot sun at the funeral. He was keen on finishing his book that evening before emotional patrons undoubtedly descended upon his inn and would start asking for him to reminisce about a man none of them really knew. He had barely lit his oil lamp and reclined on his large sack of grain, wedged between two barrels before the cellar door slammed open. Rosheen and Keera stopped at the top of the stairs in surprise at seeing their boss. Rosheen began to first nudge and then out right push Keera along, down the stairs ahead of her.

“Hey girls. Out of something already?” he asked surprised.

“Yup,” Rosheen answered quickly as she and Keera passed off flustered glances to one another. As they made it to the bottom of the stairs and into the cellar proper, she pushed Keera toward Bibliomane and stepped away. He was half paying them attention and half turning to his bookmark.

“Ok. Just mark whatever down in the ledger... Keera?” He replied before pausing and looking at Keera standing uncomfortably a few feet in front of him. Rosheen rummaged through something over to the side of the room. Taking off his glasses and sitting up to pay more attention, he asked, “I’m sorry. Are you alright?”

“Oh, yes... Well, mostly...” she answered before gaining some concept of what small talk to try and make. “You knew Lord Rockhurst better than most didn’t you?” she asked.

“I don’t know about that, but perhaps... Perhaps better than most. He was deployed to Pagan’s Pass with several of us from town. That was before he was Lord though, when we were both young men,” he answered genuinely.

“Right... Was he a brave man?” she continued inquiring with seeming innocence.

“Oh, well yes. He was very brave back then and we were both lucky –” his answer was cut short.

“Ok! Got it. Customers to serve. Come on, Keera,” Rosheen announced as she promptly started up the stairs out of the cellar.

“I guess I better go. Thanks,” Keera stated backing toward the steps, blushing a bit at her attempt at distraction.

“Wait!” he queried, and more firmly than his normal manner. Both the girls froze. “Rosheen, what are you doing with a torch? I thought you needed more wine,” he pressed. Near the top of the stairs Rosheen paused as panic rushed over both the young women. Rosheen was frozen but for a moment before she turned to look at him.

“Did you skip out early on the King’s speech at the funeral? ...to come here and read?” she asked pointedly with a bit of obvious delight in finding something to sidetrack his question. He stammered searching for an answer that seemed appropriate, “Come on, Keera,” she continued as she and her friend turned and left the cellar.

What just happened? ...Did she just sass me? He thought to himself, making a funny face. For a moment he was reminded of Rita, which changed his expression into an assortment of rose pedals amongst thorns. “Whatever,” he said aloud and shook his head. “Ok, Mr. Stonefinder, what happens next...” his thoughts continued as he drew back into the old heavy and weathered book that had captivated him for the last several days.

Chapter 20: “Tunnel in the Sky”

The forest was a dim value of greens in the crisp early morning just outside of Rauthulaus. The Knights stood at the ready. I had come to see their bravery firsthand and was relieved that a host of them would be joining us in taking the fight to the League of Nations. The foreign soldiers from the far continent were an odd mix of professional and ridiculous. Their black terracotta armor was neatly arranged with their single-sided blades tucked away on their backs. Each one

knelt in staged formations holding a small shrub, bush or evergreen limb. Leofaren had gained a lot of clout since first arriving in Rauthulaus to be able to convince over a thousand battle hardened men to carry greenery into an invasion. He and the others I had come to know well, were huddled around me at the front of our makeshift army. Somehow our little group of five capable refugees had gained a title, The Destroyers. Silly and a little more violent sounding than I would have preferred, but I had become proud to be a part of their group. Ulfric with his thunderous hammer laid over his shoulder, was wearing a smug grin as if he already knew the outcome of what was about to take place. Leofaren stood there, imposingly tall, but seemed as nervous as I was. He was holding a small bush he had pulled up. Its lavender flowers were close to matching the color of his short, dense fur. Brack stood like a scaled midnight statue. He remained as emotionless and unknowable as usual. Dobro glowed like the brazened scales that sat upon him like armored skin. It was apparent he was eager for battle and revenge. The fact that the imposing figures of the two dragon men did not seem to intimidate the foreigners, was encouraging of what I might be able to expect from them in battle. The far continent's presence alone in the mission spoke volumes of their hate for the League. I couldn't help but wonder if Danzig was still alive wherever he might be. None of us had seen or heard of him in months.

After what felt like an eternity of waiting, Admiral Yeshen from the Far Continent, the dryad, Hattaway, decked out in his intricate white leather armor, and the large Priest of the One who had called the Typhoon Council showed up.

"It is time. There will only be one chance to take down the protectorate. To take down Oleen. Are we ready?"

The question came from Hattaway still polished but less assured than usual.

“We will fight to the death to stop this dictatorship from reaching across the sea,” answered the Admiral, full of conviction.

“Hopefully our deaths will not be necessary,” interjected Leofaren.

“There will be plenty of death, shifter. Don’t you worry about that,” Brack replied mostly to Leofaren in his deep breaking voice. Everyone felt the heavy truth in his simple words. Even Dobro’s smile faded.

“We won’t let you down, Hattaway. The plan is solid,” Ulfric said putting an encouraging hand on mine and Leofaren’s shoulders. The dryad, wrapped in intricate armor that seemed too fine to fight in, nodded in agreement and turned to the priest.

“Very well. We will land in Namel’s public square,” the priest’s voiced boomed deeply as he continued explaining, “There you will have to protect me while I cast this devil’s trap. I will be drained afterward but once the fiends are exposed for what they are, there will surely be panic and that should help. Most of the citizens and even the League’s soldiers have never seen a demon, much less will know they have been ruled by them.” We all seemed to react to his words as if we had seen demons and would not panic ourselves. “Of course after speaking so, I will have to draw off my friends from above.” Hattaway looked over the priest most seriously and nodded at what was said. I never figured out who could have been his friends from above or why we would not want their help. Then the large human pulled the stone spell tomb from his tan robes and began to read in the tongue of dragons, “Lig e bi tollan tri am...”

“Draw swords,” I could hear the admiral say, accompanied by the metallic song of one thousand swords being drawn.

“...agus spas as anseo chun Namel!” The roaring chorus, like words of the priest, faded as the world seemed like it began to stretch upward. The trees seemed to grow infinitely tall before my perspective was squeezed into what I perceived to be a white tube of clouds straight up and then over. I could see glimpses of the ocean below and the sun above from beyond wherever or however we may have been. It was daunting but there was no discomfort and all that could be heard was like that of a gentle breeze as we whipped along through a tunnel in the sky. Abruptly after a short sensation of falling, our sublime journey through the ether was interrupted by our sudden appearance amongst the numerous and confused crowd in the huge, open public square in Namel. The pause for surprise was short lived. Quickly, the swift warriors of the far continent were mixing sprays of red blood over the red capes of the few League of Nations soldiers that were unfortunately close to where we had appeared in the square. There were sentient creatures of every type engulfed in the panic. People were around us and amongst us; it was chaos. Quickly I raised my axe to the ready in one hand, still holding the ridiculous little limb that Leofaren had convinced me to carry in the other. My companions and I were surrounding the priest as he began reading the next spell from the tomb. His words felt harsher this time and more difficult for him to say as well as to be heard. I could not understand them, though I cannot forget how that language seemed to stab at my ears. One delicately dressed human in purple and burgundy robes made a quick turn toward us. In a sweeping flash, he ripped a sword from one of the far continent soldier’s grasp who also carried a bush from the forest. The robed human quickly struck down that ally and then another who

had his sword drawn. There was a red and gold broach pinned on this man that signified him as some sort of League of Nations official. The man pushed through the crowd that was now fleeing from anyone heavily armed and drew closer to our position. To my surprise he struck down one of the Rauthalaus knights in one quick stroke as the knight tried to turn the man around without attack. His sword stroke was precise, slipping under the cuff of the knight's helmet. The tall, dangerous man proceeded straight toward us. Brack was on my left, Ulfric on my right; we were ready. The man stopped ten feet from us with his expression jumping from burning embers to pure astonishment.

“What words do you speak?!?” the man shouted in a high-browed tone at the priest, as he finished reciting the words for the second spell. Immediately the man seemed to blur but not move and then as if watching a refraction gather from disturbed water that was settling, we saw it. There in the man's clothes stood a coal black gaunt figure standing some seven feet tall still gripping the sword. His eyes were red as roses in full bloom, his ears and elbows came to long, pointed, clay, red spikes. Rising out of his head were four spiraling horns like that of an antelope. I was shaken to my core. Though the creature reminded me of an Adharca, the difference was as severe as that between a tabby and a lion. The fleeing crowd already in panic by the sudden appearance of a foreign army were rattled with a renewed wave of screams.

“Devils! Fight for your lives!!” I heard someone shout nearby. From the overly formal accent, I assumed it was from one of the League of Nations soldiers still among us. I noticed over my shoulder the exhausted priest that had brought us there, drop to one knee. The four horned devil sneered at the large, older human behind us and leapt forward.

I barely brought my shield to bear in time to keep from being skewered. From behind my metal wall of protection I heard more heinous words in the language the priest had just been speaking. I saw a wash of snow and ice pour out from the beast's outstretched hand, over Brack who indomitably shook off the attack of spraying frost and met the devil steel-for-steel with his own sword. The wretched thing pivoted fast enough to deflect Ulfric's harsh hammer swing as well. I Watched in amazement as the creature dueled two of the most skilled fighters I had met or read of. In a flash, out of nowhere, two ivory swords flew like diving falcons around them into the devil, points first, as he was swinging frantically at my two companions. The flying swords' odd sound made a song as much as their flight made a dance. Hattaway stepped up beside me as the fiend fell dead, spewing a black steaming liquid. The flying swords stirred, then pulled free from the coal-like corpse, and returned quickly to hover next to Hattaway, while their gold wing-like cross guards began to lazily flap for show.

"Don't get any of their blood on you if you can help it," he stated with a callus disdain. The large limestone paved square we had teleported into was now almost empty aside from our forces. There were a few disfigured fiendish bodies lying dead among us with a couple dozen more League of Nation corpses; some companions laid motionless as well. A couple red-caped soldiers that saw the devils revealed, were engaged in confused and tense conversations with some of the Rauthulus Knights that accompanied us. In the distance a loud, heavy bell began to toll.

"The North Gate," the exhausted priest stated calmly but loudly enough for us all to hear.

“Admiral Yeshen, Wilnick, move your men with me!” Hattaway shouted and continued, “Taisteal, come on. We must stop their reinforcements.”

“I have done my part, and you will be lucky if anyone listening is more interested with me than what you are doing here today,” the priest answered while standing and pulling his tan cloak up over his head.

...Bibliomane pulled away from the book for a moment, stroking his chin. He reclined upon the large sack of grain as he stared absently before making a slight chuckle.

“Nahhh!” he mused with a slap of his open hand on the big book laid before him. He began reading again.

“Indeed, I wish for no listeners. Where will you roam next?” Hattaway replied rapidly.

“Everywhere I know of until I find them ...and If I call on you then, do not forget how you got here...” the words from the priest became more devastatingly assertive as he continued in a voice deeper than Brack’s.

“Ok... Ok, my friend. Thank you.” Hattaway answered calming his own tone.

“Good luck... to all of you,” the bouldering human replied eyeing us all as he turned south and began walking calmly away. I couldn’t help but get the feeling that he was talking more to me and The Destroyers than to the rest.

“Hattaway, we are ready,” barked Admiral Yesheh. Hattaway nodded and began running toward an alley north of our position, flanked by his two hovering swords that followed him closely.

“Don’t forget your plants!” Leofaren shouted in his slow cadence as the bulk of our army began to follow the white armored dryad. As we moved along, the city alleys and streets were emptying. We could see wood shutters and doors slamming shut as citizens locked themselves in the three story or higher stone buildings of that district. The city was quickly becoming a giant empty maze of various stone and wood textures.

After a few moments of what could only be described as a fast march, there was an explosion of fire, dirt and smoke up ahead. The destroyers and I quickly shuffled through the halted pack of soldiers up to the front of the group. The small alley we were now staged in ran from east to west and emptied out onto a large street that ran from north to south. Another whoosh of heat and flame passed by the corner of the building that Hattaway was pressed against for cover at the head of the army. The blast came from the north.

“The gate is just there! We must seal it before their reinforcements enter the city!” he excitedly lamented to us. Dobro quickly and deftly moved up to the corner of the building and gave Hattaway an odd wink as the dryad moved out of the way. Perhaps if he were not a seven-foot-tall bronze-scaled beast it would not have seemed so demeaning. He quickly glanced around the corner and then pulled back as a blast of fire rocked the opposing side of the building, dropping some small, fragmented stones around and on us from above.

“They have two collared mages up on pedestals... no more than a dozen other soldiers around the gate,” Dobro quickly filled us in.

“I can take them out if I can have a moment to look safely,” Hattaway imposed.

“Dobro, that fire poses little threat to you, right?” Ulfric interjected.

“...But those arrows are a different story,” Dobro answered.

“Fear is for the weak and dying,” Brack chimed in aggressively.

“I thought getting shot by arrows was for the weak and dying?!?” Dobro clapped back more playfully than seemed appropriate.

“Ok... It’s obvious where this going. We make a distraction, and you kill the threats, right, Hattaway?” I reluctantly added. He agreed and motioned up some of our soldiers with notched arrows to assist in the killing.

“...and then have everyone throw their plants at the gate!” Leofaren added to our bemusement and continued, “No, seriously. This will work great,” Hattaway and the rest of us shared an unconvinced glance before acting.

“Polished scales goes first!” Brack asserted in a boiling under the surface kind of way.

“You’re just jealous that I am fireproof,” smirked Dobro before sprinting out in the open street! In a brief moment of panic and foolishness that most would call bravery, but only because it worked, I found myself rushing out into the street with my team. Dobro charged quickly

across with three hurling balls of fire smashing into the street around him. Ulfric and I brought our shields up just in time to intercept the flying debris and scattering, waning flames. Dobro let out a cry of pain that quickly turned into maniacal laughter. Before I could peak over my metal plate of salvation, I felt the uncomfortable and familiar thwack of an arrow bounce off my shield. The thwack was soon followed by the bizarre whirring song of flying swords and screams. As I looked up over my shield, I realized Hattaway had not oversold his capabilities. The whole lot of soldiers that stood guard at the gate along with the poor mages that had been “weaponized” laid split in various ways. As the dust and smoke finished settling, Dobro’s heavy laughter was joined by the even deeper chuckle of Brack as he began to help pull small fragments of splintered stone out of Dobro’s left leg and pat out flames on his clothing. I knew my dragon men friends were tough but surely, we could have handled the challenge with less risk.

Leofaren observed the success but for a moment before charging the gate in his long near slow-motion strides that carried his tall figure surprisingly fast. I could see charging enemy soldiers on horseback outside the city through the open gate.

“Forward with the shrubbery!” he yelled as a rallying cry. He was followed by The Destroyers and a couple hundred confused troops that had remembered to hang on to the plants they had pulled up from before arriving in Namel. Not taking much time to be puzzled, the rest charged on behind us. We all knew that we would be hopelessly outnumbered if the League’s main forces made it into the city walls. As Leofaren made it past the red-splattered dead men who once guarded the thirty-foot-high and fifty-foot-wide arched gate, he entered the short hall created by the opening in the thick

stone wall around the city. He chunked the plant he held. His voice echoed in the small hallway that was starting to fill with the sound of many clattering hooves from the fast-approaching enemies on the other side.

“Nooooowwww!” he shouted in a drawn out note that sounded like a long, low horn blast. As we ran up next to him, he knelt and began mumbling something I could not make out in all the commotion. As the plants landed in front of him, they began to writhe and grow. Sticking new roots deep into the road breaking the granite pavers that lined the street. They twisted together into a weave of vines that rushed upward to the top of the gate’s opening, separating us from the arriving League of Nation’s calvary. Seeing what was happening, we moved back out into the street encouraging the others to rush in and toss the plants they held on to. The ever-growing net of twisting and tightening plants soon filled the whole hallway from street to ceiling.

“I thought those were for some scheme of healing?” I asked my lumbering friend breathlessly.

“Nature adapts to many scenarios,” he replied patting me on the shoulder with his large fur-covered hand. The muffled battle cries and sundering hooves from the other side of the newly grown “gate” were all but subdued.

Chapter 21: “Tunnel in the stone”

It was a highly capable group Hattaway had assembled. The Admiral and the Far Continent warriors had quickly secured the top of the wall and even had one trebuchet firing on the enemies beneath the other side of the wall. We knew there were other, smaller ways into the city, so we had to proceed quickly. As planned, the Admiral and his

men took to task keeping the reinforcements out of the city. Most of their forces stayed at the main gate but a few were led by some knights who had been to Namel before. These groups quickly set out to cut off the other smaller entry points. Hattaway, the remaining knights, myself, and the rest of The Destroyers quickly made our way into the city's opulent west district closer to the Protectorate's manor. That was the last time I would see any of those who stayed behind to defend the walls.

We slowed to a snail's pace slipping down an alley to the large courtyard that stood in front of the manor. There were about two dozen of us now all together. The sharp contrast between the bright courtyard and the shadow in the alley provided us some element of stealth. Peering out over some wooden crates at the end of our alley, as our eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight, we saw in the distance a couple red-caped soldiers fall dead at the feet of flailing demons. The courtyard was full of bodies... some hundred at least. About a dozen large figures of all different, grotesque shapes stood between the bodies and the large, bronze double doors of the manor. The courtyard itself was a pattern of large, white paver stones with neatly trimmed grass between each stone-like mortar. The building at the center had tall, stained windows and was clad in marble and granite sheets with blue, stone shingles covering most of the gables and domes of the roof. Attached to the rear of the building were tall, green hedge walls that made a large rectangle.

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"Not again," Bibliomane complained aloud as he skipped a page or two ahead. "How obsessed can this dwarf be with architecture... Who cares what stone the columns were... There!" he muttered on as he picked up a place ahead in the old book that once again regained his attention.

.....

Beneath the bronze-covered dome roof on a pronounced semi-circle balcony, stood one lone figure gazing down over the murderous scene below. Before I could focus on the details of the figure, Hattaway pulled me down behind the crate quickly.

“That’s him!” he exclaimed in a hushed tone. “We only have one shot at this! That fiend has been ruining the world since the massacre at Marcelano fifty years ago.”

“He has a history of fleeing, right?” asked Ulfric.

“Yes,” Hattaway replied and added, “He even slipped by the hero, Jace Winthrope. We must be careful.”

“Then we should hit him from two sides...” Ulfric added peering up over the crate again for a moment, “Is there another way in? ...Through those large hedge walls behind the manor perhaps?” he asked.

“Only through the sewers,” answered a confident, regal voice from further behind us in the alley. Startled, we turned to see a tall, dark tan woman covered in a burgundy and grey coat. Her clothes and rings were elegant, but her feet were bare and her grey straw hair wild. It was hard for me to make out her age.

“Glerenbluff!” exclaimed Hattaway.

“Your entry could have been a little more subtle,” the woman replied as she motioned for us to follow her deeper back into the alley. We all followed her back down the alley and around the corner of a building, arriving at a square metal lid that laid on the side of the street. It turned out that this woman was our informant on the inside of Namel that had helped Hattaway form our plan. She and Hattaway briefly

spoke in Dryadic before they relayed to us that we, The Destroyers, should be assaulting the manor from the sewers while the rest would hit the manor head on. Both options seemed dangerous; however, we agreed to our fate.

“Head west from this entrance and go up the copper ladder. I don’t know what you will find after that, but it is the way they smuggle items and people into the manor,” she spoke to us calmly as if the battle at the gates was a continent away.

“If my experience is right, you will probably run into Oleen trying to escape while we attack head on,” Hattaway stated while gently brushing the hilts of his hip holstered swords with his thumbs. Their cross guards began to flap again like lazy cranes as they slid out of their sheaths all on their own. The knights drew swords, and their courage by the perplexities of emotions I saw displayed on each face before they flipped down the visors of their helmets. The woman began to step back in the direction of the manor more confidently than the iron-clad and battle-hardened knights.

“You are going to fight as well? Those demons are dangerous,” Leofaren asked the woman directly.

“This shifter is not ashamed of the natural look ...I like that,” she stated indirectly with the tone of her voice rising as she finished the statement. Leofaren looked at her with a curious smirk as she spoke.

“Onus celeritas,” she then said to him directly.

“Good luck my friends,” Hattaway added before ordering, “Knights, let’s go.” With that they all were moving back toward the courtyard where a devastating fight would surely await them.

We swiftly descended into the dark, cramped tunnel of the sewers, down the iron ladder, beneath the lid we removed. It was immediately apparent to me why nearly all the buildings in the city were granite and marble as the sewers were crude circles, chiseled straight through stone. The city must have sat upon one enormous stone at the edge of the ocean. We moved swiftly and silently into the pitch dark. Of course, I took the lead. Though taking point was not my preference; who can see better than a dwarf when underground? After passing a few more iron ladders we soon came to a small, circular chamber where four paths in the sewers converged. There was a slow, tight, bubbling sound and the smell of sulfur. Tension began to mount in my mind as I slowed in my approach, observing all that I could in the darkness of the intersection. I jolted as Ulfric laid his hand on my shoulder.

“What do you see?” he whispered.

“A large metal basin... and a copper ladder next to it,” I answered taking in details.

“This must be it!” he answered and began to move past me. I grabbed him by the arm stopping him.

“Wait. Do you smell that? ...The tub in the center is copper as well,” I barked before lowering my voice and continuing, “I have read of something like this in the ‘Songs of Winthrope.’”

“That book was pure fiction!” Ulfric snorted in surprise to my reference.

“Mostly fiction!” I interrupted before continuing, “The villain of that exaggerated story is here now! The author claimed that Oleen had some sort of monster below the city in

Marcelano that consumed the corpses of opponents
...Dissolved them.”

“Then we should prepare it a meal,” I heard Brack’s
pent up sarcasm chime in from the rear of our group.

“We cannot delay,” Leofaren added in a slow cadence
that contradicted his intended urgency.

“Then I’ll go first,” Ulfric said while readying his
hammer. I murmured some words I had long practiced while
grasping a copper coin. It lit up brilliant white, like a tiny star
shedding dim light across the junction. I tossed it ahead of my
brave, human friend toward the base of the ladder so he could
actually see. The bubbling ceased as he approached, and we
all followed closely. The large basin was hammered copper
and about chest high to me; frustratingly not even waist high
to most of my ridiculously proportioned companions. A
polished copper pipe came down from the high-domed ceiling
of the corridor beside the ladder and stopped about three feet
above the tub. As we looked over into the vat, the source of
the smell was apparent as a slimy, thick, opaque, black liquid
slowly swirled in the tub. Then, in a flash of speed, a lump of
the liquid sprang up into a tendril and came smashing down
on Ulfric who managed to get his shield up in time. The thick
fluid burst apart like thin oil upon impact. The only thing
worse than the putrid escalation of the smell was the sting of
the droplets as they sprayed across most of us. The paladin
flung his shield to the ground as quick as he could while the
sizzling ooze that clung to it quickly cut holes into the polished
metal kite.

“Up the ladder now!” I exclaimed as Ulfric was quick
to agree and ascend with all his might. Dobro was next and I
followed as rapidly as I could. Looking while climbing, I saw
multiple thick tendrils of black fluid rising out of the copper

tub nearly ten feet high. Leofaren barely dodged the hammering swing of one as it smashed into the floor. The resulting thin substance spread quickly over the floor and Leofaren danced in panic and pain as his bare feet tasted the burning substance. I focused on climbing faster up the tall ladder. As soon as room emerged, he joined us on the ladder. Hearing a roar of courage, I looked down again. Leather armor crackled and fried off Brack's black, scaled shoulders falling to the floor as he grabbed onto the side of the tub with both hands and lifted. Another grunt as he was hit yet again by a swirling, elongated pod of filth. I heard the stone crack beneath the tub as his roar filled the chamber like that of an actual dragon in his lair. The copper basin tumbled over away from us and the ladder pouring out the blob on the floor.

"Climb you limp sack of bones!" he shouted up to the rest of us as he followed suit, still simmering from contact with the thing. A quick blast of blinding light came from above with a metallic clang. Soon, with Ulfric's help, I was scrambling out of the sewer into a brightly lit marble and silver decorated latrine. After Brack emerged from the hatch we quickly battened the iron door back down over the ladder. His armor was mostly gone but the thin hissing liquid dripped off his brawny scale-covered body, leaving little trace. I immediately began reciting words of healing and reaching for the medallion around my neck that I held sacred before he stopped me.

"Save that for someone split open," his words sounded calm but the tremble in his rippled frame hinted at an inner rage.

"Hear that?" Dobro interjected. Pausing for a moment, I picked up on the sounds of combat echoing down the corridor just outside the immaculate washroom. I could hear the chilling sound of Hattaway's swords, the shouts of

men and beast all over a metallic symphony of scuffle. We had certainly come up in the right place.

“Let us keep to the plan,” Ulfric propounded.

“The third-floor balcony!” I answered.

“Right. Let’s go!” Dobro agreed as we began to sprint out into a most grand hall. The commotion was louder as we soon found a spiral staircase and ascended. It was difficult for my properly proportioned legs to keep up with my lumbering counterparts. Once I saw a glimpse of fighting on a huge second story landing. A couple knights were fighting a bright green and orange demon along with Hattaway. I think only the Dryad noticed us as we ascended. Among the myriad of thoughts rushing through me as I ran, I could not help but appreciate the delicate crowning and trim that lined the top of walls. It ornately outlined each doorway. Some in dark marble and some in blue stone or copper, contrasting the white, marble sheeting that ran throughout. Each piece lightened by the carved shapes of flowers or flurrying wings of hummingbirds –

Bibliomane sighed again and flipped ahead a few pages to skip the long description before picking back up...

We heard the League of Nation horn blast as we arrived at the third floor. A dark wood door with a large, demeaning human-like face carved into it stood at the end of a short hallway across from the stairs.

“In there!” Ulfric shouted holding the medallion around his neck. “He must be in there,” we crowded around the door with weapons drawn. As my brave friend reached for

the door's iron ring handle, in the "nose," the face came alive and morphed into a wide arching smile with an audible click. The "eyes" in the door darted about us frantically as if it were observing. Ulfric hesitated but for a moment before he aggressively pulled the door with all his might. To our surprise, it opened freely.

Chapter 22: "Big Cat"

The heavy door swung open quickly with a thud against the adjacent wall. We rushed in with a mix of yells and roars. We had all heard tales and even seen statues of Oleen, the Great Protectorate of the World, but I could only imagine what the demon's true form would look like. None of us were expecting what we saw. The room was a large oval with an elongated domed ceiling. The ceiling was covered in a painting that had fluffy clouds on the sides, and darkened in the peak, revealing a dark night sky dotted with lifelike stars brightly twinkling. The floor was covered wildly with a myriad of thick, colorful rugs of all different shapes and sizes. Standing framed triptychs ran along both sides of the room, hiding what appeared to be cozy armchairs and one large copper bath with black iron paw feet. There were four beautiful human, or perhaps dryadic, women standing in front of us in the room's center wearing few enough clothes to make me blush brighter than the burning coal braziers that sat on pedestals next to the door we had just entered. In the distance across the room, the stout silhouette we had seen earlier was still standing at the balcony's edge. He turned to face us, and we saw. Wrapped in a double coat of blues and purples with gold and mahogany trim, stood what could only be described as a bipedal jaguar. The face was a heavy-set misshapen union of a man and big cat. The paws with mid-length fingers each adorned by gold rings, were framed in

ruffled circles of white lace at the end of the sleeves. Around his neck sat a large, ocean green jewel that pulled heavy against its chain. His eyes were an unsettling bright blue.

“So Hattway has sent more sacrifices. I do hope he lives to repeat this process once more,” the words railed out of him as sure and confident as a six-mast sailing vessel under a heavy wind.

“Ladies, you best leave before things get started,” Ulfric directed at the women who stared seemingly past us and stood unaffected by our entrance.

“Not sure they can hear you...” replied Leofaren sheepishly. Another blast of a League of Nations horn sounding from outside, accompanied shouts from scores of men.

“Perhaps he will not survive after all. Pity,” the creature continued.

“Those men will kill you when they see you for what you are,” Dobro shouted. The giant bipedal cat smiled wide before answering.

“The effects of the words... read from that wretched tomb are all but over. The next time that door opens...” The wood door behind us slammed shut and made a loud, metallic click behind us as the cat continued in smooth, polished tones, “I will look exactly as they remember.”

“Aside from being dead,” Brack rattled off with his white-hot rage now displayed clearly in his voice. We each had our reasons to hate the League of Nations and this thing that had pulled the strings to create it, but I never found out Brack’s exact motivations for carrying such rage.

“You certainly are a monster of a different sort, aren’t you? Why don’t you take that bloodlust out on your soft companions here? I am sure to be down a few officers after today. You could be... mine,” Oleen continued with his voice like an inviting fragrance of thick, sweet mead.

“Are you really so desperate a coward? There is no talking your way out of justice, demon,” Ulfric rebutted.

“Justice?!?” the creature responded more excitedly than before, “When has there ever been more justice than before my rule? I have brought one court to all the lands. One currency! One language. The eradication of fools who play at magic but have no grasp of how to... believe! I am the commoner’s justice!” His words were a cadence of confidence and outrage that stirred something odd. His words were most intriguing, like a classic story never heard before. Something in me wanted to hear more.

“The less he talks, the better!” shouted Leofaren over a small moment taking an aggressive posture.

“Agreed. Let’s put this villain down!” I bellowed with all my might shacking off the trance-like state that was slipping upon me.

“Has it seemed I was trapped in here with you?” Oleen responded before letting out slick, echoing laughter that filled the room before he disappeared altogether from where he stood. The women each pulled jewel covered daggers from behind their backs, their faces still blank as dolls.

“Now ladies this is not going to –” Ulfric was cut short in shock as they each plunged the blades into their guts, twisting the blades. They soon began to crumple over. As their bodies hit the ground, long shadows seemed to slink out across the floor from the fresh corpses. Additionally, an eerily

familiar putrid and sulfuric smell was filling the room. We looked around frantically, but the demon, Oleen, was nowhere to be seen.

“Coinnigh Duine!” I heard him say from behind us. I tried to turn and look, but to my panic, I could not move a single muscle. I saw the shadows slip across the rugs of the floor toward our own shadows from the corner of my eye. The shouts of my companions were loud. Ulfric spoke to his god while Dobro shouted in the tongue of his giant winged ancestors. Someone sounded as if they were being strangled. Still not able to move, the shadows danced around and by me on the floor. I could see the shadows of one of the fallen women grabbing on to the neck of Leofaren’s tall shadow cast by the bronze lamps behind us. I heard a metallic crash as hot, burning coals scattered across the floor. All the shadows shifted, and I saw one blur.

“Light, more light!” cried Ulfric behind me. I heard the rasping deep breaths of the dragon men. I knew what was coming. A short burst of fire curled from around me, casting bright light further shifting the shadows. I was struggling to move and could feel my body slowly beginning to respond once again to my will. Ulfric’s hammer was bright with brilliant blue radiant light. It was working! The shadows were dissipating in the dazzling displays and flashes of light. As he continued about the room chasing the shadows and swinging his hammer like some zealous torch, he fell abruptly! One of the rugs in the center of the room had flown out from under him! Other heavy, wool rugs began writhing and rolling into a storm of color into which Ulfric vanished. Brack and Dobro rushed into the fray of flying fabrics. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the tall figure of Leofaren buckling, bulging, and shortening; he was shifting into a new form! Right before I was fully free, I heard the smooth voice of Oleen in my ear.

“You seem soooo familiar...” he said in a low tone as thick as molasses. His long-clawed paws became visible reaching around my shoulders. Try as I might, I moved in hyper slow motion, unable to make a sound as my friends continued thrashing about before me in the storm of rugs. His claws seamlessly split the leather straps holding up my shoulder pauldrons, and then patiently moved on to my breast plate. My armor clanged to the floor revealing my candle shaped necklace and bare chest. “A different scholar from years ago,” he continued as he rubbed the smooth velvet-like palm of his paws across my chest with the tips of his claws a page’s depth from my skin! “...Who also came to kill me.” His voice snapped so close I could feel his whiskers on the back of my neck. A new ruffling growl that ascended into a shriek echoed throughout the room, followed by a wild pounding on the floor. The claws slashed my chest and belly as the pounding sound bounded up behind us. In a flash, the great cat was knocked off my back and I freely moved and pivoted to see Leofaren as a giant gorilla!

Korin’s note: Gorillas are large humanoids who walk on all fours most of the time and live on Islands far to the south. Though they are among the strongest of all creatures I believe they are benevolent in their true nature.

Though this hulking and bombastic form was new to me, the long face and familiar eyes made it apparent it was Leo in a new form. Sprawled out on his back, having been flung, crashing through one of the Triptychs, Oleen looked up at the fur covered mass of muscles with as much surprise as I did. Leofaren’s new form was shorter than his normal posture but still taller than me and perhaps three times as heavy! I pivoted and righted my shield and mace which had stayed tightly in my grips through the whole encounter thus far. The big cat recaptured his wide smile while glancing between us

and the rest of the group still fighting and now burning the flurrying strips of wool, cotton and silk.

“What a delicious smell!” Oleen mused taking a moment to inhale deeply. The putrid smell that now distinctly reminded me of the blob from the sewers was more prevalent than before.

“You have never known pain, but you will. Uligo will taste your flesh,” the big cat stated more somberly than before, and nodded knowingly while continuing, once again disappearing as he spoke, “You have my word.”

A ripping, shredding noise caught my attention as I saw that my three companions were finishing off the animated rugs. Threads ripped, patches and burning heaps of different cloths was all that remained of the former torrent of colorful materials. The shadows that emanated out of the now dead women seemed to be gone also. A gurgling sound began and a foreboding copper pipe next to the large tub on the other side of the room vibrated.

“Where did he go?” Dobro asked loudly.

“Vanished again...” I answered before Ulfric cut me off.

“That smell... the pipe!” he went on. We all shared a look of resolve as we readied ourselves. I ran my thoughts over the mass of books I had read over the years. It must have a weakness, a flaw that could be exploited. I could not keep from wincing underneath the bleeding slashes across my front while I thought. In those few moments the pain of the fresh cuts sank in.

“Keep an eye out for the cat. We don’t want him sneaking up on anyone else,” I relayed to my friends out loud.

“Understood,” Dobro replied. Leofaren began leaping and bounding around the edge of the room, knocking over art pieces and furniture looking for the invisible Oleen. Then, the thick, opaque black-green substance we encountered below the streets began to slurp out of the end of the curved pipe. It first splattered and then congealed on the floor, growing into a mass as large as all my companions and I put together, before it began half rolling and half sliding in our direction! First, we circled it, avoiding its protruding tendrils and their attacks as best we could. Soon into the flurry, I lost my shield as Ulfric had done in our previous encounter. The pivoting mass of filth rolled over the decaying shield and pulled it into itself. The shield soon dissolved like sand in water, out of sight inside the congealed chaos. I saw in my periphery that Leofaren had found perhaps more than he bargained for. I could hear his piercing cries but had difficulty in finding if they were of courage or pain. I saw Brack lose his sword into the thing after making a few successful slashes that seemed to have little effect. With every hit, the sting of putrid burning liquid spayed over us. It was a punishment just to be near the thing. Brack’s rage let itself out loud once again. His black scales seemed to rattle against each other around his neck and shoulders as fire billowed out of his mouth once again, this time onto the blob. A large section of the thing obliterated up into dark steam.

“That’s it!” shouted Ulfric, “Fire!” he yelled. His yell was matched by the sound of waffling growls from both Leofaren, as a bounding dark, furred creature, and the dragon men as they conjured more fire in their throats. Brack could summon only a minor amount more of flame before wheezing and backpedaling away from a couple thick twisting pseudopods that came smashing down near him. Dobro however was a fountain of heat and flame. He stood his ground and blasted one breath after another as the blob

seemed to turn and move solely in his direction. The sizzling, steaming hole in the thing's center grew as he continued but it began stretching around my bronze-scaled, fire-spewing friend in a circle. Ulfric let loose, risking much by batting one side that was encircling Dobro with his enchanted hammer. The sound was like a clash of thunder and the crashing of a wave. Thick droplets sprayed off the blob and onto himself, Dobro and Brack. I had moved back toward the door seconds earlier, not being able to stand each droplet's sting without my armor. The blob finished encircling Dobro and he disappeared into the engulfing ball of thick liquid and steam. The light of fire continued inside until only a thick cloud of dark steam engulfed my view into the room. The light of the fire had stopped.

I had little time to think as the growls of Leafaren continued, challenged by the blood-curdling, descending and high-pitch wail of the giant cat. I heard Ulfric yell in agony, and Brack continuing to wheeze, in an attempt to catch his breath. All beyond the cloud of dark, misty death that separated me from the rest of The Destroyers. This was the moment I began reciting the long, practiced but never used words of my study.

"Infect créacht..." I belted out as I ran forward through the fog. The sting was as expected; engulfing, horrendous. I kept running through the cloud raising my mace high overhead, eyes closed, and continuing to speak the spell I will never translate for another, "Mo ghráin go léir!" As I came through the other side and opened my eyes, I saw Oleen out on the balcony swirling from Brack to Leafaren, one after the other. Their bare hands little match for his elongated, clawed paws. Puffs of red blood sprayed from each as he pounced back and forth. Ulfric was down on hands and knees, bleeding from his neck and still scuffling forward, trying to pick up his

hammer in front of him on the ground. I hesitated only long enough to catch the shrieking fiend halfway in between his pounces as I brought forth my mace crying, "Infect créacht mo ghráin go léir!" once more. Oleen's attempt to deflect my attack was worthless. The spiked spherical head crunched past his paw into his arm. As the spikes drove into the fur-covered flesh, a sickly, yellow light emanated from the head of my mace and then quickly injected itself into the fresh cuts in his arm, as if the light had become some sort of vapor.

"Miserable maggots, the lot of you!" Oleen hissed as he backed up against the rail. Before he could finish getting the words out, his left arm and the head of my mace both began to darken and shrivel. I tossed my dissolving weapon to the side, and he shrank to one knee in pain, snarling at me most directly. "Of course, your methods would be as wicked as your ends," the three of us encircled him ready to strike. "You trade one dictator for a hundred!? I brought order to your world's chaos!" he raved, still kneeling as we drew closer.

"Tell that to my brothers you put in collars," I answered in distain. Leofaren let loose with pummeling punches. I stomped in his thighs and chest. Brack grabbed on to his head and began bashing it against the stone railing behind him. Our thrashing lasted only long as needed. Oleen, The Protectorate of the League of Nations, lie in ruins. Blood and sweat poured from me. Leofaren was slashed up and down. He began transforming back into his tall, fur-covered natural form with its purple tint. Brack was bleeding also and had scuffs of scales missing on his arms and shoulders. Ulfric struggled to stand, spilling red from his neck and shoulder. Dobro was still somewhere engulfed in the dark and slowly dissipating mist in the center of the room. Over the balcony and below, we could see red-caped soldiers rushing into the front doors of the building. Hattaway and the knights were

nowhere to be seen. Too exhausted to flee, we would soon be surrounded.

Chapter 23: "All the Destroyers Disbanded"

As the timing of such writing endeavors go, what happened to the League of Nations should be obvious to any reader here observing this text. Nevertheless, I shall supply a brief exposé.

After the death of Oleen and most other fiends that paraded as high officials in the League of Nations, the League splintered into several factions of varying sizes, and continues to decay even to the time of this text's completion. Though many fragmented political leftovers remain in power here and there; by and large, the pride of nationalism has revealed itself to be strong. One such old nation that has rekindled, the Kingdom of Dallis, has become amongst the strongest kingdoms the main continent has known. Out of the League's remnants, very few fly the pure red flag or hold the same titles from their time with the League of Nations. As for the new conflicts and wars that sprung up in the League's fall, I take comfort in RuArc de Oro's literary work, *Amongst the Horror*. His book details the prisons, torture and treatment of many under the rule of the League. *Amongst the Horror* further details the capture and control of peoples able to perform magic and how the League turned them into mindless weapons. It is a read I highly recommend.

So as the destructive dominance of the League of Nations came to an end, so too, did our little alliance affectionately known as, "The Destroyers." Below I will reveal what I can on each of our team members whereabouts after the assault on Namel.

Danzig Yohan. After his complete disappearance during our first mission with Hattaway, none of us ever again had contact with Danzig. I find some comfort in thinking that his disappearance was by his own intention. No matter his motives I am eternally grateful for his help fighting the beast in the marsh outside of Rauthulaus.

Brack. Just as mysteriously as he appeared, so he departed. After the debacle in Namel with the surviving League of Nations officers and soldiers, after we defeated Oleen, he did return to Rauthulaus with some of us for a short while. No one knew or perhaps was willing to tell where or when he took off from there.

Dobro. No one of our band knew the horrors of the League of Nations better. The only person I know of to have regained their sanity after being a weaponized mage for the League; he was the most committed out of us all. Unfortunately, he did not survive his wounds. His body is now honored beneath a statue depicting his final moments near the Hoggins Castle on Rauthulaus Island.

Ulfric del Hoggins. As most readers will know, Ulfric is now King of Rauthulaus with his son soon set to take his place. While he charmed his way into that spot as the self-purported "first elected King," he is still bound to the simple laws of the Islands, same as all its other citizens. The Knights of Rauthulaus still operate independently of politics and enforce those laws. From what I can tell, his kingdom is one of the better places for the average person to live these days.

Leofaren. He stayed behind in Namel in the aftermath of our assault. From letters we have corresponded back and forth, it seems he has even pacified the local remaining officers by volunteering some jail time in penance of any collateral damage we may have caused while liberating the city from the

fiends. He has persuaded not only the officials and common locals to accept his unique appearance, but the mysterious Glerenbluff as well. Last I heard, the two were engaged to be married and run an almshouse called, "The Patient Virtue."

Hattaway. Continuing his lucrative mining and mercantile operations, he has been pivotal in keeping many of the League of Nations' trade routes from collapsing. The Dryad's appealing to people's greed as much as their comradery has probably served the world well. No doubt many conflicts have been avoided by many rebuilding nations staying in his trade game. He runs his empire from Ulfric's newly established kingdom on Rauthalaus.

Korin Stonefinder. As for myself, I traveled north –

.....

"Fire! Smoke across the street!" came muffled from the floor above. Bibliomane picked his head up from his reading in slow motion, listening to the patter of feet up above. Apparently, some multitude of patrons had arrived since he had begun reading.

"Fire!" another, more feminine, voice rang out clearly from above. His eyes sprang wide in surprise now realizing what was being spat so excitedly in his bar upstairs. The old man jumped to his feet dropping the hundred-year-old book as he raced across the cellar and up the stairs.

A PAUSE IN THE INTERLUDE

The Door in the Mountain: The Great Ghost's Call Part 3

Chapter 1: "Mirrors"

The wind beat upon the mountainside colder than anything she had felt before. The thick snow swallowed them up to their waists from below and filled the air above as it swirled to the ground in flakes. The angle of the incline was nearly too steep to ascend. She could only imagine how fraught and breathtaking the view below would be, if only she could see more than a dozen feet through the squall of white. A comforting voice hung in the air... *you can do anything you believe you can*. The clouds above began to clear allowing streaks of light to break through. A jagged rock point up above; *was that the peak?...*

"Alice... Alice, wake up," Jack said softly with a gentle hand on his friend's shoulder. As she came to, she moved as if to shudder from being cold before the warmth of her surroundings became obvious. "Are you cold?" he asked surprised while the early morning sun shone dimly on them through the trees. The glistening river slid slowly around them like a liquid mirror reflecting all the nuanced colors of the world above its surface.

"...No. Where are we?" she asked softly.

"We sailed through Manefold about an hour ago. There is smoke up ahead," he elaborated pointing a figure down river. As she fully began to wake, she took in her surroundings. Taisteal was being roused in much similar fashion at the back of the boat by Arturius who also drearily manned the rutter. She and Jack sat in the bow of the skiff. Its taupe sail was full, and the ship slipped along quicker than the slow, flat current of the Yarden river. On the south bank,

the river was a wall of thick sprawling trees. To the north, the road bordered right along the low riverbank; beyond the road lie endless fields of short, green, leafy plants that played in the breeze. Looking west where Jack had pointed, she could see a column of smoke on the road's side of the river fast approaching. There were figures moving about as well.

"I don't think I have ever seen him sleep," Jack mused looking back at Taisteal.

"I know I have never seen wounds like his," Alice lamented considering the dark, infected looking cuts all around the large priest's ankles where the steel clamps held tight into miscolored flesh.

"Lie low. Both of you," Arturius said directly, a juxtaposition compared to their soft conversation, "And pull that wool blanket over head," he continued gesturing to the bed roll next to them while navigating the boat closer to the south bank.

"What is your plan?" Taisteal asked grumbling up from his deep but restless sleep.

"How can we help?" Jack interjected.

"By hiding!" Arturius argued quickly pointing at the wool roll once again, "If we need an expert in combat, I'll call for your help," The paladin continued raising an eyebrow and matching the defiant stares of both the young woman and man at the front of the boat. His stare softened into a smirk but for a moment before it hardened again at looked forward to the billowing smoke growing closer. Alice snickered with a smile of her own while Jack grumpily grabbed the bed roll and began laying down next to Alice.

“I think that was sarcasm...” she mused while both pulled the large blanket overhead.

“Perhaps we should pretend to be a traveling circus act,” Jack retorted seriously. The two friends looked at each other; Jack’s serious face versus Alice’s big, surprised grin. He had not seen her smile like that in some time. The two erupted in laughter from underneath the heavy, dark cloth. Even Arturius revealed an uncharacteristic grin at the back of the boat, hearing the two laughing.

“Quiet!” Taisteal insisted in his deep voice regaining the commanding presence he usually carried after fully waking. “All three of you,” he continued looking up to Arturius next to him. The two younger companions went silent and still. The Paladin’s face grew serious once more and glanced between navigating down river and the smoke covered bank. Taisteal sat up as straight as he could muster, surveying the bank with his gold eyes. There were men moving about, shouting about the fire. Bodies of different sizes littered the road. Some of the living were rushing from the water’s edge carrying clay pots to what appeared to have been a wooden store house of some sort that was being consumed by spiraling red flames. There were several dozen moving about the burning wreckage. By the spears some carried and their minimal armor, it became obvious they were Yarden military men. Some of the soldiers on the bank were beginning to take serious notice of the little sailboat, pointing their spear tips in their direction.

“Captain Oren!” Arturius spouted out loud after recognizing the man. He began to turn the boat toward the soldiers and move to drop the sail.

“Why endanger him further?” Taisteal asked surprised that Arturius had been able to see more detail amongst the crowd than he could.

“If I recognize him from here, he surely recognizes me,” Arturius answered and continued, “Oren has eyes like a hawk.” The paladin moved toward the bow, patting the two under the blanket he whispered, “Don’t make a sound, ok?”

“We’re stopping?” Alice asked excitedly from under the sheet of wool in a hushed tone.

“Arturius?” Taisteal interjected as well in a questioning tone.

“Most of the bodies on the shore are hobgoblins. We need to know what is going on,” Arturius answered. Taisteal rubbed his eyes and then his forehead, whipping an undue amount of sweat from it. He glanced at the rotting mess about his ankles where the cursed blades still dug in deep. Looking to the shore, his face was a perplexed and silent undulation. He could usually see better than any ‘hawk,’ but the details of the shore were still blurry to him. Little to nothing could be seen under the dense fabric, but Jack could feel Alice get ridged next to him.

“Very well,” the deep voice of the priest reported as the small ship approached the shore slowing now unaided by the wind. Jack and Alice rocked against the front bulkhead as the ship came to a swift stop in the sandy bank. The lovely, young woman lay stiff next to Jack trying not to make a sound. Jack slowly reached his hand over to hers. She winced slightly, surprised by his touch at first. Soon, she reciprocated as they interlocked fingers. The shipped rocked once more as Arturius jumped to shore.

“Golden boy! You just missed the excitement,” Captain Oren said with a half-crazed smile while walking down to greet Arturius. The few soldiers that had made it to the boat’s landing space relaxed at Oren’s words and lowered their spears.

“What excitement, Captain?” Arturius asked standing in ankle-deep, cool, clear water between the skiff and the grey sand bank that rose about two feet from water level.

“We found some of those Hobgoblin rumors in the flesh!” Oren replied.

“On this side of town?” Arturius said glancing back at the boat briefly.

“Slipped by us somehow, the fowl swine. Attacked a traveling merchant whose bodyguard managed to ride to town. We rallied a response west and those prideful, green magots chose to stand and fight,” Oren explained. Seeing now that as many Yardish men lined the road as hobgoblins Arturius’ hard-set face turned to disgust before softening.

“Does anyone need healing?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, no. Those creatures make deadly strikes,” Oren answered and continued, “We lost over half the squad. The few who are injured can march back to the Hall just fine.” At that Arturius looked to Taisteal just a few feet away still seated near the rear of the boat. He wondered if he should warn his friend of Drem’s betrayal. That these hobgoblins were probably ordered here by a Council Priest to ambush the two who were hiding below a blanket in front of the skiff. He could not think of a way to warn Oren without revealing too much. The awkward pause was soon interrupted, “So, who is your friend here? I have seen you at the Hall of the One, but we have never been introduced,”

Oren asked drifting the attention of the question from Arturius to Taisteal.

“This is who I was looking for, Priest Taisteal,” Arturius interjected, “He was ambushed by hobgoblins himself.” As Arturius rambled on he wondered what would be best for the two vessels and their quest. *What would be the best for Oren?*

“Pleased to officially meet you,” Taisteal answered in his booming voice garnering its usual commanding presence. “I would stand but I was injured myself.”

“Where was the ambush,” Oren asked curiously and quickly.

“Cole’s Crossing ...Did you happen to find a small mirror amongst the hobgoblins here? ...Any small trinket that was reflective and sacred to them?” the priest asked shifting the attention off himself.

“A small mirror?” Oren asked ruffling his lips and jaws in confusion.

“Yes, an enchanted one. A cursed one. I consider that the Hobgoblins use them to communicate over great distances,” Taisteal stated plainly.

“Cursed by who?” Oren pressed shedding his casual series of slightly exaggerated expressions.

“Do you believe The Great Ghost is real, Captain Oren?” Taisteal asked. The captain hopped down the little sand embankment into the shallow water next to Arturius. Still holding his spear, Oren postured with his knots of muscle on display. Arturius stepped wide, placing a hand on the gunwale of the small craft, his sword was sheathed over in the boat, out his quick reach.

“What are you getting at priest?” Oren asked.

“If you find one, destroy it. ‘He’ is using it to communicate with them as well,” Taistea answered. Oren’s familiar smile was completely gone and replaced with a grimace. He eyed the two men of faith seriously.

“You’re serious. This is supposed to be the ‘last army?’” the captain asked suspiciously, motioning broadly back to the corpse-filled road, his arm rippled revealing years of physical training.

“Perhaps a small fraction of it. There will be much more to come and soon, from outside your borders and within,” the priest responded.

“You are serious...” Oren spouted somehow still surprised looking between the priest and Arturius, whom he had known for years.

“Some people in Yarden are communicating with him as well. You should not trust –” Arturius stated before the rare occasion of Taistea interrupting someone occurred.

“– Anyone, Captain. You should not trust anyone. Defend yourself and your citizens the best you see fit,” Taistea spoke with a heavy drop in his voice that added to the growing sense of dread in the conversation.

“What are you two going to do?” Oren asked earnestly.

“We... are running away,” Taistea replied deflated after a brief but effectively dramatic pause.

“What?” Oren asked surprised. Arturius tried to stifle his own surprise at Taistea’s answer. The concept of running away was more foreign to the paladin than lying.

“You know about The Great Ghost, what about the children prophesied to save the world from his ending it?” Taisteal inquired. At that, the paladin could not control his surprise any longer and looked at the priest as tensely as an eagle’s talon around a fish. Arturius considered if Taisteal was really about to tell the captain everything.

“I do,” Oren answered slowly, meticulously sounding out the words indicating some skepticism. A couple of the other Yardish soldiers standing at the top of the bank were now sucked into the conversation, as well, listening from the sandy slope with piqued interests.

“They died,” Taisteal mused somberly. Arturius relaxed a bit at his words.

“What? How are you sure it was them? Where?” Oren went on more excitedly.

“There is no doubt. A fire in Petram took them. It is over; there is no way to stop the Ghost now. There is no one who can open the door. No one to plead our case,” the priest continued. Oren listened believing at least that the priest believed his own story. Faith in the One, belief in the door in the mountain and the children prophesied to open it, was prevalent in Yarden. Oren had heard this all before but always relied more on what he saw than what he was told.

“...And now you’re just running away?” Oren scoffed with perhaps what was a small amount of fear becoming palpable on his voice.

“Do whatever seems best to you, Captain, but remember your sway always dies with you. Come on, Arturius. Let us be off,” Taisteal stated looking down the river dismissively.

“I am sorry, Oren,” Arturius stated with a strong pat on Oren’s shoulder. He turned and began pushing the boat off the shore. He waded out a bit with the skiff before climbing back over and going straight to work on dropping sails. Oren stood there in relative confusion, twisting his face like a wet rag being rung dry while watching the little ship drift away. The ship soon righted itself down river and the sail filled out. One soldier that stood on the bank overhearing the conversation eyed the entirety of the ship and its contents as it began to pick up speed down river.

“Alright men, search these wretches for mirrors!” Oren shouted with exaggerated gravitas while turning back to the bank and his soldiers. The soldier jumped out of his trance-like study of the ship and saluted with his right hand; his left hand clinched a tight fist by his side.

“Yes Sir!” he and the other Yardish soldiers replied as the captain walked past those who had gathered by the bank on toward some nearby hobgoblin bodies. The soldier who had so eyed the ship quickly slid a small dark reflective sliver of glass from his left clinched fist into his pants pocket before turning to help further search the bodies on the road.

Chapter 2: "Bitter"

Dust had settled in the early evening dew and waited patiently around the scattered heaps of broken stone. Some of the piles were twice as tall as a man. The front walls of Castle Rockhurst laid in ruin. Keera and Rosheen looked on from amongst the crowd of locals, most still wearing black from their lord's funeral. None dared approach the rubble that was being scoured by black-caped knights from Hortus. Murmurs spread throughout the crowd as the soldiers shouted in search of their King.

"Could this be the third royal death in a week?" queried one older woman with red hair and a pursed face, as she passed by.

"Here!" a shout could be heard from one of the knights. A light sigh ran through the crowd as the armored men converged on the cry amid the rubble. More lazy dust was stirred as the men pulled small stones back. Soon an armored hand was revealed. There was no mistaking the King's armor no matter how mangled and bent it may be. Soon they had moved enough rubble to reveal his unconscious torso. One knight went to grab a small, dark mirror that lay next to the still King's head.

"My King!?" the knight jumped in surprise as the seemingly lifeless corpse grasped the little mirror quickly and tightly. To the men's increasing surprise, the King moved from bent mangled stupor up onto hands and knees, pulling his feet free from underneath the boulder of broken castle wall that had fallen on him. He clung tightly to the little mirror, "Sir, can you hear us?" the knight asked. He ignored the man and began to stand only hesitating a moment to wave off the attempts from the surrounding knights to help him up. They stood in disbelief as he appeared to be mostly fine and looked

about his surroundings with a flat expression, like one might someday give to a statue in his likeness.

“They escaped to the west?” Indoctus asked his knights with only a hint of hoarseness accompanying his usual, thick, polished tone.

“Yes, my King,” the one who first found him answered quickly and continued, “Your betrothed was with them.”

“We have riders giving chase not one moment behind them,” another knight with particularly broad shoulders chimed in.

“They will not catch the sorcerer...” he answered with only a hint of lamentation, “It is up to Drem now... Or the darkness...”

“Who?” the broad-shouldered knight asked. Indoctus glanced at his mirror before sliding it under his bent breastplate that awkwardly fit his undamaged body.

“Bring scrolls and ready riders. I have orders for the Lords of the Dallis... and beyond,” he commanded with a tone befitting a seasoned King. Glancing over but for a second at the rubble, and still smoking castle, he turned his blue stone gaze out across the town with his eyes settling on two young women standing amongst the crowd, “And find an Inn for us to set up in, wherever has the best ale,” he said loud enough for the edge of the crowd to hear.

Keera quickly looked down seeing the King’s gaze and hearing his words liked poisoned honey. Rosheen backed away slowly pulling along her panicked friend, back into the crowd.

“How could he know?” Whispered Keera still looking at her feet while being shuffled through the crowd.

“Shut your mouth!” answered Rosheen much louder than she should before leveling off her tone and continuing, “Our ale is too bitter. Surely, he meant somewhere else.” Keera looked sheepishly doubtful at her love to find Rosheen, who usually was so steadfastly confident, also bearing a wide-eyed frantic gaze. Rosheen sighed a long breath and continued, “Come on. Let’s find Bibliomane.”

Chapter 3: "Where the whole world meets"

It was a new morning with a strong westward breeze. Alice held on gently to the rutter. She piloted the skiff effortlessly along the ever-widening Yarden river. To her the river seemed wide enough to fit the entirety of her hometown of Petram into. There were more and more houses and other buildings, ones she did not know the purpose of, dotting the banks now. Likewise, they were no longer alone in the river. Several small fishing vessels were scattered quietly along the water. Their silhouettes through the lifting fog revealed with men holding lines in the water. One long, low heavily loaded ship was being rowed upstream by a numerous crew of what she deemed to be dwarves by their look, and the tongue of their singing that kept time with their rows. Jack stood beside her at the back of the little boat while she steered steadily, giving plenty of space between them and the other ships. They both enjoyed the touch of another warm morning's sun as it burned off the thin smoke like mist over the river.

"Hard to believe they both fell asleep last night," Jack said low and objectively to Alice. The large priest and the long, sturdy Arturius laid out asleep in the center of the boat's hull, seemingly comfortable atop the large wool blanket that had hid Jack and Alice the day before. Arturius was enough of a man in physical stature to overshadow most, but beside Taisteal, he seemed thin and lanky.

"It's about time. The Paladin hasn't slept since we met him," Alice answered in a tone that was hard for Jack to read the feeling of.

"Yeah, I tire of the feeling of being 'taken care of,'" Jack replied. His friend rolled her eyes instinctually without him noticing.

“Indeed, it gets old,” Alice agreed focusing again more directly on the river downstream. Jack took a somber posture considering all the times she must have been ‘taken care of’ in ways not of her choosing while growing up the Lady of Petram. As his thought’s turned to the very recent loss of her father, he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Jack?” she said pointedly as a question stiffening her shoulders. He smiled a shallow smile to dismiss his action and returned his hand to the railing behind her atop the stern.

“Yes?” he asked not yet understanding her tight response. Then, all at once, while out of the lifting fog in the distance he saw what had shocked her. A stone wall twice as high as the highest point of Castle Rockhurst running from the river’s edge on both the north and south sides out of sight into the forest and fields. Beyond the mouth of the walls, the river ran gently through the city, splitting off the main flow into large streets of water separated by buildings. It was hard to count their stories in the distance. Jack and Alice shared an excited glance as they approached. This was the place they had long teased each other about and where Jack had sincerely tried to convince Alice to run away with him. Though the emotions were complicated and different in each of them, one fact animated them with enthusiasm beyond the others. They both knew the ocean lie just on the other side of this city, the world’s oldest metropolis.

“Namel,” Alice said with a sense of awe and a little louder than the words they had been sharing. Fresh smiles grew naturally across both the young friends’ faces as they studied the city’s entrance.

“Where the whole world meets,” answered Arturius, raising his head from his slumber and looking ahead.

“You have been here before?” Alice asked a little higher in tone than usual, not hiding her excitement.

“Only a couple times, but Taisteal knows the city well,” he answered.

“And do you know this friend of his? This Leofaren?” she asked, lowering her tone, regaining some of the patronizing distrust she often mustered without intending to do so.

“No. But Taisteal trust him, and I have heard he is the best healer outside of Mon Dryadalis,” Arturius responded. “...I hope that is good enough,” he added looking at the sleeping Taisteal.

“Where do we dock?” Jack asked hanging out the words slowly as they began to pass through the mouth of the city’s walls. Alice’s amazement returned as well. Even Arturius took a moment to take in the grandeur before letting out the sail to the point where it was luffing, and the craft slowing. The walls were hundreds of feet high and some sixty feet thick at the river’s edge, from which they protruded down into the river deep enough to make any entrance into the city by land impossible. The road to the north entering the city was crowded on both sides of the wall. Guards manning the top of the walls, looked as small as the doves that frequented the walls of Castle Rockhurst back home. As incredible as the walls were and the tall sprawling buildings that seemed to float between the streets of the dark, still water, was the crowd in town. Small vessels, many loaded to the point that they seemed only an inch before taking on water, zipped back and forth in all directions. Many by paddles raucously splashing along, while some that traveled further from the main run of the river, were driven along by poles being pushed off the bottom. On the roads and alleys that they were now

able to look down, it was obvious that the crowd only intensified off the water. Not only was the crowd immense, but immensely diverse. Someone of every race and species was in the city and no one group seemed to overly outnumber the rest. The two young travelers swiveled their heads in wonder from one thing to the next, taking in everything they could. Arturius moved next to the sweat-covered and wilted-looking Taisteal in an attempt to wake him as pleasantly as possible. In a dumfounded moment, revealing Jack's youth and inexperience in the world, he pointed at a nearby canoe in surprise.

"That man has horns!" Jack spat out loud. The shirtless, red-skinned Adharca in the back of the canoe turned to them with a vicious look as they passed each other only feet apart on the water.

"I am no man, ye gobshite inlander," he replied in a raspy voice in a way that rolled each word together. The pale, grey horns that protruded from behind his ears, curled straight up into points, adding an otherworldly intimidation to his words. Without hesitation the insulted being took his paddle and slapped the water heartily, sending a thin spray of water over Jack, Alice, a frustrated Arturius and a sleeping Taisteal. The Adharca immediately erupted into a raspy laughter and set back to paddling his craft. Taisteal jumped awake sitting up quickly while Arturius, kneeling beside him, put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"What is it!?" Taisteal boomed as he woke with a mix of sweat and river water across his brow.

"Now that you have that out of your system," Arturius berated Jack before turning back to the unusually distraught priest. "Just a local. We are in Namel," Taisteal nodded not saying anything else, looking around to get his bearings. Alice

was giving Jack a big smile with even bigger eyes. Jack mouthed to her 'Not one word!' silently. She shook her head in a playful way as if to guarantee her noncompliance in his request.

"There. Turn right down this canal," Taisteal stated, gaining the calmer tone they were more used to hearing from him. The two younger travelers lost their momentary amusement as the seriousness of their situation returned to their minds. Arturius dropped the sail.

"Jack, grab a paddle with me," the paladin instructed and Jack quickly followed suit. Even though the small skiff seemed much larger in its current surroundings, Alice guided the ship clearly down the small canal as the two men paddled. The narrow canal was completely shaded by the series of tall stone buildings on each side. Soon, the large priest had pointed out a small, empty dock next to a dirty, but considerably less busy alley. As they pulled up, only a couple of poorly dressed humans that were leaning against the railing between the alleys end and the canal, seemed to notice. Arturius quickly fastened his sword before he lent a hand to help the large, injured man stand, as Jack and Alice tied the ship off to the little wooden dock.

"I can stand," Taisteal bemoaned sharply in his deep voice as he waived off Arturius' help. The paladin was taken aback. He always knew Taisteal to be a rational man, yet he clearly needed help despite the protest. The priest ardently sat straight up and tried to stand in the gently rocking ship. The three others could clearly see the multitude of feelings run over the big man's face. His fists closed, forming big hammers, pushing against the tops of his thighs, and his eyes closed tight as his legs attempted to flex underneath him. Fresh blood slipped past all the black, clotted mess that surrounded the clamps still on his ankles. His eyes opened

and his mouth gasped for a silent breath before clinching back closed, tight, gritting his bare teeth behind a feral snarl. He emitted a low growl before exhaling, closing his hazy gold eyes once more, and calming while still slowly lifting. There was a tremble in his lips and a twitch of his closed eyes; the emotion was leaving him. He was becoming like a closed eye statue, calmly breathing through the motion of his straitening legs. Still shaking and flexing, he began to rise ever so slightly. Arturius and the two youngsters looked on in amazement as the small skiff trembled with his rising body. About halfway up, he gave way. He fell back heavy on his rear, rocking the boat and giving off a small splash from its swaying hull. He sat there for a moment staring blankly forward before his eyes ran down to his pitiful ankles. The dark, steel clamps were still tightly in place, cutting in deep against bone and sinew. The wounds were messy and where they had sealed over with curdles of dried blood, new streams of red were now flowing. As he looked up, his large, golden eyes were wet as if to the point of dropping tears. Alice, Jack and Arturius all gazed back at him with surprise and concern. *Was this a look of defeat?* Jack thought. He nodded at them and raised his arms as if to accept help. The two other men quickly obliged and pulled him up onto their shoulders.

“At least his almshouse is not far,” Taisteal said in a putrid tone as if he had just tasted something rotten.

“How can I help?” Alice asked as softly as she could muster, yet with enough zeal to hint at her stubborn nature rallying beneath the surface.

“...You could carry my armor...” Arturius answered rather abashedly looking back at the large sack, filled with plate steel.

“Sure,” she replied and quickly began scrambling to tie off the sheet that his armor lied in. Jack and Arturius precariously helped Taisteal off the rocking ship and onto the dock. Arturius looked over to the two men who had been quietly watching the whole process. His keen, green eyes engulfed them like a rapid river in the mountains before glancing down to the hilt of his sword and back to them.

“If you are brave enough to steal that ship, I hope you are brave enough to keep it,” Arturius rasped while still supporting Taisteal under one arm. One of the men looked down quickly while the other matched Arturius’ stare with a stern gaze and nodded. They began down the alley slowly with Taisteal. Neither realized how severely he was sweating until taking his arms over their shoulders. He was wet and clammy to the touch. Trembles came and went through him as they carried him along with almost no weight being supported by his own feet.

“No thank you!” a feminine voice rang out from behind the three men now about halfway down the alley.

“Alice?” Jack asked twisting quickly to look over his shoulder.

“Very well, only offering to help ya, girl,” the softer looking of the two men answered while backing away, hands raised.

“I am quite fine!” she mustered while shooting both men a piercing glance, who had been by the dock since they arrived. She had dragged the heavy sack of armor out of the ship and kept dragging it behind her, making a trail in the fine sand that rest upon the cobblestone alley. While they stopped and gawked, she got enough of the material gusseted up together to pull the whole thing up onto her shoulders. It

was awkward and about half as heavy as she was, if not more. But Jack had seen that face before.

“I can take a moment to don it and still help with Taisteal,” Arturius said to Jack while they watched the slender figure struggle to pivot herself up under the sack of bulky steel.

“I wouldn’t,” Jack answered with a slight smile while taking in the stubborn spectacle, “but, if you dare... go for it,” he continued. Taisteal bounced a bit on their shoulders as he chuckled. Finally getting a grasp and getting under the weight of her load, Alice walked up to the three men bent over about a third of the way at her waist.

“Ok. What are we waiting for?” she shot aloud, mostly at Jack who was struggling to hide his grin. They turned and continued down the shaded alley. When they stepped out into a main street it was like stepping into a wall of light and madness. The large open street was a stark contrast to the dark, quiet alley. Persons of every type, color and size were shoulder-to-shoulder going in all directions. There were waist high people, smaller and much thinner than dwarves; tall people, head and shoulders taller and even thicker than Taisteal, with rock grey skin; buildings at least five stories high and staked together forming walls that framed the busy street. Carts were being pulled through the crowds by creatures strange to Jack and Alice as well. They were something like a three-legged cow but taller and with sharper, more intelligent looks about them. While Jack and Alice stood there staring, Arturius was commiserating over the hustle and bustle that they would have to deal with the rest of the way.

“To the left,” Taisteal rasped in between deep breaths.

“Still hanging in there with me, old friend?” Arturius asked.

“Apparently... that is all... I can do,” he replied, still breathing heavily. As they traveled on, they received more suspicious looks and concerned glances from those passing by, than even Alice could muster to return. All three were struggling with the burdens they each carried. Taisteal easily weighed as much as two average men.

“A little further,” Taisteal mumbled with his head starting to droop. They continued on for some time before coming to a large crossroad where five streets came together around a large center court, highlighted by a tall, ornate fountain. Alice following close behind, constantly being bumped into by larger, bumbling pedestrians. She started to notice they were leaving a fresh trail of blood here and there from Taisteal’s feet. Just as she was about to speak up and stop them, the three men stopped on their own.

“All right Taisteal. Which way next?” Arturius asked. The large man mumbled some more looking to the ground, “Taisteal?” Arturius asked again, louder.

“There is no way... there is no way to get to the door in... too high. The mountain is too high,” Taisteal mumbled on, rocking his head back looking into the bright blue sky. By now Alice had circled around them and they were all focused on the priest who seemed to be slipping out of consciousness.

“No, old friend. Where is this Alm’s house?” Arturius said quite harshly trying to jostle the man back into the moment. Alice looked on with a sinking feeling. *Has another person died for me,* she thought to herself frantically, while tossing the heavy sack of armor to ground and stepping closer.

“Come on, Taisteal,” Jack mustered while the large man became completely limp under his and Arturius’ support.

“Taisteal?” a slow, mellow voice rang out from nearby. An extremely tall, fur-covered creature stepped through the crowd, leaning down to look at Taisteal.

“Back off!” Arturius rebutted to the purple-hued giant that had walked up next to them.

“Back off?” the creature answered absently and very slowly. “No, my back is on. It has always been on from what I can tell,” it continued.

“Come on, old man, you have to lead us to this Leofaren,” Arturius insisted giving the now completely unconscious Taisteal a shake.

“Oh,” the tall creature exclaimed slowly, and continued slightly faster than before but only still half the speed most creatures would say anything, “It is Taisteal!” Arturius took Taisteal’s large left arm off his shoulders freeing himself and letting his limp body gently sag to the ground, while Jack attempted to hold the heavy priest mostly upright.

“Who are you?” Arturius asked pointedly, placing his right hand on the hilt of his longsword. Pulling the blade a few inches out of its sheath, he squared his feet toward the large creature that had interjected himself into their situation. The dark-purplish creature eyed all four of them while standing back up straight and tall.

“You must be Arturius, the gold paladin. There are stories about you from the north,” he answered, not yet getting to Arturius’ direct question. The paladin stood steadfast, not letting down his guard. “Be calm young hero. There is no place further our friend must lead you to find me,”

he continued slowing his speech back down to its original cadence.

“You’re Leofaren?” Alice asked quickly.

“Always, I have been,” he answered deeply with the timing of her speech and his drawing a sharp contrast.

“Taisteal needs your help. It’s urgent,” she continued, “See?” Alice went on pointing out Taisteal’s ankles. The three stood there looking over the tall creature. He was covered from head to toe with fine, but thick dark lavender fur. His tall lanky frame, only interrupted by a healthy pot belly, went up perhaps nine feet. His rippled, long, lean muscles stood out in his long arms underneath the fur. He wore only a dark olive, sleeveless shirt and long shorts that came about half way down to what a human would call their shins. His dark eyes flanked by tall, thin, cat-like ears, studied Taisteal until they came to rest on the bloody clamps and wounds around his ankles.

“Yes,” he answered even deeper and slower than before. “Very urgent,” Leofaren agreed before putting a gentle fur-covered hand on Arturius’ shoulder. Arturius slid his sword back down completely sheathing it. Leofaren leaned down on one knee and scooped up the big man from Jack, cradling Taisteal in his arms like a half-grown child.

“Follow me,” he said while he stood and began to stride back through the crowd with long, patient steps that carried him quicker than they anticipated. Arturius grabbed up his armor from Alice and the three of them followed through the crowd.

Chapter 4: "Alms"

The tall, arched wood door bounded open and slapped against the opposing wall of stacked limestone.

"All while being so slow, must you be so loud, Leo?" scolded a regal, sharp-figured woman without looking up as they barged into the Alms' house front door. The main foyer was covered up with mostly sick or injured humans who laid on grey, linen bedding. There was a dozen or so people resting along the clean stone floor between them, and the woman standing next to a counter at the back of the room, mixing some sort of storm blue elixir in a flask. As the grey-haired woman looked up at the ragged together group of strangers and Leofaren, holding what she could only make out as an unconscious man dressed like a priest of the One, her whimsical tone firmed up, "What is this?" she asked with a shake of her head.

"An old friend in need, my love," answered Leofaren.

Jack, Alice and Arturius rested on stools around the counter near the back of the Alms' house. Only a thin, human assistant named Cinealta, and the infirmed that she attended to, remained in the large foyer with them. Taisteal had been taken into a back room with Leofaren and the woman who the three had just learned was named, Glerenbluff. After some heated arguing between Glerenbluff and Arturius it was decided to give the healers some space to do what must be done. Since the cursed wounds would not heal, apparently the only way he might survive was to amputate his feet above the clamps, and heal the new wounds which were not swayed with a curse. The mood was one of confusion and defeat amongst the three, but the feeling fell on none more heavily than on the proud paladin.

“What do you think he meant?” Alice asked softly, mostly directed at Arturius. The paladin sat there staring blankly up across the brightly lit wood beams that supported intricate stone chandeliers.

“Who?” Jack asked after a brief moment.

“Taisteal, of course. He said, ‘there is no way to get to The Door in the Mountain,’” Alice answered a bit annoyed at the feeling of being ignored. The assistant shot them a quick fearful look, and then looked away before moving to another patient further from them across the room. Cinealta was a dark, cute woman with warm eyes. She had been giving Arturius alluring looks since he had walked in, but at the mention of The Door in the Mountain, her demeanor changed to one of fear. “What did he mean by that? Is that not the whole reason why we left Petram in the first place?” Alice added.

“Men say all sorts of things when they are dying,” Arturius replied. Jack shifted uncomfortably in his seat at the thought of Taisteal dying.

“Taisteal is not going to die,” Jack interjected more sternly than usual and continued to proclaim, “He is going to lead us to the Sky Cap Mountains, and we will find ‘the door.’” Arturius motioned with a finger to his lips, followed by a lowered palm for both of them to talk more quietly.

“I hope so, Jack,” Arturius answered.

“I understand us making it to a mountain chain in the north, but finding this door?” Alice continued this time speaking much softer, “The followers of the One say, ‘no one has seen the door?’”

“Indeed, that is in some of the old texts. Most priests cannot even agree on which chain of mountains it is supposed to be in. Some even argue that it is a metaphor for the connection between us and the source,” Arturius answered.

“Yet, you believe the real door is in the Sky Caps?” asked Alice.

“I believe Taisteal,” The paladin answered looking down at the palms of his open hands.

“Why him?” she pressed speaking more gently. Jack leaned over observing both Arturius and his childhood friend more closely as he anticipated an answer.

“Our world is built on belief,” Arturius began explaining, “magic, relationships, nations— everything. Most priests of the One... really most leaders are full of falsities. They read a text that says one thing and make up what they think it means. What they want it to mean. Then, they behave as if what they have said is as much of a fact as water being wet; but we all know little. Taisteal, for all his knowledge, he is not that way. He sees the text and prophecy for what it is. Words on paper that say a thing. A thing that can guide you, perhaps even be obvious sometime; but he never pretends to know more than he actually does. If he says The Door is in the Sky Cap Mountains, then I believe him,” as he finished, Jack leaned forward onto the counter and sighed.

“Ok,” Alice said resolutely. Jack leaned up and looked at her curiously with a slanted brow. She looked back at her friend, deep into his eyes before nodding. “Ok, there is no other option. We will all have to trust him,” she stated confidently.

A loud crack whipped through the Alms’ house as Leofaren slammed open the back door behind the three of

them, who all nearly leapt from their stools. Cinealta let out a quick shriek and a few of the patients, trying to find comfort on the floor, jumped at the commotion.

“He will live,” the large creature stated joyfully. Jack and Alice visibly relaxed and Arturius slid his sword back down in its sheath, from which he had drawn a quarter of the way from its sheath out of instinct. “He sleeps now. Soon, he should be alert,” Leofaren said as slowly as anything he had said before.

“When is soon?” Jack asked in as innocent of a tone as he could muster, though his suspicion of what the slow talking giant may mean by ‘soon’ was apparent to the other humans.

“By the end... of this day,” Leo answered deeply, pausing in the middle of his slow statement before finishing with a smile.

“...and healthy enough to travel?” Arturius asked.

“When he wakes, he will be as healthy as he has ever... Aside from not having feet,” Leofaren answered, being a bit too literal.

“Then we need to be ready...” the paladin said, looking inward and pondering options to take out of the city.

“Your hurry is that earnest?” the tall creature asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Arturius answered Leofaren, before directing his attention back to the two young vessels. “We have no way of knowing how much of a lead we have on...” his words trailed off as he glanced the large, pointed ears of Leofaren hovering above. The tall fur-covered lank of muscle stood there with an innocent look on his face, listening before his eyes brightened with observation.

“Oh... this must be eastern humor,” Leofaren chuckled to himself in a slow, round tone, “...Trust me with his life, but not your plans.”

“It’s not that...” Alice began trying to restore some semblance of politeness amidst what a quick and uncouth meeting it had been. Leofaren stopped her sentence short by putting a finger to his lips that curled into a wide, amused smile. She could not tell if she was being insulted or if this was the way of showing he understood the situation somehow. The tall creature whirled on one long step to the door he had slammed open and motioned with his hand for them to follow. They did so through a modest hallway in which Leofaren had to duck to walk through, especially to get under the exposed white wood beams that held lit iron candelabras. Soon they arrived at a side door and found Taisteal lying quietly inside. Glerebluff was just finishing wrapping white bandages around the nubs that remained below the large priest’s knees. The three companions looked on Taisteal lying quietly on the low bed in individual sorrow.

“My moon flower, they wish to discuss their private things,” Leofaren stated to the grey-haired woman who replied only with a smile.

“...That’s not exactly what we want to do...” Jack started.

“Jack, I don’t think...” Alice began talking over her equally bemused friend before again being shushed by Leofaren. Glerebluff and her tall, fury accomplice exited the room, shutting the door behind them. Arturius seemed oblivious to the awkward comments focusing only on Taisteal. Jack and Alice soon collected themselves and joined Arturius around the small bed in the center of the room, exaggerated further by the large frame of a man that laid upon it. This

inner room was brightly lit with sconces along the slick granite walls that reflected the light well enough, though there were no windows. Arturius laid the large sack filled with his armor onto the floor. Pulling from it a sheathed, curved dagger with an ornate but well-worn leather handle and silver pommel, he turned to the two.

“Can you watch over him for a while?” he asked.

“What will you do?” Alice asked with the slightest of flutters in her voice.

“Find us a ship out of here. We will have plenty of time to make plans once on the water,” Arturius answered handing the dagger over toward the two, across the top of the sleeping Taistéal. Jack quickly grabbed the dagger.

“We will be fine,” the young man answered and continued, “Can we afford the fare?”

“...Yes,” Arturius answered with an audible sigh looking down into his makeshift wool bag. He drew it up and together, throwing it back over his shoulder, “Be alert. I’ll be gone no more than a couple hours.” His words were soft and sincere, like ice resting in a fire; the words came out of the hardened, serious statue of a man. Arturius wasted little time in sentiment before striding out of the room. Alice moved around the little room to a chair adjacent from Jack. Taking a seat she eyed the door, and then her friend. She followed his eyes with her own. Jack studied Taistéal’s legs, or lack thereof, before looking intently over the dagger he held.

The courtyard was busy as Arturius pushed through the crowd. A large marble-clad building with a glistening blue-domed roof in the court’s center, emitted a chorus of voices ringing, that strongly filtered through the noise of the busy intersection. One hand on his sword and the other holding

the sack over his shoulder, he moved forward with sweeping green eyes, scanning over the crowd. It helped that he was a little taller than most. Only a rare human or some other species would block his view over the crowd. As he came to a shaded alley with less commotion, the smell of salt water stirred in the breeze and filled his nose. A young woman called, in a tongue he did not know, to a petite child with long, dark hair. As the child ran up to her, a man came out of the simple apartment door behind her. The child threw its arms around both their legs before the man picked the little child up high overhead. The laughter of the three locals' echoed down the alley, occupied now by only Arturius and a few other strangers walking along. His steadfast eyes slowed from their darting and assessing of the people around him as he considered the couple and their child.

Continuing on to the port in long, swift steps, he thought, *Will I ever know what that is like?* His thoughts swirled in his head not rendering any sound out loud. *Few paladins do... It is not our common lot.* His inner monologue continued, *Though few things have been common lately...* His thoughts spiraled about the prophecies of 'the vessels' or 'the children' and the door in the mountain. He considered the way Jack looks at Alice and the way she occasionally looks back at Jack. *How odd that we should long for common things...* he thought as he shook his head and exited the little alley. Stopping to notice the multitude of ships docked before him along a series of wide, wooden deep-water docks, he breathed in the strong, salty air. Beyond the ships, white splashes could be seen over the rock breakers at the mouth of the port and then, endless blue. He stood there but for a moment drinking in the vast visual, before his eyes spotted a red and tan spectacle. She walked keenly by him making confident and direct eye contact with him. Nearly as tall as he was, she was dark tan and shaped like a silk figurine of

imagined perfection. Wearing dark linen pants over slender bare feet with a long, sleeveless, black coat that revealed her lean chiseled arms. What was most surprising were the two rough looking bearded axes that hung in leather loops by her swinging hips. Arturius scanned in the direction she was going and then in the other direction. ...*Not common at all*, he thought to himself. He turned and began to walk in the same direction she had. He was scanning the different ships along their left. He felt somewhat embarrassed as his eyes occasionally darted up to the curved figure topped by wild, red hair walking in front of him. One time in between his glances, when he looked back forward, she had stopped on a dime and turned to face him. As he stopped, the slender-eared and sharp-faced woman walked up close, face-to-face with him.

“You looking for something?” she asked in a confident voice with plenty of depth that matched her tough but unique beauty.

“A fast ship,” he gave an answer quickly and confidently not allowing himself to give into surprise. She smirked as their mutually green eyes locked. He quickly noticed the lighter striations of color running out from her eyes and mouth, down her neck like faint white tattoos. It was apparent now, she was a Dryad.

“Is that the only fast thing you’re looking for?” she spoke this time in a wilder manner while placing her hands on her axes along her hips.

“I would prefer the crew to be competent, only the ship needs to be fast,” he answered again holding his composure. Their eyes stayed locked. He couldn’t tell if he should think of a joke to flirt with or ready himself for a fight. Her aggressive smirk changed into a more serious gaze.

“Ok. Follow me. If you are looking for speed, there is nothing faster than the ‘trident,’” she said before turning back around and continuing her swift pace. He followed along more alert than before as she quickly moved along the dock-lined street. Soon he found himself following her down one of the smaller docks, across a gangway and onto the deck of a long, skinny tri-hulled sailing vessel. The skinny ship was made of three long hulls fixed together by lean joist. The openings in between the decks were covered only by a tight net that you could see down through, right to the water in between the three hulls. The whole thing sat low and sleek in the water. He stopped at the edge of the port side wooden deck before crossing the net. She continued over onto the center deck. There were no steps or railings, just flat decks topped only with masts, riggings, two hatches and one rutter’s wheel.

“Captain! I brought us a fare,” she yelled down one of the open hatches in the center hull.

“I am picking the fares this time!” roared a rasping voice up from below.

“No, you are drinking,” she answered mixing a playful tone with an aggressive assertion.

“I am drinking, then I am picking!” the voice roared back up even louder.

“He seems wealthy...” she mused while looking back over to Arturius who gave her an inquisitive look. Glancing down he realized he was still in his silver inner tunic with gold winged embroidery around the collar and cuffs of the sleeves. It was the only thing he had worn since leaving the Hall of the One in Manefold, and he was filthy. “...Wealthy and desperate,” she concluded with a smile before twirling, and quickly descending down the opposite hatch closer to the bow. An audible sigh with a trailing, heavy grumble echoed up

out of the hatch from where the captain had answered. Loud creaking steps ensued from below before a large, shirtless copper colored dragon man climbed up from the ladder below and onto deck. Arturius took one step back in shock. Namel was full of creatures from all over, but dragon men were almost never seen this side of the deserts, across from the Dallis plains.

“Hhmmm...you do look desperate,” rasped the big creature as it turned its beak-like nose and wildly bright blue eyes toward the paladin, “But are you wealthy?” the captain continued as he approached with his heavy clawed and bare feet, carrying him closer to the robust human who seemed frail in comparison. The captain’s broad head was crowned in long points that laid back like dreadlocks. Below that were long streams of straw-colored and matted hair. His copper scales glistened in the sun as they covered the rippling mass of his shoulders and pudgy, fat belly. “Well?” he insisted as much like a threat as an invitation to answer.

“Wealthy enough to buy your passage, sand lizard,” Arturius answered firmly before he poured out the armor from his sack at the captain’s talon like feet. The armor was of the finest quality, embroidered with gold and silver. Its markings made it obvious that it was of the prestigious order of Gold Paladins. Such armor could not typically be purchased, and many believed items from the Gold Paladins to be enchanted. The suit held as much value as some of the smaller ships docked around them. The dragon man eyed the armor wide and revealed sharp teeth as he licked his lower lip.

“Aghhh... hahaha,” the captain bellowed and continued, “Layuk Gadia, captain of the trident and lord of the seas, at your service,” he made his loud words while never bowing or breaking eye contact from the fierce gaze of Arturius.

“My three companions and I require private passage to the north,” Arturius stated retaining his serious stature. Layuk looked at the armor once more before continuing.

“Of course... Of course, you do, out and around that civil war no doubt. For this...” pausing to squint at the armor, “the lord of the seas will take you north... all the way to the frozen waters if you so dare,” he said before offering the paladin a large maul of a hand to shake.

Chapter 5: "Arguing Over the Wind"

The land moved along beneath him like a green roll of fine cloth. The tall and tender grains waved under the breath of the wind as he lowered to a few feet off the ground. Pulling back away, higher into the sky to glide over a thick hedge of sprawling, dark oaks before him, he saw the endless blue of the sea beyond the trees. Deep as the sky and darker, holding even more mysteries. Right before he sailed over the indigo charm of the infinite deep, a pain grew from his extremities, sharp and searing. It was debilitating. He closed his eyes tight, and all went black as the pain acquiesced to nothing. No feeling at all. No comfort, no pain, just blank.

Taisteal boomed a loud, deep yell as he sat up in the little bed between Jack and Alice. They both jumped as much as he did.

"Are you all right!?" Alice asked frantically placing a shaking hand on the large priest's shoulders, attempting to calm him. A brief moment passed as he sat quiet, looking about the room studying where he might be. Soon his sharp, gold eyes rested on the nubs where his feet should be.

"We found Leofaren. I thought we had lost you there for a moment," Jack added allowing himself to settle from the surprise. Taisteal looked wide-eyed at Jack. It was a fierce look, the look of a warrior or a maybe a wild animal. His eyes tightened with his lids making a slender reveal for his gold irises to glare through. They were back to their usual brightness. The cloudy haze that had covered them for the past couple days was gone. His body sat there stiff. Alice felt his large shoulder muscles tighten under the thin layer of fat and cloth beneath her hand. She pulled her hand back instinctually. He looked back to his bandaged nubs. Jack gave Alice a concerned look and she returned a much more

frightened look than he expected. Glancing back to Taisteal, they could see the large priest grip his hands into large fists by his side. His lower lip trembled.

“Taisteal, are you all right. Are you in pain?” Jack asked. The large man seemed to ignore him. Jack relaxed a bit trying to be patient and place himself in Taisteal’s place, waking up having lost his mobility. It was a hard exercise for Jack to contemplate. Taisteal had always seemed more like an institution or elemental force rather than just another man. The priest’s gold eyes ran up from his crimped circumstance across the floor and up the wall. He focused on a flickering sconce and the glass shade that the light danced through. Enough time passed for a palpable discomfort to fill the room before he broke the silence. He closed his eyes and relaxed.

“More pain can come from the mind than from the body,” the priest spoke in a heavy, shaking tone. Jack remembered hearing those words just before the hobgoblin attack. Alice noticed the shift in Jack’s face but did not understand. “Thank you. Both of you,” he continued in a softer tone that still carried weight like a barge filled with coal. Taisteal gave both of them a look that matched his tone before he continued, “I can only guess how much worse a fate I would have been made to endure had I been left there with The Great Ghost.”

“No. I should thank you and properly,” Alice interjected before continuing with a gentle but knife-like surety in her words, “Those goblins were going to attack no matter your intervention. That darkness would have found us without your selfless act at Coles Crossing. You have been helping for longer than I know. Yet, I have wanted to blame you or at least be suspicious you were somehow to blame, but it’s obvious now, we only owe our gratitude. I am sorry I have not been more kind or appreciative,” she concluded. Jack

smiled while she was giving her discourse as he found the sentiment comforting. He had believed and trusted the priest for some time, however, he had held Alice's thoughts and opinions higher than almost anyone else. Though it would have been difficult for him to admit that out loud, it was greatly comforting hearing she agreed with him.

"Truly. We are in your debt, my friend," Jack added. He and Alice each took a hand of Taisteal. It was a most welcome moment since that first hob goblin attack when all three of their lives were rushed across that series of trials like a squall over breakers at a shore. "They were Hob Goblins though," Jack mused directing the words to Alice who shot him a sharp but playful glance.

"Where is Arturius?" Taisteal asked.

"Finding us a ship," Alice answered with a quick spirit of excitement while considering seeing the ocean for the first time. They all three jumped again as a loud screech and thud shuttered the tiny room.

"Taisteal!" Leofaren exclaimed blasting the door open against the wall behind Jack. Glerebluff also entered behind her lumbering, beloved creature. "Awake and well, as expected," he continued a little faster than his usual pace, but still slow for normal speech.

"Indeed. I was lucky to have been brought to you my friend, and Lady Glerebluff," Taisteal answered while giving a nod to the grey-haired woman who returned one in like kind.

"...Sorry about your feet," Leofaren lamented.

"It was a clever procedure. Those wounds would have only gotten worse, I fear," the priest answered.

“You do realize what language that curse was written in? Where were those blasphemous devices cleaved onto you?” Glerenbluff asked resolutely, but gently. Taisteal looked the odd couple over seriously.

“Hob Goblins who do not speak but one language inscribed those devices, and a man unschooled in magic applied them,” the priest answered.

“What man?” the refined, silvery woman pressed filling the room with an air of suspense.

“The King of the Dallis,” Taisteal answered. Leofaren and Glerenbluff’s faces showed a growing bewilderment, each in their own manner.

“Good thing he is dead!” Alice blurted. Taisteal gave her a doubtful look, “... but I saw the wall crumble on him!” Alice insisted.

“I would not count on him being destroyed, even with what we saw...” Taisteal started.

“The trouble in the Petram...?” Glerenbluff interrupted. Leofaren took a step back, observing the two young humans with Taisteal.

“The vessels... these two are the children of prophecy,” Leofaren exclaimed slowly to the surprise of Jack and Alice. “...then The Great Ghost has returned!” he continued, pressing his tone in a mix of excitement and fear.

“Yes,” Taisteal relented to his wise friends.

“Then you must get them to ‘the door’ ...How can we help?” the gray-haired woman insisted.

“It is worse than you might think. He spread his darkness far, before revealing his hand. The Priests of the One

have been infiltrated. Yarden is not safe, Namel will not be for long..." Taisteal trailed off as his gold eyes glowed brightly and his stare became distant.

"A vision..." Leofaren stated.

"Tell us. What do you see Taisteal?" Glerebluff pressed. As the light left his eyes, returning them to a more human hue, he blinked and 'came back' to the room with them.

"We must leave now! They are coming here," the large man answered.

"Indoctus?!" Alice minced her word, immediately wishing she had not let the name leave her lips.

"To Namel?" Jack asked nearly over top of Alice's exclamation.

"No, it's Drem, the Priest of the One, and he is in Namel. They are heading to this Alm's house now!" Taisteal continued.

"Drem, our friend in Yarden?" Leofaren asked sternly.

"Not anymore. If it was not for this one's intuition," Taisteal continued pointing to Jack, "They would have all been caught in a trap set by Drem and Hobgoblins just outside Manefold." As Taisteal spoke, Leofaren's calm and jovial persona that seemed natural on him melted away. What was left was a wilder look, more like that of a beast than of a man.

"I have a plan," Leofaren exclaimed slowly and sternly.

The tall, arched wood door of the Alm's house slammed open as a very thick grey-haired man wheeled a comically large cart out the front door. The cart was made like a two-wheeled wheelbarrow, and covered on top with folds of

white linens, with which it seemed to be filled. As the man and his cart turned the corner of the building, making his way through the crowd, he passed by a dark-skinned Priest of the One with a stern look on his face, dressed in the common tan robes of his order. He was followed by two gold paladins fully set in their polished and ornately decorated plate armor. One of them already had shield in hand and the other, resting a hand on the grip of his sword. They were heading swiftly for the Alm's House.

Soon they had cut clean across town and onto the cobbled stone street beside the docks; Arturius strolled along much slower than his usual pace taking the last swig of ale from the tankard he had talked Captain Layuk out of. It was not enough to give any effect beyond its taste, but after the hustle of the last few days, he welcomed the comfort. He stopped abruptly as a large cart topped with linens pulled right out in front of him.

"Excuse me, sir," Arturius exclaimed a bit surprised before he stepped to the side to walk around the cart.

"It's me," the grey-haired man pushing the cart said plainly in a tone and cadence common to a seafarer in Namel. Arturius squinted at the man in brief confusion.

"Leofaren," the man continued.

"I don't know anyone by that name," the paladin quickly answered full of suspicion.

"Everyone in Namel knows that name, Arturius," the man insisted to the paladin's surprise.

"Arturius! It's us!" a young woman's voice slid out of the large laundry cart.

"In there... all of you?" the paladin asked.

“I cannot believe it either. Have you found a ship?” answered and asked a defeated sounding Taistal from within the cart.

“– Drem! They’re here,” responded Arturius looking past Leofaren into the crowd, “Yes, I have found a ship!” he continued.

“Then on to it!” Leofaren commanded. Arturius nodded and quickly turned and entered a jog back in the direction of the trident. Leofaren, in his broad human form, quickly wheeled the cart behind him. Behind them some hundred feet, Drem strode along, flanked by his two paladins. People who recognized them by their attire moved aside politely while people who only saw their demeanor and armament moved aside out of fear. Only a few seafarers and armed young commoners pretended to ignore the three easterners as they cut through the crowd.

“There,” Drem said smoothly as he pointed out Arturius and the maniacally piloted cart that followed behind him. “There is your traitor!” he continued, adding flair. The air stirred along the street out toward the sea. There were dark clouds moving overhead from the east.

“Arturius!” one of the gold paladins gritted as he drew a two-handed sword. There was a gasp amongst the crowd of pedestrians as the two armored paladins leapt forward into a sprint. Drem continued in a calm walk behind the rushing warriors in pursuit of Arturius.

“They’re after us!” Leofaren exclaimed as he followed, sprinting onto the narrow, wood dock that ran out into the deeper water of the northwest port.

“Shove off!” Arturius yelled toward the trident as he ran down the dock, “Shove off now!” he continued.

“Wealth and desperation!” Layuk growled while finishing tying off something along the central mast of the main hull. Leofaren followed Arturius right onto the ship over the questionably thin gangway, barely making it across with the cart, which he spilled over onto its side once on the portside deck.

“Your companions?” Layuk asked surprised seeing Jack, Alice and Taisteal topple out of the overturned cart. The two youngsters quickly helped Taisteal sit up. He had no time yet to get use to his new impairment, “...More companions?” the dragon man barked more excitedly, pointing down the narrow dock with the two gold paladins clattering toward them with weapons drawn.

“Not anymore. Shove off!” Arturius answered drawing his long two-handed sword and standing wide in front of the narrow gangway.

“What is going on up here?” Pulchra, the red-haired dryad asked, annoyed by all the commotion while coming up from the forward hatch. She was holding a green, wool bedroll with an unstrung bow and arrows rolled up inside.

“– Shove off Pulchra!” Layuk answered while whipping loose some knots and pulling two large ropes, one in each hand, behind the central mast. Two black sails began yawning out into triangles, quickly filling with air. Noticing the pursuing armed men now shouting for them to stop, heading down the dock, she scoffed. The ship pulled tight against the rear spring line.

“What have we gotten into? Those are gold paladins!” she argued to Layuk.

“The lord of the sea keeps his word. Cut the ropes, girl!” the large, scaled captain proclaimed and ordered.

“This is the stupidest thing we have ever done,” she vented while running her hands down over her hips pushing her sleeveless coat aside and retrieving the two bearded axes. She quickly cut the fore rope in one fluid swing. Sighing heavily, she gave Arturius a deadly glance as she walked by him to cut the aft rope. His attention was fixed on the approaching armed men, however. As soon as the rear rope was cut the ship lunged forward, away from the dock. The gangway flipped sideways and splashed into the dark, green-blue water below, just as the paladins reached the end of the dock. The one with a sword and shield took a couple strides as if to attempt a leap for the stern of the ship as they approached the end of the dock. The other paladin with the two-hander grabbed him by a shoulder pauldron pulling him to a stop.

“The water is deep!” he exclaimed. “You’ll drown in your armor,” the man continued while holding onto his seething companion. Arturius watched calmly, lowering his sword from a statue like high guard. Distance quickly grew between him and his former allies as the ship pulled away.

“You will pay for what you did to Dilis!” shouted the furious paladin. Arturius’ face grew colder considering what lies must be spreading about him and his companions amongst his former ranks. The priest, Drem, had made it only about a third of the way down the narrow dock when the ship began to slip away. He pulled his hood back revealing his bald head, and took a knee on the wooden planks.

“Tá an spéir dorcha agus fealltach!” Drem’s words resonated across the waters like they were spoken by an army of giants. “Tarraing anuas agus tarraing go talamh thú!” he continued, as the steady breeze westward that was carrying the Trident quickly away from the dock, fell still. They were just getting into the larger section of the harbor about three

hundred feet from the docks. As the black sails fell limp, Layuk looked back to shore. Dark clouds swirled and manifested overhead.

“What wizardry is this?” he fussed.

“I told you this was stupid,” Puchra answered back quickly. The wind began to pull back to the docks. Arturius kept his footing and sword ready. Taisteal rolled over onto his knees, ‘standing’ as tall as possible. On the main deck, he grabbed ahold to a free rope from the aft most mast of the ship to steady himself. Drem continued in loud incantations that echoed over the water like strings over a sound chamber.

“Tagann an ghaoth chugam!” he bellowed, “Tagann an ghaoth chugam,” again, he proclaimed. The wind began picking up speed and the ship completely stopped. With the flat downward swept stern slapping heavily against the water, the ship began to move backward and yaw port side. Alice stumbled near the edge of the deck before gathering her footing and moving closer to the center hull. The danger of a ship with no railing, quickly becoming apparent to her and the others, as the dark water began to toss around them.

“There are only two of them with weapons. Let’s just be done with it! Why run?” Layuk shouted.

“Tá an ghaoth saor in aisce mar ár n-intinn,” Taisteal said softly closing his eyes. Only Jack, and Leofaren were close enough to hear him. Drem’s loud words faded as if a pillow was placed over his face. “Tá an ghaoth saor in aisce mar ár n-intinn,” Taisteal repeated and the ship rocked as the natural wind into the ocean swirled back. A beam of light cracked through the clouds and onto the ‘trident.’ Drem stood up on the dock. Now a crowd was forming behind him, witnessing the impossible volume his words had reached. There were a

few other armed folks of various species in the crowd, confused as to what they should do.

“Bogann an ghaoth chugam! Bogann an fharraige chugam!” Drem boomed, projecting his voice somehow even louder out over the water. People clasped their ears on the docks behind him. The deep, teal water from the inland side of the large, stone breakers began to churn like a drink being carried in a glass. The wood docks slapped and creaked in the turmoil. People amongst them fled to the street behind them. Out on the water, the trident pitched back and forth. Everyone on board struggled to keep their footing.

“Or perhaps... we should run!” roared Layuk holding on to the rudder wheel tightly to keep himself upright.

“Níl máistir ar bith ag an bhfarraige,” Taisteal spoke louder, pulling himself up straighter with the rope from the mast. Wind swirled about the ship spaying salty water across the deck. Heavy clouds over the port began breaking, dropping heavy sheets of rain.

“What are they saying?” Alice yelled in the building and swirling wind amidst the loud claps of booming voices, like peals of thunder.

“They are arguing... They are arguing over the wind,” Jack shouted, barely audible over the growing commotion.

“Tá an taibhse mór ina mháistir ar an bhfarraige,” Drem replied in surreal volume. His words collided with Taisteal’s as if the sounds pressed into one another quicker than sound could move, creating resounding booms out over the water. The waves capped more violently. Water swept over the hulls of the ‘Trident.’ Everyone was fighting to get to or stay on the center deck of the three-hulled ship. Wood creaked and moaned in the strain of the various forces

wrenching on the ship. The entire harbor churned as the effects in the water and air spread a wave of influence, crashing and capsizing various docked ships.

“Níl máistir ach craetor,” Taisteal insisted in a matched loud voice. Again, the words on the air seeming to impact each other, causing crashes, as if invisible boulders were colliding in the sky between himself and Drem.

“Ach máistir! Ach máistir!” Drem argued. Lightning ripped through the sky. The water boiled with waves in every direction. A shadow reached out across the surface of the deep from where Drem stood to where the ‘Trident’ tossed about. The wind pulled into a squall, twisting to the north, then the east. The three-hulled ship pitched heavily to the starboard side as the bow of the ship turned north. The ship leaned so that the port hull pulled completely out of the water. The ship was about to roll over into the churning water.

“Drop sails! Cut loose!” Layuk cried heavily as he clung onto one of the main masts. Water splattered and sprayed across the slick hull. Even the sure footed Arturius had sprawled out, clinging to the netting between hulls to keep from falling. Pulchra glided across the three decks like a cheetah running down prey, cutting ropes to let sails waffle freely in the violent winds as she went. After one sail went free, flailing worthlessly in the wind, the ship crashed back down flat onto all three hulls. Taisteal, and all aboard but Pulchra, were knocked to the ground in the opposite direction. The bundle with the bow and arrows Pulchra had brought from below deck, rolled over in front of Alice. The splash of the hulls setting back down heavily in the water was blasted across the decks in the continuing squall. Alice scrambled to grab the wool bedroll and began unrolling it. Along with the smashing carnage amongst other ships at the docks, some

ships unfortunate enough to be out in the bay, were rolled over by the heavy winds into the water, bearing their keels. Glass windows around the bay shattered overhead as some citizens along the dock street began to flee into the maze of buildings surrounding the harbor, while others rushed to their docked ships in vain. The 'trident' continued to slowly spin and violently pitch, now nearing the harbor's center.

"Help me!" Alice cried while frantically trying to bend the bow to attach the string. Jack scrambled over to her on all fours. Taking the wood bow from her, he flexed it down over his shoulders while she quickly set to looping the string over the ends.

"How is that going to help?" Pulchra insisted, sweeping gracefully, over next to the two strangers on her ship. She was the only one able to keep her footing on the wet, pitching decks. "We are twice out of range...and this wind!" she continued.

Taisteal growled out a massive yell, slamming both his large hammer-like fists on the wooden deck, cracking one board down its length. He sprawled out on hands and knees like a great, grey lion.

"Is lógónna mé!" he roared. The spattering water around the ship shattered away from them, as a fast expanding and invisible bubble, quickly flattened the turbulent water in a circle around the ship. "An chéad!" he continued, leaning back, raising his large arms wide like a posing eagle. "Tine óir!" his voice cracked louder than thunder. The water droplets in the air around the ship drew into tight cyclones circulating below his outstretched arms, like whitewater wings. His body rose as his stumps left the deck, now completely floating a few feet into the air. The ship now rests in an invisible sphere of near calm, while the wind, rain and

waves bashed white, against the sphere-like rain on a window. He hovered above the deck, lowering his voice to speak plainly and confidently in a voice all could understand, "The sky belongs to me!"

"Everything belongs to the Ghost!" Drem cried back in response. The trident continued to rotate, and Taisteal remained in the air a few feet. Some waves and gusts of wind would intermittently rip through Taisteal's bubble of calm, as if the invisible window had shattered and then quickly reformed. The whole harbor bucked as if a most terrible cyclone had settled upon it, centered on Layuk's ship. The riggings moaned and the front mast cracked, as one gust ripped through and quickly subsided.

"This has to stop!" roared the fierce captain, fighting his way back up to his claw-trimmed bare feet.

Alice found her footing, holding the now strung bow with a set arrow. Looking down at Jack, she remembered his words from what seemed like a long time ago. She looked to the dock now some five or six hundred feet away. It was difficult even to make out the priest, Drem, on the dock beyond the capping and spraying waters. She drew the bow, heavy, it was all she could do to get the string back to her cheek.

"Goath Bogadah," she whispered as she released the arrow. It flew straight and true, unaffected by the violent swirls of wind between her and the docks. The mist and sprays of water seemed to funnel into a circular tunnel as the arrow flew toward the shore.

"Briseadh uisce briseadh adhmaid briseadh..." Drem's repetitive deep chant was broken as the arrow sank deep into his upper chest with a thud. Sticking just inside the shoulder, it wedged deep into bone. He fell in pain, down on all fours.

The gold paladins that accompanied him rushed to his side. Taisteal floated back to his knees, settling on the deck of the ship.

“Impossible?” Pulchra mused aloud.

The shadow that had reached out on the water dispersed, like a drop of ink in a deep well of water. The surface of the deep quickly began to grow calm, and soon an easy breeze grew back out to sea. It seemed quiet after the cacophonous clashing of words and weather. The clouds began to brighten and allow a little light to streak back through, here and there. Arturius sheathed his sword. Leofaren still in a human form, moved to help Taisteal balance on his knees. Layuk wasted no time hoisting the two main sails once more. Whirling his rutter into place, he pointed the ship out to sea.

“Hoist what is left, Pulchra. Pulchra!” he barked. The dryad broke out of her trance of staring at the downed opponent, who had been struck from so far away.

“...Yes...” she replied absently before quickly getting on to pulling waffled sails and twisting riggings back into place.

“You believed it would work?” Jack asked Alice. Completely soaked, they held onto one another with stiff hands, clinging to each other’s shoulders.

“I believed it had to,” she answered solemnly. He placed one hand on her cheek beneath her soaked and twisted hair. With the filling sails, the ship picked up speed coming closer to passing the breakers at the mouth of the bay.

“Taisteal... I cannot leave Glerenbluff,” Leofaren stated loudly. Taisteal nodded to his old friend who was helping him keep his balance on his amputated stumps.

“We are not turning back to those docks for anyone!” Layuk interjected harshly, still helming the wheel in the center of the ship.

“Keep your heading, little dragon,” Leofaren answered to a half insulted and half amused, Layuk. Lowering his voice and directing to Taisteal, “You... You will take them there,” he said as if stating a known fact. Taisteal nodded in agreement.

“We would not have made it without your help,” the gold-eyed priest answered. “Get out of Namel, my friend. Perhaps to the mountain if you can,” Taisteal added. Leofaren only looked up and around as if searching for something in the sky before giving his attention back to Taisteal.

“The shining dryad... Underwater?” Leofaren asked the priest, who nodded in agreement.

“Keep a fire burning as often as you can,” Taisteal said to the shapeshifter, as he stood transfiguring back into his usual tall, fur-covered form.

“Good luck,” he said with the slightest of bows to Jack and Alice. He took a few long strides and dove off the starboard deck. While he was sailing through the air, still in mid-dive, he stretched out into a giant purple, yellow and green fish. He looked like a long, obtuse triangle going backward as he splashed into the water. Standing near the bow of the main hull, looking back over the spectacle, Pulchra exclaimed, “What kind of fare is this?” she berated toward Layuk.

“A desperate one. That damn well better be wealthier than one suit of armor,” Layuk rumbled looking back at her around the central mast, and then over to the paladin. The ship was back underway properly and rounding the long breakers to turn north, following the coast.

“Head north only until we crest the horizon. Then west to Rauthlaus,” Taisteal said deeply and calmly.

“With pleasure, that’s closer than what armor boy agreed to and there better be more compensation when we get there, flying man,” Layuk spat back over his shoulder to the hobbled priest.

“In Rauthlaus you will become richer than you want to be, captain,” Taisteal answered calmly. Layuk blew heavily out his beak-like nose in protest to the notion’s possibility.

“Why detour?” Arturius asked. Jack and Alice both stepped near, taking a knee, and waiting for the answer. Taisteal looked up and around, amongst the sky then back to his young companions.

“They might have heard... they must have heard such an exchange in their tongue. The Great Ghost would have come to them first when he returned. I don’t think we can spend enough days safely at sea now to reach Bradach,” he answered.

“Who must have heard what?” Alice asked, a little annoyed by the lack of directness.

“Our words, over the weather... They were in their tongue. Old names were spoken,” Taisteal’s voice deepened even further, and he spoke carefully, “Dragons, Alice. We do not want their attention,” he continued. Arturius stood and strode over to Layuk, asking how he should help with the ship.

Alice glanced about the sky before her eyes settled on the endless horizon. Today was the first time she had seen the ocean, and now took the first moment to appreciate its vastness. Jack knelt there, looking inward, thinking over the different words he understood that Taisteal had just used in the argument with Drem.

“Jack,” she insisted, placing a hand on his shoulder. He broke from his thoughts and looked at Alice. She was still affixed on the endless blue before the ship. He soon noticed what had so captivated her, and joined in her gazing upon the endless depths. The ‘Trident’ carried them swiftly out to sea leaving behind a rocked metropolis, stirring with chaos after the contest of wills and wind.

Chapter 6: "A League of Men"

The heavy glass salver rattled over Keera's small trembling hands as she approached the table in the corner of the Single Moat. Her eyes kept darting toward the small cellar door. Bibliomane was busy at the bar, attending to several soldiers from the east that had come along with the large group of reinforcements after the deadly goblin attack on Petram. He had sent Rosheen down there to bottle the latest brew of dark stouts and planned on serving that to his honored guest tonight with their meals. None of the regular customers were allowed inside; the pub was filled only with knights and soldiers from Compita or Hortus.

"Thank you, my dear," the broad-shouldered knight stated, while standing to help Keera set down the four glass goblets. The glassware she brought was Bibliomane's best. She winced a smile.

"Thank you, sir," she answered coyly, trying desperately to get the ale to the table without spilling or making eye contact with the other men at the table. It was the third trip she had made to that table, and she knew full well who she was serving without her boss' incessant reminders every time she approached the bar. After taking the last goblet from her directly, the knight stood there for a moment, smiling and gawking into Keera's dark, brown eyes. She forced herself past her fear and pulled a delicate smile across her narrow face. She struggled with assumptions of what the knight might be thinking.

"Sir, do you not think this is too strongly worded?" one of the other men sitting at the table, wearing a black tunic with ornate gold designs across the shoulder, asked. The broad-shouldered knight turned his attention back to his charge at the table and sat. Indoctus' steel blue eyes looked

up from the scroll laid out before him. Keera nearly let out a squeak as she turned, trying to avoid making eye contact with the King as she left the table.

“You certainly served my father well, chancellor,” Indoctus poured out the words more smoothly than the straw-colored ale that swirled in the fresh poured glasses before them.

“Why... thank you, sir, but the matter at hand?” the chancellor continued pointing back to the scroll before them.

“Do some ale’s pair better with dark meats than others?” the smooth-tongued King asked reclining back in his wooden chair, surveying the small common room of the inn. His gaze scanned over Keera and Bibliomane, along with the host of some two dozen of his men present, while he waited for an answer. He had freshened up since being uncovered from the rubble and sat cleanly wrapped in a simple, black shirt with only the thin, polished silver diadem on his head, setting him apart from the rest in the inn.

“Well yes, sir, they do,” the chancellor answered a bit apprehensively. The two armored knights at the table now focused completely on what the King may say next.

“Some letters pair better with violent times, and make no mistake chancellor, these are violent times,” Indoctus answered calmly, with force like that of a deep river that moved heavy ships swiftly along. The knights smirked and nodded nearly in unison in their pleasure at the King’s answer.

“Yes, sir. I will deliver the letter to the Yardish council immediately,” the chancellor agreed, rolling up the scroll and placing it in a round leather case. He quickly pulled down one long swig of his hazy, malty drink before he stood and headed for the door, leaving the King sitting there with two of his

knights. Indoctus quickly and smoothly set into writing on another parchment on the table before him. The thinner, older knight reclined, taking his fill of ale as well.

“What will we do when these violent times are behind us?” the broad-shouldered knight mused out loud, looking across the room at the thin waitress who had been serving them next to the bar; now helping a taller, dark-skinned woman set out heavy growlers.

“Some things you can’t wait for, lad,” the older knight replied noticing his younger counterpart eyeing the thin, young woman. Looking up from his focused work, Indoctus noticed what the two knights had been so curiously pondering. His gaze squinted with a growing and devious intent over the two women next to the bar.

“Indeed. Sir Lata, your mother was a commoner, was she not?” Indoctus asked the broad knight who was now outright staring at Keera.

“Yes, sir,” he said cheerfully with a growing smile across his strong, square face.

Keera tried to keep her movement steady and slow as she helped unload the small pallet of stout drinks.

“Just keep calm, girl. If they knew we helped Jack, they would be doing more than gawk,” Rosheen said quietly to Keera once their backs were turned to the King’s table.

“I know. By the creator, tell me they are not still staring,” Keera answered as she pulled off the last bottle.

“I cannot...” Rosheen stated blankly looking back to the corner table with the most important of guests. Keera turned to look for herself but could not believe what she saw. The King himself was motioning for her to come back to the

table with a calm, slow finger motion. The shock must have been obvious on both the women's faces, given the smirks the older knight was giving.

"Keera...?" Rosheen asked quietly. Keera took a deep breath and righted herself in confidence.

"I'll be fine, Rosheen," she said as regally as she ever had and strode over to the table. As she approached the broad knight again who stood to greet her, towering over her small frame.

"My dear, can you believe this brave man here is in need of a wife?" Indoctus said loudly to her as if his words were water being poured over a tortured hostage. Several of the other knights were now noticing the confrontation. Keera glanced back to Rosheen but for a moment. Looking back at Sir Lata, she mustered the slightest of smiles while her feet desired to attempt to match the pace her heart was setting in her chest. It beat so hard and quick she pondered for a moment if this man and the King may hear it beating.

"The dame is speechless. Say something, Lata," the older knight chimed in.

"I understand. Keera, isn't it? You have been leaving me speechless since I first laid eyes on you in front of the castle." Sir Lata added taking one of her hands firmly but sincerely. Her hand laid loosely trembling in his heavy mitt.

"Well, let us not stand on ceremony during such times," Indoctus said giving a quick, but sinister glance of covered rage to Rosheen, before standing and looking back to Keera and Sir Lata. "Am I not King? This is not your betrothed Sir Lata; this is your bride. I, King of Men, pronounce you husband and wife!" The men in the tavern roared in cheer at Indoctus' proclamation. Bibliomane looked on as well, trying

to learn what to make of the quick escalation. The older knight stood and clapped on in celebration. Lata took Keera's other trembling hand in his own. He smiled as gently as he could in his excitement, not recognizing her shocked expression for what it was, horror. Rosheen looked on the scene in similar horror and shock before she noticed the stare of Indoctus clearly on her. She and the King locked eyes across the room. He smiled a sickly wide smile drinking in the different nuances he saw in her expressions. Rosheen grabbed the wood pallet by her feet, and rushed through the small door behind the bar, and down the stairs into the cellar. The door slammed behind her, but the cheering upstairs still sounded throughout the cellar below. Rosheen screamed in rage, while she smashed the wooden pallet into pieces on the stone floor before her. Keera stood in the gathering crowd of cheering men trembling, waffling between a faked smile and terrified amazement.

Chapter 7: "Echoes of power"

The tough fight from the day before made the mid-day heat much worse than it really was. The men before Captain Oren marched east, ahead with their steps out of sync and shoulders slouched. Usually, he would have allowed no such reduction of standards, but the men had fought valiantly, and a runner had already carried the news back to Manefold. All their wounded had died quickly and suddenly from their wounds, only about an hour after being injured. The hobgoblins must have coated their weapons and arrows in some form of poison. Oren knew little about such things as he considered such the tactics of lesser warriors, but he understood well what effect the deadly encounter along the Yardin riverbanks had on morale. It was not the time to whip on brave men for slouching. When the tower of the Hall of the One came into view, he sped up his long steps and straightened his posture, as if presenting in front of the Yardash Council after elections. As he passed his soldiers one by one moving up toward the front of the column, he saluted each one in the Yardash custom that predated the rise and fall of The League of Nations. He turned his upper body thirty degrees towards the men and brought his bare right arm up, paralleling his building, dark bicep to the ground with a bent elbow and a wide-spread palm, pointed straight up as if holding an invisible weight. By legend, the origins of this gesture were that the first Yardash men who saluted this way were reminding each other of the weight of the freedom they fought for. As the men saw their captain walk by in this manner, a visible change moved up the column as each man returned the salute and pulled their form together tight. By the time he had reached the front of his unit, they were all marching as proudly and properly as their captain. A few of them additionally displayed visible streams of water down their cheeks, but none dared to make a sound above the

patter of their feet. As they began to pass by people in the edge of the city, they were a silent tribute to the proud and long heritage of the Yarden Valley.

“Here all! Let all have it heard!” someone cried up ahead in the west-most city square of Manefold, “For this is now proclaimed by your elected council of all Yardish citizens.” Oren could now make out the man; he was one of the elected officials of the Yardish Council. He knew him, but not well enough to have remembered his name. The official stepped up on a horse-drawn cart they had stopped. The group with him included a unit of Yardish soldiers lead by a man Oren did know, Adir, and the red-headed Priest of the One, Ahdom. The busy intersection quickly brought a crowd around the official who began to orate in a loud, aggressive voice. Oren called a stop and his men halted in a tight, single column behind him, instead of barging through the forming crowd.

“The treaty has been signed and the pact has been wholly committed to. Yarden and the kingdom of the Dallis are now sovereign allies with a common purpose and commitment.” Some of the people looked dumbfounded, while a few immediately clapped and agreed verbally with the finely dressed man standing over the crowd. Oren stood like a statue, observing and listening. The official continued, “I could speak in my own words to the pride I feel as a man of Yarden... or the fear all of us must feel surrounding these last few months... or the urgency of this current moment; but I will use the words so well placed by the new King of the Dallis. Here, lend your ears! I read to you now the proclamation and imploration of the man, King Indoctus.

‘To the honorable and brave men of the Yarden Valley and the dutiful elected council members who represent the strong and courageous will of the fruitful valley’s people: The

threats and attacks of the goblins and assorted creatures from the northern forest have become unbearable to both our sovereign territories. Your rage and fears are felt amongst our people, and well understood. For too long, weak leaders like my father, the late King Pater Patriae, and Lord Rockhurst of your neighboring, Petram, have allowed a multitude of violent creatures to amass along our borders, while allowing 'passive' creatures to assimilate amongst our villages and cities. The division of men over ideology and capabilities, whether they be of culture, magic, or religion has been a frivolous distraction from the real threat to us, historically and presently. We know a lamb and a wolf do not lie together. We know the eagle and the hare do not trade services. Yet, we squirm in surprise when the goblin and the dragon man attack, most violently. Moreover, we have overlooked the lions in our own bed! Did the Dryad and the Dwarf not compete in war for centuries, long before we men were here to witness? Look around you, do you see them? Foreign beings pretending to care of perils while they trade for your best good, and then retreat into their mountains or caves. Long have the men of Namel whored themselves out for spices and rum to all manner of beast. Now beasts run the most prominent port to the vast ocean. Will the valley suffer the same fate? Will the plains? I say, no! Not under my tenure as King. My people will not be slain by the sword of goblins nor be beguiled under the seduction of more cunning beasts."

Some people cheered as the orator grew louder and more emphatic in his reading. Some people squirmed uncomfortably at the words. A few dwarves amongst the crowd began slowly heading out of the square toward an alley, while one grey-haired and very stout dwarf began moving toward the center of the crowd, saying something Oren could not quite make out, but in obvious protest to the notions of

the letter. Oren noted the overall aggressive body language of the crowd. Inwardly he was surprised by the phenomenon taking place before him, but outwardly he stood like a statue observing it all under his smooth, brown eyes. The orator continued. Only Adhom seemed to notice the shadows laying towards the crowd's center, despite the sun beginning to hang into the west. The red-headed priest swallowed and pursed his lips as if he had taken a drink of something that while it tasted sweet he knew would make him sick later.

“No! My people will rise like the men of old who carved out a piece of this continent and made room for their people to live! I, Indoctus, the King of Men, implore you to join me! Rise, men of Yarden, and roust the thieves and leaches slithering among you. Join the Dallis in driving out the imposters of good will. Drive out the Dryad! Drive out the Dwarf! Drive out the upright beast with horns and fur! Be men and protect your people; not being weak and waiting for the opponent to strike first and so cripple your land! Join me now, men of the valley, and we shall start an age of retribution and throw off the shackles of cowardice and assimilation. The time of our race being blended and subdued is over, the time for The League of Men is now!” the council member finished reading the letter in a furious shout. To Captain Oren's surprise, the crowd erupted into a cacophonous cheer. The grey haired dwarf was nearly lost in the much taller crowd of humans but by some shouting and shoving, Oren saw the stout fellow get flung to the ground right in front of the other captain. Adir smiled a sickly grin across his course, pock-marked face while some Yardish locals began kicking the downed dwarf.

“Hold your positions!” Captain Oren ordered his men fiercely as he took swift steps over to the incident. The first

few soldiers in his column looked on in surprise with what was unfolding and had been said.

“Stand back citizens!” Oren whaled in his most imposing voice as he twirled his short spear to where the blunt back end faced the young men who were kicking the downed dwarf.

“Or what?!” a muscle-bound young man, who was front and center of the abuse, spouted at the end of Oren’s spear like it was the mouthpiece of a horn. Without hesitating, Oren pulled the blunt butt of the spear back about one foot and then racketed it into the young man’s teeth. He went down with a bloody grimace, holding his mouth. One other vagrant, who had been beating the dwarf, leapt toward the good captain. He took a few steps, easily evading the young man’s wild punches and whirled the spear once more. This time carefully missing the body just enough so that the blade end still cut a long slash through the man’s tan, loose-fitting shirt. When the assailant realized how close he had come to being skewered, he froze. Oren stood, locked in place with the butt of the spear, again, only a few inches from the man’s face with the ripped shirt.

“Citizens, stand back,” he said loudly but much more calmly, without any rush to his voice. The few left around the dwarf stepped back, leaving a moaning heap of the old, grey-bearded figure at their feet.

“Captain Oren! Did you not here the words of the Dallis King?” the other Yardish Captain, Adir, questioned.

“That is not our King, and this is not the way the men of the valley behave.” Oren replied calmly but loud enough for the crowd to hear.

“It is our place to follow orders, not give them,” Captain Adir insisted stepping from the crowd, closer to Oren and the stunned man who stood frozen, now between the two captains.

“No one ordered this,” responded Oren resolutely.

“On the contrary,” the official stepped forward to Oren, handing him a different sheet of paper from the letter he had read aloud. In the background, Oren noticed the grey-headed dwarf get up and begin stumbling away from the rowdy crowd of humans who were now affixed on this confrontation between captains. The parchment was bleached bright white and thick. It bared the cream wax seal of official orders from the Council of Yarden.

By the Army and citizens of all Yarden. All half human, three quarter human, and non-human sentient beings are to be expelled from Manefold by night's end of the fifth day of Elul, year 152, post liberation.

Oren's dark brown eyes took the short stamped and sealed order in like a raging fire, consuming the brittle parchment. Today was the day. It was baffling, beyond aggressive to make such a decision. Yarden had always been keen to promote the wellbeing of its own citizens over outsiders, and being born of the Yardish bloodline was the only way to become a citizen. This order, however, sounded like one of the panicked responses that would have been issued back during the war with the League of Nations. A time Oren had only heard tales from. He shoved the order back to the official who stood wearing a wry smile, matched by one of Captain Adir. Ahdom, the priest, stood back amongst the crowd with a piercing gaze over Oren and his column of troops who stood professionally behind the whole occurrence.

“We had not received this order yet, since we had been busy fighting enemies that fight back,” Oren replied smugly, eyeing the other captain.

“Yes. I heard your runner’s message. Hobgoblins west of town...” the official interjected.

“There must be hundreds of spies among us, how else could they slip past our scouts?” Captain Adir directed to Oren.

“Indeed, or perhaps they came from the west. All manner of beast resides in Namel these days,” the official added. It was common for Oren’s fellow men of the valley to speak down of foreigners, even about how they were foolish and easy to take advantage of financially. Yet, he had never heard this type of disdain come from his fellow Yardish. These foreigners were the trading partners for their huge farming overages and skillfully crafted items. Trade down the river was the lifeblood of the valley’s wealth. Then it hit him like the strike of a spear’s shaft. *The Priest of the One on the run with Arturius*, he thought. *What was the large man’s warning again?... ..*he pondered if the Great Ghost was real and working amongst his town presently.

“Captain, are you alright?” the official interrupted his thoughts and dazed downward glance.

“Yes, we are only exhausted from battle. Thank you for the relay of orders. I will see to it my men are cleaned and outfitted in the north barracks within the hour,” Oren stated, surely adding an honorable salute to the official and the other captain.

“Good, Major Danim is there assigning specifics now. My unit is working the west side,” Captain Adir responded matching Oren’s salute. The baffled captain turned on a leaf

and strode back over to his column of soldiers, who just a few moments earlier, he had felt a great deal of pride to command. Now, a sense of dread was filling him. He walked down the side of the column, gaining some distance from the other unit of soldiers and the crowd that was now dispersing and cheering.

“Zohar!” he said quickly and quietly as a particularly tall soldier with some indications of a middle rank quickly stepped out of line and moved close to his captain.

“Yes, sir,” Zohar followed up. Oren grabbed him by the shoulder pulling him in close.

“Take the men to the east barracks and order them to disarm and go home,” Oren stated in a hushed tone.

“Sir?” Zohar asked also in a low tone. Oren looked up at the taller, younger man with a heavy depth in his dark brown eyes. The two men had served Yarden together for several years now. “Yes, sir,” Zohar answered firmly. As the tall soldier mustered the column to begin marching ahead, Oren eyed the line of his fierce warriors as they walk by.

“You!” he spouted to one particularly small soldier. “Does your armor fit well?” Oren asked as the soldier side stepped out of marching column to answer his captain.

“Yes, sir. It was custom built for me, at your request last year. You have my thanks, Captain,” the soldier answered.

“That’s what I thought. You are coming with me. Come on, soldier,” he replied as he turned and headed north through the scattering crowd. The confused soldier followed.

Across from Oren’s unit of dispersing soldiers, Captain Adhir gave quick orders to his own men to carry out the

rousting of any non-humans. As they moved out, he was left there with the priest Ahdom and the official. A crack of lightning thundered in the west. Clouds grew dark quickly, so quickly it drew the attention of the three men. A chilling breeze stirred from the west.

“There are voices... faint voices on the wind,” the official stated in amazement. Ahdom and Adhir listened along. “I cannot make out their tongue...” the official continued.

“I hear it too, ever so faintly,” Adhir admitted.

“It is the tongue of dragons,” Ahdom answered closing his eyes, listening intently.

“Dragons?” Adhir asked promptly.

“Men speaking the Dragon’s tongue in Namel. Drem has found Taisteal,” the red-headed priest stated with a ferocious heat in his voice, reflecting his simmering temper.

“The priest who betrayed your order and killed one of the paladins? How can we hear him from so far away?” Captain Adhir asked the question quickly.

“The very same. When words carry true power, they travel far,” Ahdom answered.

“Then Captain Oren must have let more than Hobgoblins slip past town recently,” the captain added in a condemning tone.

“How well do you know the old captain?” the official asked.

“Only professionally. Old Oren commands a lot of respect in Yarden. Too much, if you ask me,” Adhir answered.

“Then you will not be troubled to learn that he finally married last year ...to a half blood,” the official answered. Adhir and Adhom pulled their attention from the faint words in the air back amongst themselves. Adhir slid a merciless grin across his dark face.

The small wood door fought clumsily with its brass key. The modest wood and white plastered house did not have a front stoop, and rain was beginning to pour on Oren and the small soldier who attended him. Right before the muscle-bound captain began to cuss the little lock, it clicked and the door swung open. Standing before him in a fine, burgundy cloak holding a lantern, was his wife. The young, skinny soldier who accompanied Oren was struck, dumbfounded by her beauty and poise. The lantern was the only light within the house and its flame shed light across her flawless complexion, like moonlight over the dark Yarden river during midnight. He swallowed as loud as if a whole apple had slid down his gullet when he noticed her peaked ears pointing through her silky, rainbow hair.

“In lad!” Oren ordered hastily as he grabbed the soldier by his leather pauldron and dragged him into his home.

“My love, tell me this madness is not true!” the women who presented both traits of the Yardish and Dryads so clearly commanded gracefully of Oren.

“For you and I, it holds no truth,” he answered as he stepped in giving her a kiss. Though she looked much younger, which proved to more thoroughly confuse the short young soldier who had been dragged into the house, she was actually a few years older than Oren.

“Now, swap clothes. Both of you!” Oren stated gesturing to his wife and the smaller soldier who stood about her height.

“What? Sir, I don’t understand!” the soldier protested.

“The only thing you should understand is that wearing my wife’s cloak and dress with the hood pulled tightly over your face is the only way you leave my house alive!” Oren said as he snatched the spear from his subordinate’s hand.

“...and the dress...” the young man grumbled, realizing and accepting the role he was about to play.

The exterior door cracked open on the front of Oren’s house into what had come a heavy downpour, transforming the bright, hot day into a dim affair. Adir and a few other soldiers stood quietly across the street underneath the stoop of a larger house. Oren and what appeared as a smaller soldier, clad in the usual leather cuirass and helmet, sped out of the house toward the east, both wielding spears. Soon thereafter the slender, short figure wrapped in a burgundy cloak exited, glanced both ways with nervous movement, and headed west. Adir grinned and his group of soldiers followed the cloaked figure west.

Chapter 8 "A shadow rising"

The chilled wind swirled out of the west, across the crashing coastal waves and over the vast sand desert, far to the south of Namel, Yarden, or the Dallis. The dunes were heaped up in great piles ending at the crystal blue waters and ran as far as could be seen inland in all directions. Barely in sight of the coast, further inland, was a wicked stone formation that rose jagged out of the waves of sand. It stood as if it were a mountain swallowed by sand, nearly to the top with only some hundred feet still uncovered. The shadow that should have been cast long to the east by the falling sun seemed to be sucked into and contained around the mouth of a large cave. The cave sat nuzzled into the base of great rocks where they met the rolling sands. As the chilled breeze rushed by the cave, faint words whispered across the stones.

"Lies..." a great voice of dread and terror echoed out of the darkness. "The voice of the Liar fills my air once more..." The shadow around the mouth of the cave intensified to the point where the entrance was invisible. A rumble stirred in the deep. Heavy thuds stomped closer to the surface. "The Ghost tells the truth... The false god lives..." the darkness of the shadow coalesced and grew, until the entirety of the peak out of the desert was blotted out. "But not for long," the voice growled out into the open of the desert, trembling the dunes in the weight of its malice. "...And you... you will all bare witness of my splendor," the terrible sound resonated into the empty dessert.

Chapter 9: "Endless Blue"

Alice's gaze was like the vista before her – flat, still, blue, and endless. The waves were almost completely still, and the water barely kissed the bottom of her bare feet that hung over the edge of the deck. The water's cool touch provided a glint of relief from the beating sun in the cloudless sky. They had made good progress for two days as Pulchra and Layuk had made quick work replacing the frayed ropes and ripped sails from the storm in the port that Drem and Taisteal had caused. Her thoughts wandered slowly like the trident in the dead water.

You know I would not hold it against you if you did as you wished... The words of her father echoed as a memory in her mind. It was the last conversation she had with him, before Indoctus- before she ran away. Her thoughts continued as the question that had haunted her since she learned he had died, forced its way back into her inner monologue. *Would he have died if I had not run away?* The question was like a knife in her skull. The hobgoblins were chasing her after all, they might well have ravaged the whole city of Petram had she been there, locked in the castle. Taisteal barely helped them escape at Cole's Crossing, surely, he could not have stopped so many. And then there was Indoctus himself. It sickened her to think she had once accepted a proposal from such a man. He had shown himself to be not only of terrible character but also in league with this 'Great Ghost' everyone kept on about. *Would he have stabbed us all in the back had we been there? Was he the one indeed that killed father? What should I have done differently!?!* The questions abounded silently in her mind like an agonizing flavor she refused to spit out. It was hard to consider her recent past and difficult to think of much else. Tears would not come. Her face stayed as placid as the water

and as dry as the sky around her, while her mind battled with doubt and rage.

At the rear of the ship, Arturius was polishing his long two-handed sword with some oils he had acquired from Layuk. The captain stood at the back of the ship throwing a boomerang high into the sky and watching its flight and return intently. The large, dark wood boomerang made a revving sound each time it left the large mitt of the dragon man. Pulchra was perched at the very top of the tallest center mast like a bird on lookout. Taistéal sat still with his eyes shut against the large aft mast, where he had spent most of his time since being on the ship. Only a ladder went below deck and only three rooms were down there anyway. One was stuffed with supplies and spare sails. The other two were Layuk's and Pulchra's personal, but cramped, quarters. Jack had gone below to be out of the sun for a while.

"Anything?" Layuk yelled up to his shipmate while catching the swirling angle of shaped wood.

"No dragons, if that is what you are asking," Pulchra called back down just barely loud enough to be heard.

"No. Anything!?" Layuk rebutted to the high perched dryad as he threw the revving piece of wood once again high into the sky.

"...two poor sloops far to the south with depressed sails. Just like us. A whale blowing to the north. Some birds to the west. We would be there by morning if there was any wind," she answered with a sigh.

"You are out of your mind," Layuk went on pointedly, turning to Taistéal to continue, "You understand that, don't you, priest?"

“Or are we?” Pulchra retorted as she climbed easily down from the mast on one of the ropes that ran at an angle using only her arms.

“Why don’t you whip up that magic of yours again and call us some wind?” the captain asked Taisteal expectantly.

“Sustaining that type of wind would be no easier for me than if I asked you to row us there; not to consider, right now, we are a needle in a haystack. Casting a large spell would make us a singing needle,” Taisteal answered.

“Yeah, well when was the last time anyone really saw a dragon?” Layuk asked loud and generally for anyone to answer.

“People claim to see them often,” Pulchra answered as her feet hit the central deck with a thud as she dropped the last five feet or so.

“For certain?” Taisteal asked calmly while leaning against the rear mast; his gold eyes now scanning the horizon. Arturius stopped polishing his sword and looked to the priest. Just enough time passed for the captain and the dryad’s attention to be pulled fully in as well. “One hundred and fifty years ago, when the copper dragon, Bodach, turned down Ulfric del Holgins’ request to help in the fight against the League of Nations, that was the last sighting. He was last seen entering the deep caverns of Rathulaus to hide,” the priest continued calmly, with only a hint of condescension.

“A dragon running from men? Ridiculous!” Layuk insisted before turning to continue twirling the boomerang out and up.

“Is it, Layuk?” Pulchra answered with a more serious tone than she had before. “You just saw what two powerful

sorcerers are capable of,” she continued nodding toward Taisteal who continued to scan the horizon. “The League of Nations had hundreds of sorcerers leashed and at their command. It’s how they killed Sceall Alainn, the silver dragon.”

“The fastest of dragons, slain in the gray havens... only a legend,” the captain insisted.

“The most beautiful dragon,” Taisteal mumbled too low for anyone to make out.

“No, Layuk,” she replied quickly. Looking inward as if seeing a memory, she continued, “I saw the aftermath of that day. A field of frozen trees and scorched earth.”

“How long ago was that?” the paladin asked, speaking for the first time that day. Pulchra looked over inquisitively to find what she deemed as a bit of a smirk. She couldn’t tell if the strapping man was truly curious or playing with her about her age. For a human she would be very old, and a paladin of Logos should know all the dragon lore. She walked over close to him and knelt. A quick moment passed before her face turned curious and she sniffed the air, looking about before turning her face back to make eye contact with Arturius.

“How long ago has it been since you showered?” she asked straight-faced with only a touch of sparkle in her deep green eyes. Arturius looked dumbfounded, only but for a moment, before standing to jump headfirst into the bright blue water beside the still ship. The cool water splashed against the deck. Pulchra quickly headed below deck, concealing her delight from all but Jack who was about to come up the rear cabin’s ladder. Her face quickly shifted like a blade turning from its ricasso to the edge. Jack reigned in the temptation to ask her anything about the smile and headed

up. The captain chuckled deeply up on deck before going on with Taisteal.

“So, without playing on about dragons...” he initiated to the reclining priest who looked to him, “...richer than I want to be’... what does that mean exactly?” he asked with a darker variation of the skepticism that he used earlier.

“You know of Hattaway?” Taisteal asked.

“The dryad on Rauthlaus who is wealthier than any king... of course,” the heavy-set dragon man answered.

“He owes me, and will give ...” Taisteal could barely get the words out before being interrupted by Layuk’s thundering laughter. The large, square-faced man turned his golden gaze directly at the squawking captain before they both became locked in a serious, quiet stare.

“...more than you know to ask for; but I am serious about the dragons. The darkness that made the other priest powerful enough to toss the entire harbor of Namel... it will hunt for this ship to the ends of the world,” Taisteal added.

“You are serious, aren’t you?” Layuk insisted.

“Of course, I may just be a crippled madman. You are welcome to take the gold and your chances, but I would only take the gold if I were you,” Taisteal answered, looking back to the horizon.

Jack took only a moment to nod at the priest and the captain, who both reciprocated before he saw Arturius taking long, backward stokes in the water some couple hundred feet from the ship.

“I thought I heard a splash,” Jack shouted to the paladin who only paused to wave briefly before continuing his

lazy, but effective swimming. Jack looked around for his lifelong friend to see Alice sitting over the edge of the bow. He began creeping up behind her quietly with his bare feet. She was still lost in a trance gazing out over the sea, her exterior hiding the storm of thoughts inside. It was too much to keep from doing, even though he knew there was a good chance she would be very mad at him for it.

When else might I have such a chance? he thought to himself. He crouched down low and moved slowly, right up behind her. Right about the time she noticed him he pounced forward, pushing her over and following her into the water. They plunged under but for a second before surfacing. He was all smiles, not holding in his joyous laughter as he broke through the clear, blue surface. Her enraged face began melting like sugar in water, into a softer disposition as she looked at her frolicking friend. She splashed as hard as she could enveloping his smiling head in a small wave of her making. Soon they were both laughing and splashing as they circled out from the ship.

“More fun than last time we were swimming,” Jack stated as he paddled in closer to her as they continued to spin. Their eyes were set on each other’s and the storm that had brewed in her head was now melting away too.

“You can actually swim this time,” she answered, getting close enough to touch his right hand that was so badly broken when they were in the Yarden river.

“...and I am not in need of saving ...At least for the moment,” he jested as they shared a quick smirk. They circled further from the ship. “You did though. More than once,” he continued.

“Did what?” she asked earnestly.

“Save me,” he answered moving in closer. They kicked with their feet now holding on to one another’s shoulders in the deep water.

“I think we are saving each other,” she added, giving him a look he did not fully understand.

“I figured as much!” Pulchra called out to them. They quickly pushed a foot or two away from each other looking back to the ship. “These should fit you a little loose, Alice, but they are dry and clean,” she continued lying a neatly folded, short stack of clothes near the front of the net between the tip of the main hull and the portside hull.

“Thank you, Pulchra,” Alice replied. The dryad bowed in what sure seemed a sarcastic gesture before she turned and headed for the opposite side of the ship. Diving off into the water toward Arturius, she made little splash. Taisteal relaxed looking over Arturius, Jack and Alice, all enjoying themselves in the water. It reminded him of a blue version of a meadow he used to frequent with good friends, long, long ago. At the rear of the ship the dragon man let loose his twirling boomerang once more, sending it high up into the sky. Following its movement with his eyes like a hawk watching a hare, he jumped, elated at seeing the boomerang fly off course to the west at the crest of its arch. It splashed down into the ocean on the starboard side near the bow.

“About time!” he roared as he went over to the riggings on the side of the aft mast. Soon he produced a white silk material tethered to a rope and a brass contraption that looked like a horn. He wasted little time setting lines and unrolling the material into its large, tear drop shape. The dragon man took in a deep breath and brought the horn contraption up to his lips. The other end of the contraption ran into an opening in the silk material. He let out a breath

that rasped and wheezed before the sound of exhaling was replaced by the ripple of fire. The noise was so sudden and loud, even Taisteal jumped at the commotion. The silk balloon quickly expanded and lifted as his breath continued. As the opening in the balloon slid off the pipe, the others could see red flame shooting out in a stream, straight up. The hot flame-driven air accelerated the silk bubble's ascent. He ran out of breath and fire as the balloon rose higher than the mast of the ship, pulling up a few ropes with it. Soon the white dot was several times as high as the tallest mast and had pulled up three small triangle shaped sails that caught the stream of air high above the ship-like kites. The ropes pulled tight, and the ship began to move slowly forward.

“All aboard, wet rags! The lord of the sea has you under way,” Layuk railed out in a self-approved statement. The humans and the dryad swam back and pulled themselves onto the hulls as the ship slowly began to move just faster than the average person could swim.

Chapter 10: "A League of Women"

Keera trembled on the edge of the bed in her thin, white nightgown. Outside, a storm that had rolled in from the west was beating against the upstairs windowpanes of the Single Moat Inn. Thunder rippled in the distance like giant boulders colliding in the sky, and the white flashes stood in sharp contrast with the warm glow from the room's fire. She had cleaned this large guest room hundreds of times but never had stayed a night in it, since it was usually reserved for big spenders traveling through town. Since being proposed to and married all in one fell swoop, the night had been a temulent ride of fright. Her 'husband' was still somewhere downstairs celebrating and toasting with the other knights. She had been sent upstairs by his command about an hour ago. The noise below was dwindling and that could only mean that her unaware tormentor would be on his way. She thought of running, of pitching herself crashing out the window, but she thought mostly of Rosheen and what may be best for her. She knew her friend's temper was bound to get her in trouble and the best bet of her surviving was most likely for Keera to simply go along with what was to come. She would tell Rosheen to move on in the morning. Perhaps her friend could still escape to a life in Namel, like they had so often fantasized about.

There was a loud knock at the door. The wait was over. Her pale skin was like crawling ice on the edge of a freezing lake.

"May I come in, my bride?" Sir Lata said in a deep, gentle manor, if not a least bit slurred. She was frozen in panic, not answering. She eyed the dark brown dress she had hung up across the room next to a dresser, now regretting not having chosen a more drastic option earlier. The door latch twisted, and the door swung open slowly. The hulking but

admittedly by most standards, handsome, Lata entered the room. Shutting the door behind him, he stumbled over to the stool next to the dresser by her dress. He eyed her hungrily as he sat to take off his boots. "Still not much for words, my flower?" he continued. She stared straight ahead at the door pondering if she could outrun him. She knew she would not escape the inn with him in pursuit. She looked over at the large man unbuckling the heavy plate armor from around his chest and waist. Tears welled in her shivering eyes.

"Can I have tonight alone?" she muttered out weakly. He crooked his head and stood to come kneel in front of her, now shirtless.

"My dear! Do not be so troubled. I can be a gentle man," Lata said placing a hand on her knee. She closed her eyes trying to retreat into herself as she sat motionless on the edge of the bed. His hand slid a little up her thigh. "So gentle," he mused looking at her petite frame silhouetted in the near glowing white fabric, lit only by the small fire from the opposing side of the room. There was a heavy rack on the door. He hung his head sighing. "No, thank you," he stated loudly. There was another three heavy hits on the door. Keera shot her eyes open; the knocks seemed familiar. "This is Sir Lata of Hortus. I am off tonight... with my wife!" he commanded louder at the door. The knocks at the door came again and louder. He hung his head but for a moment before standing and striding over to the door. "I said –" he cut his sentence short as he whipped the door open. Rosheen stood there looking as meekly as she could fake, holding a serving tray topped with fresh warm bread and a tankard. "Did you not hear me before?" he barked.

"But sir, the King insisted I bring you the finest thing left in the kitchen," Rosheen said as lightly as possible. Keera peered at the door, wild-eyed.

“The King left before I did with an escort to some map maker’s house!” Lata fussed. It seemed like he may slam the door in the dark-haired woman’s face for a moment. Turning to face Keera he asked, “What is your friend’s name, my dear...” he gasped for air and straightened his back vigorously before dropping forward to his knees. The serving tray and tankard crashed to the floor overshadowing the sound of repetitive squishing and slicing. Keera saw a thick, red liquid splattering onto the floor behind him, along with the spilling ale. Rosheen’s face was a grimace like that of a wild cat in the mountains as she worked the serving knife in and out of the back of the large man’s rib cage. Keera jumped to her feet in amazement as the man fell face first onto the wide wood planked floor. His body lie perfectly still, not breathing. Keera locked amazed eyes with the fury in those of Rosheen’s. The front of Rosheen’s olive dress was splattered with fresh blood.

“You are going to get yourself killed!” Keera beseeched in a quick hushed tone. Rosheen rushed forward, past the fresh laid body, face-to-face with the smaller woman.

“If I had not come... I might as well have been,” the fierce dark-haired woman answered. Keera placed a hand behind her friend’s head and pulled her in for a deep, wild kiss.

“Lata?” a man’s voice rang out down the hall through the open door behind them. Rosheen backed away from her love gripping the little knife that had just served her well. Keera grabbed her friend’s wrist and shook her head. The thin girl in only the light gown took a deep breath while a multitude of impression-giving shapes ran over her face. She quickly strode over to the door pulling it half shut behind her, leaning out into the hall clumsily and playfully. “Oh! Excuse me miss,” the knight who had taken a room across and down

the hall exclaimed. He had just stepped into the hall and was still dressed in his armor.

“Oh!” she feigned with a laugh as coyly as possible in a way that seemed earnestly embarrassed. It wasn’t hard to act uncomfortable being as how she was simultaneously a genuine mix of terrified and relieved. “Excuse us. We will try to be quieter, sir,” she continued while wrapping her arms around her chest to accentuate the fact she was not acceptably dressed for public.

“Ah... Ok. Certainly, miss,” the knight answered noticing now with his grog-hazed eyes what should have seemed obvious. She smiled an awkward smile before pulling the door shut. The tired knight rubbed his stubble-covered jaw looking dumbfounded at the shut door. “Sir Lata... Damn,” the knight mused to himself with a smile before shaking his head with the perplexity of approval and confusion. He turned and shut the door to his own room with a heavy thud.

In the opposing room, at the end of the hall, Keera and Rosheen both breathed sighs of relief when they heard the other door shut.

“Did he...” the larger of the two women asked slowly.

“No,” Keera stepped forward placing a gentle hand on her friend’s shoulder.

“Ok...” Rosheen responded, softening her demeanor and blinking away a few tears. They took a moment in a warm embrace before the larger of the two women pulled away. “We have to get out of here,” she continued, gathering herself from the moment within the more pressing moment.

“Where will we go?” Keera replied in near panic, now with her eyes a flood of fresh tears.

“I don’t know yet...” Rosheen answered curtly. “Get dressed!” she continued a bit frustrated at the thought of what had almost taken place. While the thin woman quickly began reacquiring the dress she had hung by the dresser, Rosheen’s drying eyes darted about the room. Soon, she was plucking up the unlit oil lantern that sat on a small table next to the bed. Pulling the heavy curtain down from the window as carefully and quietly as possible, she placed it from the mattress to the fire’s edge.

“What are *you* doing?” Keera puzzled, putting extra emphasis on the *you* while finishing off the threads up the front of her dress.

“Helping Jack,” Rosheen mused sarcastically while beginning to soak the cloth with the olive oil from the lantern.

“You are going to burn down Bibliomane’s tavern?” she asked surprised. Rosheen looked over to her friend just as she finished pouring out the oil, and the flames began to lick onto the soaked curtain.

“I don’t think anyone who is not the King owns anything in this town anymore,” she raked hoarsely.

“...but why?” Keera asked.

“We need our own distraction to escape, just like Jack did. Come on!” she answered, taking Keera by the hand and rushing quickly and softly out the room and down the hall.

Downstairs, the two quickly marched across the main room. It was empty aside from the old man who had employed both the girls since they had been old enough to work. A surprised Bibliomane, standing at the bar lazily

cleaning a glass, began to speak up before Rosheen shot him a grimacing look from behind a point first serving knife. The blade of the knife was still red. He looked back at the two of them in confusion as they proceeded right out the front door and into the raging storm outside. He twisted his head slightly glancing back upstairs from where they had come. *Was that blade covered in blood or wine?* He pondered as a familiar panic rang out from above.

“Fire!” yelled one of the knights from above. He froze in shock at the oddness of what had just taken place, and soon in a panicked mess as he and the others in the inn ran outside, into the storm by leaping flames. Rain fell in stinging sheets and the road was a river of mud, but the old wood and thatch pub was still in roaring flames. The girls were gone, leaving no sign of which direction they may have taken in the drenched night. He glanced at the remnants of Jack’s burnt down house and back to his scorching inn.

“Why would they do this... That priest... Jack?” he mused out loud. Lanterns were quickly being lit in some of the nearby houses as cries of fire continued to ring out.

After a couple days wondering north through the forest, the two young women were exhausted and frustrated. For all their days dreaming of adventures, they had spent very little time out of the confines of Petram. Both were self-reliant in their own ways, having done most of their growing up without their parents but neither knew much of surviving in the wilderness that surrounded them. With Keera in the lead, they happened upon a slow flowing stream, little more than a foot deep that ran in between the thick forested hills around them. They both rushed forward to the water’s edge and hesitated only for a moment at the green tinted water, before dropping to their knees and scooping up cool mouthfuls. The water was a touch bitter, but still a cherished relief after not

finding anything more appealing than a mud puddle since fleeing the inn. The last day had been dry at least, but the humidity of the wet foliage around them was making this day, in particular, stifling.

“Mushrooms!” Rosheen jolted before scrambling over to some small tan stems that came up into brown caps, spanning out into thin edged saucers. She quickly grabbed a couple with each hand, plucking them up from the loose, black soil.

“Rosheen!” Keera exclaimed as she slapped one out of her friend’s hand, “Those may be poisonous...” The determination in her words waned coming face-to-face with the quickly building fury in Rosheen’s eyes.

“These are the ones Bibliomane buys!” the dark-haired woman fired back at her friend.

“Actually, no they are not,” the smaller, fair woman replied regaining some of her ardent objections to her friend’s idea. “The ones he used to buy were more yellow and wavier around the edges. Like a lily,” she added.

“And now you’re the food expert between the two of us?” Rosheen asked harshly.

“Well, if you’re the outdoor expert, why did you lead us in a circle yesterday?” Keera pushed back matching her friend’s tone, not backing down as she so often did.

“...so... it would be harder for them to follow our tracks,” Rosheen answered trying to maintain her serious visage. Soon, a smile was shining through. Keera caught on and before long, their spat had morphed into laughter. As their jubilation subsided Keera placed a delicate hand on Rosheen’s cheek.

“...So...” she began, mocking how her friend had just stumbled over the word before continuing, “...are you sure these are the ones?”

“They must be. Are you as hungry as I?” Rosheen asked picking back up the one she had dropped and handing it to Keera.

“So much that I could eat Jack’s cooking,” Keera mused as her friend let out another stab of laughter. She brought the mushroom up to her lips.

“Stop!” a woman’s voice rang out from across the stream. They froze in the moment just before taking a bite. “Those are skull caps in your hands,” the woman continued sternly, now partially visible from behind a large laurel bush. Rosheen quickly dropped the mushrooms and scrambled in the mud to find a round rock about as large as both her fists. She stood quickly, widening her stance; Keera stayed motionless surveying the other woman.

“They are alone... and harmless,” a deeper voice rang out from behind them with some amusement. The two young women, already startled to the point of ignition had they been flammable, jumped and turned to see a dark-skinned and muscle-bound man in leather armor with a short spear. “What are you to doing out here alone?” he asked.

“What are you doing out here?” Rosheen shot back after a brief hesitation. The man laid the spear over his shoulders, flexing it just a bit and revealed a big smile.

“That’s a Dallis accent. Let me guess, not a fan of your new King?” Oren asked.

“You could say that, sir,” Keera answered while placing a hand on Rosheen’s shoulder in attempt to get her to relax a bit.

“Then we are here for similar reasons. A single decree from your new King turned our valley upside down,” Oren answered before looking over to his wife across the stream. Keera followed his eyes and was astonished to find the tall, regal looking dryad woman now standing plainly but sternly. Her multicolored hair flowed back in thick lines of reds, browns and silver. The woman seemed ageless, perhaps as young as they were or older than the man next to them. Looking back to the two young, human girls from Petram, Oren asked, “Where are you running to?”

“The Yarden Valley,” Keera answered after her friend seemed overly hesitant to. Oren sighed.

“Not if you keep heading the same way.” he replied. Rosheen quickly glanced an obstinate frustration at her thin friend who had been leading them. “You would go right by the valley and into the Knob of Terras.”

“Oren...” the beautiful woman across the stream called to her love in a kind but firm voice, “My father’s people will accept them. Both of you, come with us to Mon Dryadalis,” she continued, turning her words to the two young women. They glanced at each other nervously but with a touch of excitement at the mention of Mon Dryadalis, a magical mountain they had heard tales of growing up.

“No use in arguing with Shokola. Come, we can get acquainted as we walk. I must warn you though, the two of us are probably being hunted,” the smiling Yardish man stated as he began to step across the small stream.

“Then that makes two things we have in common,”
Rosheen answered, nudging Keera to follow across the
shallow water. The four cut a quick path through the forest
with low conversation and light feet as they pressed on north
and to the west.

Chapter 11: "An Assemblage with Alice"

The trident rolled forward with good speed, easily breaking through the small swells. The favorable westward wind had returned from its slumber the day before. The water around them seemed crowded to Alice after having been out in the open ocean for a few days. In that moment she missed the endless and empty blue. Now, ships of all sizes and kinds parlayed the waves around the coast of Rauthlaus Island just before them. The sun hung low in the west sky just over the tips of the mountains at the island's center. The port city and name's sake of the island glowed a soft gold hue in its light, but the large stone fort lined with black metal cylinders, dominated the vista. Layuk was quickly guiding the ship to the northmost pier coming out of the city's center into the deep water. Both piers were long, solid stone structures of equal size, but the one he headed toward was less crowded with less than a half dozen other ships tethered to it. She had been given a few days of rest out on the open water, but now a sharp focus was upon her as she stood steadfast on the center hull between Jack and Arturius. She held her bow in her left hand with a full quiver of arrows slung over her shoulder.

"Those cannons up there make me nervous every time," Layuk admitted while the ship slowed as it ever neared the pier.

"As well they should. No ship ever forced its way into Rauthlaus. Not even a six-mast maned by the League of Nations," Taistal answered. As they slid up next to the long, stone structure, Pulchra tossed a rope over to a barefoot dock hand who began pulling the ship against the wooden bumpers mounted against the pier. Alice scanned the piers and then the giant stone fort just south of them. It loomed over the entire port. The dock hand had begun talking with the others, but she tuned out the conversation. There were three armed

men coming down the pier, all in heavy, plated armor flagged by green and gold capes. The one that walked ahead of the others had gold trimming on his armor that shimmered in the evening light as he walked. He was a head taller than the other two and had flowing blonde hair that trailed out from underneath his crown. Though some may have been honored to be greeted by a King, she had grown tired of royal company even before her recent experiences with Indoctus. She eyed him closely and suspiciously as he stepped up next to the ship.

“Greetings, friends of the Great Hattaway,” he called out to everyone on the ship.

“They dryad sends a butler to greet us?” Layuk spouted. The dock hands looked shocked by both what was said and the enormity of the thing that said it.

“This is King Ulfric the 3rd, grandson of the first elected King! He is sent by no one,” one of the heavily armored men replied in earnest disgust through the vents in his helmet. Taisteal sighed heavily before speaking up.

“We are indeed honored. Have you come to escort us to our friend?” Taisteal asked.

“Interesting that our friend chose not to inform me he would be entertaining private guests on my island,” Ulfric replied.

“Surely we are not guests so important as to warrant your attention, King of the Island,” Taisteal inquired.

“I doubt your arrival is inconsequential. The old Dryad’s estate has been stirring with secret comings and goings, awaiting your arrival. Yet, nothing happens here without my knowing.”

“I assure you; we seek only the same shelter that these shores have offered to many other refugees in years past,” Taistal continued.

“So, you are familiar with our laws. You should understand my concern then, when a lady pledged to become Queen of the Dallis attempts to sneak onto our shores. Moreover, at a time when the men of the Dallis and the Yarden Valley declare war on anyone who is not human.” Alice shifted uncomfortably as the King of the Island eyed her intensely.

“Who gave such a declaration?” Alice spoke up strongly. Ulfric peered at her from behind his curled blonde mustache and finely combed beard before answering.

“The new King, Indoctus of Hortus,” he answered.

“That is news to me and my companions here,” Taistal continued.

“Really, news travels fast in Hattaway’s circle of friends,” Ulfric answered smugly. The conversation continued between this elected King and Taistal but Alice drifted in thought. She looked at Jack who was giving her a curious look. She recognized the look; he was trying to figure out if she was shaken by hearing Indoctus must still be alive, and she was indeed trying to hide how that made her feel. Rage and fear swirled in her head. The storm that had plagued her mind had returned. Soon, she was shaken back to present circumstances by the escalation in the conversation present.

“...Do you intend to impede our arrival then?” Taistal asked losing some of the usual patience he possessed.

“Surely not with so few armed men?” Layuk asked proudly to all around and continued. “I was promised a

substantial sum for delivering this fair upon this shore and I will have it!" Layuk's posture was becoming aggressive. She noticed Arturius and Jack readied themselves for action of any sort. One of the armed men behind the King looked across the bay to the looming fort with a hand raised. Additionally, there were more armed men gathering at the base of the pier, donning white-looking armor. Taisteal began into some long statement regaining his composure. She ignored its content.

"Do the rest of these men know who I am?" Alice interrupted with words as strong as a mounted knight's attack. Taisteal looked back at her from his awkward posture standing on his knees. The group was silenced by her commanding tone.

"What other men?" Ulfric asked.

"The ones at the base of this pier or the ones your guard now signals to in the fort," she answered. Ulfric looked around and then at the base of the pier before sighing.

"No, just my two guards here. Those men in white belong to Hattaway, so you would have to ask him; and of course, these dock hands who have overheard us just now." His answer allowed her to relax from her near fighting posture. The dockhands gave each other grave glances, realizing they had exposed themselves to much more than desired.

"Then you understand the danger of my presence here being known on the mainland," she stated before continuing as composed as a master's stanza, "I am quite familiar with the laws of your land, and you know that you are now at war with Indoctus no matter what is decided at this pier today. He will see you as my captor or my conspirator." There was a thick pause that hung in the air after her words. She let the tension sink in just enough before continuing,

“Now, since we both know we have a common enemy, why don’t we decide to be allies. Will you see to it that we are discretely and safely given passage to our host?” she asked with a strong look she hoped was hard to read. The King looked at her as a small smile appeared. His charming grin made her feel less welcome, but she tried to hold her blank face.

“Since you have so convincingly asked, I will see to it,” he answered.

“Then I will see to it that you are made privy to everything discussed between myself and this Hattaway. If we are to be allies, I would not have you be an ignorant one,” she continued keeping her composure. Taisteal gave her a worried look before looking across the bay. He smiled a quick smile at her she was sure he forced himself to muster.

“So be it,” the large priest mumbled.

“Then let us be underway,” Ulfric stated offering a hand down from the pier to help Alice step off the lightly bobbing trident. She tried to stifle her immediate panic before a response filled her head.

“Since discretion is our goal, you should not pay me any special attention as we pass through,” Alice answered.

“That will be difficult,” the King replied with all the charm of the Knights of Dallis combined. It was obvious to her that Jack was controlling the emotions inside as aggressively as she was at the moment. Soon they were off the ship and were making their way through town on a carriage, after picking up the company of the men and Dryads dressed in white at the base of the pier.

“I would ask if you know what you are doing, but...”
Taisteal mentioned to her quietly as they road along.

“...but what?” she asked.

“...but that would require I know what I am doing,”
Taisteal quibbled, this time with earnest amusement in
between looks of grave concern. She let her strictly controlled
face return the sentiment.

After moving out of the city, lush green rolling hills dominated the vista, with the ocean outside the right window of the carriage and mountains far beyond the hills to the left. The King and his men took up individual mounts as she and her recent shipmates followed in the carriage apparently sent to them by this Hattaway, who began to grow more mysterious in her mind by the minute. So much so that her anticipation blurred the spectacle that was the exterior of his cliffside estate. Jack seemed anxious too, and the brief conversation he had with Taisteal and Arturius along the carriage ride, seemed tense but not interesting enough for her to pay attention. Soon they had arrived at the Dryad’s estate, and the whole lot of them were being escorted through the grand, marble-lined halls by two men adorned in white armor that was as bright as the moon on a clear night. The King’s two armored knights must have waited outside the estate as she did not notice them continuing along with the rest. The men in white had provided a chair with various size wheels for Taisteal to ride in throughout the mansion. Arturius had taken to pushing him along.

Who could this Hattaway be that Taisteal would need now rely on him? How could anyone really help if dragons had truly returned to come after Jack and I? As these questions swirled in her mind they came to an incredible high, black double set of doors at the end of a long hall that had ethereal white,

stained glass down the right side. Their escorts stepped aside and bowed slightly, continuing with the whole show of formality they had kept since acquiring them at the harbor. Arturius hesitated slightly and that was enough for Ulfric to take the lead. He pushed the two slick midnight doors apart, revealing another bright room with a large, black table resting – *No, it's floating!* she realized. A large, granite slab floated in the center of the room with a man standing at its far end. The ceiling was made of the same glass that had adorned one side of the hall they had just exited. Light fell through making everything as bright as if it were a courtyard, yet nothing glistened as much as the pale man who wore, in sharp contrast to his complexion, all black.

“I have brought your secret guest,” the King started. Alice’s eyes took a moment to adjust as she and the rest entered the room. Pulchra eyed the pale man carefully, as if seeing the remnants of an ancient tomb. The man wearing all black paid little mind to the King. Alice could feel his dark eyes scan over her, and then over the rest of the group before resting on Taisteal. His sharp features and pointed ears were framed by long, straight hair as dark as the velvet in the coat he wore. It became clear this was the Dryad, Hattaway. His carved scowl softened as he looked at the large, framed man, reduced to sitting in the rolling contraption devised for a cripple.

“Old friend, should we burden these two seafarers with what must be discussed?” he asked in a tone as polished and perfect as the rest of him.

“They have already been seen with us, while we escaped Namel,” Taisteal answered somberly before adding, “The burden is already upon them.”

"I heard that escape, even here. Impressive, my old friend," Hattaway answered.

"...And I was told I was to be impressively burdened with coin," Layuk interrupted.

"Spoken with fire, like a true Taul," the Dryad answered.

"I am Layuk, captain of the Trident and lord of the seas. I belong to no desert," Layuk interjected quickly and loudly. Pulchra audibly sighed in what may have been embarrassment.

"Indeed, and you will have your wealth... Come then, be seated at my table," as Hattaway responded, the tall, dark doors swung shut tightly and seven multicolored marble tiles that sat in the floor around the floating table joined the table in floating. They came out of small holes in the floor and affixed themselves into chairs around the long table. Everyone but Taisteal took a seat, and all gathered around. Alice made sure to grab Jack by the hand and find seats across from the King and furthest from this Hattaway. She hoped she had done so without revealing her suspicion to either the King or their new host.

"So, why all this secrecy? Are you playing mainland politics again, Hattaway?" Ulfric asked. Hattaway looked at him and then to Jack and Alice expectantly.

"Shall we shroud the conversation in mystery? All of us in this room are now bound to your fates it seems; should you not tell them who you really are?" the dryad inquired. She hesitated feeling the tension of the room. Taisteal gave the two of them a nod as if to say it were 'ok' to answer.

“My father found us in a field near Petram when we were but babes,” Jack started. She and Jack locked eyes as he paused to look at her before continuing his story. She studied his articulation of their story, noticing slight differences in his ‘version.’ Undoubtedly, they must occasionally have seen the same things differently. More conversation came from those around the table, along with greetings she was not that interested in. More talk of the door and prophecies of which the old dryad seemed every bit as knowledgeable about as Taisteal. Talk of the Great Ghost invading the hearts of men and aligning an army in the mainland. As they talked on and on, Alice could not place her finger on the nature of the relationship between the priest and the dryad. Hattaway was well over a thousand years old by anyone’s account, yet he occasionally spoke to Taisteal as if he were the Dryad’s elder. Before long, however, Hattaway mentioned something that garnered her full attention in the moment.

“Taisteal, it is obvious then that you seek to use the Ocoee to traverse the seas unnoticed from above,” Hattaway stated confidently. Though, every word she heard the dryad speak sounded confident.

“Yes, and unless you have a competent captain to spare, it should be given to Layuk and Pulchra after we are delivered,” Taisteal answered.

“The ship that sails under water?” Layuk gawked, “Another legend?!” he continued.

“No more so than the dragons,” Pulchra insisted growing tired of Layuk’s contrary nature in the moment. Hattaway nodded to the other dryad who up until then had remained silent during the meeting.

“Yes, daughter of the mountain,” their dark-haired host answered. Pulchra shifted uncomfortably at their direct

interaction. "...There would be no one more suited for the mission. We could outfit the ship with a wood and oil furnace so magic would not be required to power it. So, the two of you could make a return journey..." he continued aiming the last sentence to the dragon man and Pulchra.

"How soon could that be accomplished?" Taisteal asked with some excitement growing in his voice.

"About your timing... might I be so bold as to suggest to you a different tactic in reaching the door in the mountain?" Hattaway asked, seeming to defer the authority of the mater to Taisteal.

"What of it?" Taisteal asked flatly.

"You have been making all haste to whisk these two to the door since you have discovered their identity... and I understand what is at stake for you..." Hattway began and continued. Alice found his phrasing most curious. "...but might I suggest that we take some time to prepare them for the journey and whatever lies beyond? We do not know to what extent of power resides in these two vessels... Every link in a chain must be strong to raise a heavy burden and this burden is heavy. The fate of all rest in this task."

"I realize what is at stake. I have already turned down the Great Ghost's call. When have you been tempted? Have you defied the darkness when nothing separates you from the will of wrath?!?" Taisteal answered as his voice rose to a booming level as if he were about to cast one of his powerful spells. Hattway paused before continuing. No one dared speak up, not even Layuk as the room lay as silent as a sunrise. Arturius' stone demeanor even seemed surprised by Taisteal's frustration.

“Indeed... you have been tested far longer and more severely than I. But remind me, how did you pass the test, my friend? This recent trial at the hands of the flatlands King and his master, how did you overcome your captor?” the dryad mused out as delicately as someone bowing a string instrument. The large priest relaxed and regained a composure that Alice was more used to seeing on him. He looked at Arturius, Jack, then rested his big, golden eyes on Alice.

“It was done together,” Taisteal answered softly before continuing, “Yes, together. Forgive my pride. Perhaps you are right, this has been a place of refuge against a great many evils for many years,” the large priest continued. There was only a slight argument raised at the notion of them staying for a while and it was of course raised by the King of the Island. Ulfric mostly wanted only to be heard, as it seemed he had a stout disposition against anything to do with the Great Ghost. Not to mention he obviously enjoyed the idea to defy the other Kings of men on the mainland, even if it was to be done in secret.

“Ever imagine we could call a place like this, completely surrounded by ocean, home?” Jack asked in private, leaning over near Alice. She simply smiled at her friend. Alice did not know what life on Rauthlous may look like for her and Jack. She did not know what these preparations for the rest of their journey may include, but the thought of staying in one place for a while, even a short while, was a pleasant one. After all, she was more than tired of running from her enemies.

Several days had passed since their arrival. They had been on like this each morning, ‘learning’ the ways of magic and casting spells. The first time she had done so had been at the bay in Namel, and despite something within her

determined to ignore Taisteal's teaching, had cast many spells since that day. Each morning it was about an hour walk north out of the lush scenery and into the lifeless cliffs where the island's mountain chain came to the eastern shore. The mountains here were bare, loose gravel formations that made a high ridge of jagged points, like fingers falling into the sea. These points were separated from the steep cliff down to the violent, dark ocean by a path carved out wide and paved with cut stones in the narrowest of places. Taisteal was leading the group today, walking ahead on his wood, brass and leather prosthetic feet the old Dryad had someone fashion for him since arriving. Alice and Jack followed along with the five monks who were accustomed to coming with them every morning. These monks were of the very same order that served King Ulfric and operated the cannons on top of the city's fort.

"Today we will work on something more dire. You have done well lately; I believe you are ready to be tested," Taisteal said stumbling just one step as he stopped and turned to face the two on a narrow section of the road, next to the steep cliff that dropped straight down to the water.

"I am ready for a challenge," Jack answered enthusiastically stepping forward and facing the large priest. Alice smirked from behind at her friend's excitement. She had a mixture of amusement and respect for his quick mastery of all the spells they had learned; but there was something boyishly cute about how much he had enjoyed learning. Taisteal noticed her smirk and gave a quick wink before he turned to look down one of the long, narrow, winding canyons that went inland from the cliff road. Alice had come to think there was a lot more to Taisteal while on Rauthalaus; one thing in particular, a wicked sense of sarcastic humor. The monks of the eleven towers moved out around them some

couple hundred feet and cast their silent spell in unison, as they always did. They each stood solemnly in their heavy leather coats facing away from the three doing the training. Taisteal leaned down and placed his large open palm on one of the stones that had come loose from the canyon's wall. He spoke softly.

"Eirigh agus mair na clocha seo," he said as he stood and backed away out onto the road. Several more stones began to fall from the sides of the little cliff just inland of the road. The ground began to shake. "Today you will not do a thing for the sake of learning. Today, you will cast spells to defend yourself!" The gathering pile of stones began to roll over themselves and rise up in a heap. Taisteal stood facing the gathering pile, muttering more words under his breath and wearing a face of focus as if he were facing down a field of charging hobgoblins. Then the shaking all at once stopped, and the rolling pile affixed itself like a standing man of loose stones and boulders, standing taller even than the large priest. Two dark pieces of obsidian positioned themselves like dark set eyes in the 'face' of the earthen creature. "Behold, my sléibhe golem," the priest proclaimed proudly in his deep voice. The figure was menacing. Beyond the priest, Alice noticed even one of the disciplined monks turned around to catch a glimpse of the thing. "Your bow, your sword; they are worthless now. This is a beast you must defeat with your wits," Taisteal spoke aggressively and proudly. It was unnerving. Jack glanced over at Alice before taking his hands off the new two-handed sword strapped around his waist that he had been learning to use in the evenings. She sat down the bow Pulchra had given to her. "Be ready," Taisteal boomed and continued, "Sliabh ionsaí orthu!!" Taisteal stepped back as the rock creature stretched up even taller. It took one, slow step toward them, then a quicker one before raising its fist high overhead, preparing to slam down on both of them. Jack

held his ground and widened his stance, anxious to use what he had learned.

“Tine!!!” Jack roared while pushing his palms forward. Fire flickered in the palm of his hands before rolling out of them like a red, yellow splash, tossed from a bucket of flaming oil. The fire licked over the chest of the creature that seemed unfazed by the barrage of flame. It towered over Jack with smoke billowing off it from his attack. Alice grabbed him by the hand, and they rushed into the narrow mountain canyon before the creature brought down its arms, crashing onto the ground behind them and narrowly missing Jack. The creature pursued them with faster movement now. They were scrambling down a canyon that did not have a flat bottom. It was difficult to keep ahead of the shambling stones and keep their footing. Soon the canyon came to an intersection, the mountainside was a maze of steep, jagged rock canyons. Jack turned and faced Alice quickly. “Split up!” he blurted as he went in one direction. She went the opposite. The golem came crashing and tripping into the intersection. “Domhantarraingt!” she heard Jack yell as more stones from higher up fell on the creature. It made a grinding sound internally and went after her friend, who bounded away from the beast further into the canyons.

“Remember your training!” the priest’s voice echoed like thunder down the canyon. “Understand the thing you desire to do, exactly. Remember how it functions... believe...” The words of Taisteal faded as she closed her eyes to visualize her surroundings.

“Súil éin,” she stated as calmly as possible, remembering the concepts of vision that she had so boredly studied with Jack a few days before. Soon her vision went from the dark of her imagination with closed eyes, to a view from above looking back down at the thin razor maze into the

mountainside. She saw herself. She saw the creature pursuing Jack a little way south, she saw herself, and soon a connecting canyon from just behind her that curved around to where Jack was headed. She zoomed her vision further out overhead to see more.

“...Remember your training...” giggled a feminine voice nearby. Alice’s eyes shot open as she looked around, ending her spell. There was no one to be seen anywhere around her. A light sound of self-indulging laughter filled the canyon. Alice’s skin crawled at the sound. Then a loud crash echoed through from the canyon that would lead to Jack. She jumped and began to sprint to her friend. Running quickly, partially out of fear and partially out of determination to help Jack, she soon saw him around one corner. Jack stood tall, facing away from her with a wide stance. The canyon forked behind him, one direction further into the mountain and one down the direction she had come from. His shoulders were cocked back, and his fist clinched. She had little time to admire how her friend had grown into a man as defined and rugged as any knight she had seen growing up. She stopped a few feet from him, looking back to see if she was followed by whatever had spoken to her. All at once his command of a spell snapped her back into the present thought.

“Lámh aeir!” Jack yelled from atop a twenty-foot drop in the ravine, down to the creature that was scrambling up after them. Alice joined next to him and followed suit with the spell designed to ‘grab’ things with their mind.

“Lámh aeir,” she mirrored. The rock creature slipped down to the base of the little, steep ascent as pieces of it shifted and pulled loose from its body. She would focus on a stone in its body, and then visualize and believe it would fly apart from the creature; remembering all the while how wind could break down trees or power sails when concentrated and

in sufficient strength. The stones she focused on obeyed one by one. Some others did the same, no doubt under Jack's control. Yet, it was not enough. The large, stone creature persisted to climb up to them. Soon it was back upon them, and they were forced to run again. This time, Jack led the way down the canyon that went deeper still into the maze. The floor here had an even sharper vee at the bottom and was damp. Alice tried to remember the words to formulate a spell that would allow her to step on air, rather than on the slippery gray crevice underfoot as they ran. She stepped on one steep section and slipped. Jack tried to stop suddenly to grab her by an outstretched hand, but he slipped as well without being able to help at all. They slid together to the bottom of the ravine as the stone creature stopped overhead with giant rock fists ready to crash down. She looked over to Jack who was reaching his hands out over her as if he would be able to stop the crushing giant. All at once the golem froze in place like a poorly sculpted statue.

"It is alright to fail when practicing," the priest stated from overhead. He hovered down next to them with stationary wings of dust and small pebbles. The dust swirled in such a way it was obvious he was using some sort of air spell to levitate himself. Alice gave Taisteal a smug look up from the wet, dirty ravine floor. She could not understand his inconsistent vanity at doing things like creating decorative, wide wings when doing this spell, or using his voice so thunderously for other spells he had made plain to her that he could do without speaking at all. He glanced back at her very seriously, "But it will not be alright when we are again facing down real darkness..." the priest's face softened as if some terrible thought was eating at his confidence... or conscience. She could not tell. "Come on then. Meet me back at the road, we can work getting more power out the spells you already

know.” He hovered back up over the canyon walls and east toward the road.

Jack relaxed and sighed heavily. She did the same, looking up into the collection of white, sunbathed clouds.

“Did you hear anyone laughing in here earlier when that thing was still animated? A woman’s voice...” she asked glancing around.

“Laughing... no... Did you?” he replied.

“Maybe... Maybe it was the canyon changing the sound of Taistea’s voice...” she continued looking around concerned. He continued looking upward to the sky.

“Does this place remind you of anywhere?” she glanced over at him right next to her. They were both a mess from falling down in the gritty, wet canyon floor. He had a smudge of grey mud across his chin.

“Should it?” she asked. He rolled his eyes a little and looked back up at the sky. She popped him lightly on the belly. “Where!?” she insisted, mixing some frustration with her playful jab. He let out an exaggerated oof before looking back at her, locking eyes.

“The tired meadow of course,” he answered and continued, “The tall grass when we were only children.” She took in a deep, satisfied breath as they both looked back to the sky. “...Only this time it is not one of your dad’s knights who will eventually come for us,” he said lowly.

“This time, I will not leave you alone in the maze when someone comes. We will keep facing things together Jack,” she replied looking at him with a wealth of emotion hiding behind her eyes.

“You sure?” he played, as he ran a finger up her ribs towards the base of her arm. She squirmed before grabbing him by the arm.

“Jack!” she fired off as seriously as she could, fighting off the itch to laugh at his tickling. “Jack... let’s not keep Taisteal waiting,” she continued.

“Oh, I know you would hate to upset him,” Jack jested to which she responded with a much laden face of indifference. They slowly helped one another up and began back through the maze with Jack leading the way. As they came to the original intersection that had four different routes out of it, the hint of laughter filled the air behind her once again. She froze for a moment as Jack kept taking big steps forward. Turning on a dime she looked back the way they had come. She heard the lighthearted giggle right next to her. Alice immediately began to yell for Jack, but no words came from her mouth. Only the light shushing sound from the same woman’s voice.

“I don’t think he would understand quite like you will,” said a petite, extraordinarily thin woman dressed in a white gown, right next to Alice on her left side. Alice clasped her own mouth but for a moment, before turning and swinging her fist as hard as she could at the lady’s head. The punch felt like it hit mist. The woman seemed to instantly be behind Alice again. She turned to face her once more.

“That’s one reason I like you...” the light voiced, frail woman replied standing too close for comfort. As Alice backed up, she noticed how young the woman looked. Her ears were tall and bright white... maybe even silver. She was a dryad for sure.

“What is another reason?” this time the words were allowed to come out of Alice as normal. She stood her ground a few

steps back and prepared to contend with whatever this young dryad lady may be.

“We have many things in common Alice. I am brave, as you are. My father died when I was young... about your age, but he was not really my father either. I was trained in arcane ways in these very mountains years ago by a dragon,” the thin, white sheen of a woman paused looking at Alice intently for a moment before continuing, “...We both hate the Great Ghost,” the dryad continued.

“How do you know who I am?” Alice asked assertively and loud enough she hoped Jack or Taisteal would hear. The lady in white scoffed and stepped closer.

“I don’t agree with your teacher though. ‘Understand the thing. Believe the thing. Desire the thing.’ Ridiculous, don’t you think?” she continued.

“Dragons teach magic differently?” Alice shot back. The playfully deceptive manner of the woman was gone. Replaced by an intensity, burning in her crystal eyes.

“Understanding the thing... exactly how the thing is being done. That is nonsense. You only need to understand exactly what you want to happen!” she continued, adding some flair in her young sounding voice. “After all, it is magic,” the Dryad mused.

“Are you saying you can cast any spell you believe you can cast?” Alice asked, caught in a state between intrigue and panic.

“Don’t tell me you really believe you understand how the wind works?” the woman inquired. “No one does, not even the crusty, old men who make graphs and fill scrolls with marks, measuring what they observe. You move a rock

because you believe. But if you are who the whispers say you are... you will soon have to move mountains," the dryad concluded.

"What whispers?" Alice asked bluntly. The small woman looked past Alice then quickly back to her.

"Forget me... but not my words," the dryad implored.

"Alice?" Jack's voice rang out. "Alice..." Jack paused in his yelling as he rounded the corner of the skinny canyon and saw his friend still standing in the intersection. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I..." she started and then turned around not seeing anyone. "I was... thinking..." her words trailed off. She had forgotten why she had stopped.

"You were the one rushing me..." Jack said with an inquiring smile. "Are you ok?" he asked.

"Yeah. Of course. Let's keep practicing," Alice answered as they headed out of the intersection this time with Alice leading the way.

One day after her morning training routine with Jack and Taisteal, Alice took a stroll by herself into Rauthlaus' market. Taisteal, along with Pulchra and Layuk had gone to speak with Hattaway. Jack was training further in swordsmanship with Arturius. The market was on the humbler side of town where the streets were mud, but the buildings were made of comically large, square-cut stones. A local woman in a colorful dress nodded politely to her but paid her no special attention as she crossed the street. Alice was more than elated to be able to walk through the crowds here without a bodyguard or drawing attention. She felt more like an ordinary girl here than anywhere else she had been,

and it was a very pleasant feeling. Across one of the dirt streets from a cooked meat counter that she and Jack had come to enjoy eating at in the evenings, she found a newly parked cart filled with melons of every color.

“I wonder if I have waited long enough for you to trust me?” asked a smooth voice from across the cart. As she looked up, she saw the King in mostly plain clothes, less a small, wooden crown. It was shocking for her to see him without all his gold-adorned armor and large crown of precious metals and stones. She thought over her words carefully as she eyed the man who seemed quite content rummaging through the light green melons of a variety that she had never seen before.

“That depends on what you ask next,” she answered.

“Ah! This one is perfect... honeydew,” he said looking up at Alice. “Trust me, they are as sweet as their name suggests... I would think you have not had one,” he continued while handing her a near white, green ball of fruit. She took it from him slowly. A young man with a mud-stained, black shirt came up next to the King and nodded to them both. Ulfric turned and produced a few copper pieces in his hand.

“Oh, no sir. The King should not pay a farmer like me,” the young man rebutted. Ulfric just smiled and kept his hand outstretched to the lad.

“Oliver, you realize you have to pay taxes every year to the kingdom for your land...” Ulfric mused in a way that was both whimsical and pointedly true. The man smirked at the King and took the coins. Turning his attention to Alice once more, Ulfric asked a question most serious and lighthearted all the same time. It was beginning to become obvious to her that this King wielded his words like some wield a sword. “Perhaps you would let me buy you some cooked boar; these

pair terrific with meat. I know you and your lover enjoy Barton's counter just there," he continued pointing across the street to the meat counter.

"I do not have a lover!" she immediately protested, hoping her blushing was not obvious. He looked at her skeptically as he began to walk over to the place laden with fresh smoked meats.

"...But you do enjoy this place," he said as he continued across. "Come, we have things of the mainland to discuss." She watched him curiously as he crossed over and found a seat next to one of the small tables near the counter, lined with a smoking bounty. Only one other patron sat at a different table near the counter. Ulfric seemed very relaxed and only expectant of the fact that she would be curious to talk with him. Despite her initial suspicions of 'another' King, she did find herself to be curious. She shook off her bemusement and walked over to join him at his table.

"Ok, what have we to discuss then?" she asked. He gave her a nod as if he desired privacy before asking his next question, while Barton came over to take their order. The heavysset, bearded proprietor took their order before he returned to his cooking assortment and began slicing pieces off for them. She noticed the other customer seated behind them, a middle-aged man with pale skin and a balding head, seemed not to be able to speak normally. He had stuttered out a half sensible response to Barton, who seemed familiar with the man. The fleeting curiosity was quickly broken by her own company's inquisition.

"What can you tell me about this new King? Indoctus, the rumors are such that his 'league of men' has already raised an army larger than any other single army in the mainland," Ulfric lauded and asked.

“...not very much,” she answered after some hesitation. Alice considered what she should say and what Ulfric may already know about her and Indoctus.

“Yet, you were engaged to be his Queen. Most likely, in his mind, still are,” he followed up alleviating her concern of oversharing, and pulling a lever of anger in her all at the same time. She glared at him, and he returned a firm inquisition with his bright blue eyes.

“He is in league with —” she began to answer with a muster of zeal that was interrupted by a jolly Barton serving them two hearty plates of pink, sliced pork. Ulfric jested with the man about having the largest stone blocks in his house of any around; she paid little attention to their exchange. Alice briefly feigned a smile while she waited for the man to leave their table once more. “It is just like Taistal and Hattaway discussed when you were present. He is in league with Hobgoblins. It seems he and the ‘Followers of the One’ have all turned to the Great Ghost.”

“Yes, of course. I doubt they were trying to deceive me; but I asked, ‘what could you tell me about him,’” he pressed. She paused once more, now sincerely trying to consider an answer. He waited patiently.

“I can tell you that he has been a brave warrior and thought well of throughout the Dallis; that his father was also well thought of. Fair, yet strong; people often said about them. They ramped up our crusades into the desert of the dragon men,” she went on.

“Dragon men? The Taul... people like Layuk?” he interjected.

“Yes, his kind. Indoctus...” she hated saying the name, “...looks down on other races. This ‘league of men’ is no

surprise. His working with hobgoblins in secret, and now seemingly betraying them to form this 'league,'" she paused while he looked on expectantly, "...it shows just how ruthless and power hungry he is. His father, or the Kings before him; they would have never allied with other races or sorcerers like the Priest in Manefold.' We should not be surprised at anything he would do to gain a strong position, even if it meant destroying our world," Alice concluded. Ulfric nodded contemplating what she had said. He pulled an ornate dagger from his belt and sliced the honeydew she had placed on the table. He casually began eating.

"Were you lying to me earlier?" he asked after enough time had passed to let the tension of the previous topic to pass.

"No," she protested after finishing a bite of the delicate fruit.

"About your friend, Jack?" he elaborated. Her embracement was again sneaking through her expression.

"If you are referring to your vulgar question, then no, I was not lying," she continued doing her best at turning some of the discomfort back on him. He seemed unfazed as he enjoyed another bite.

"Pity then. I know love when I see it," he replied casually. She gave him a cross look before taking a moment to consider his words. Jack was her best friend, even before fate pushed them onto such a chaotic journey. She obviously knew she loved him, but did she want to be *in love* with Jack? Was she already? Realizing the King's smirk at her contemplation, she cracked a quick thought out loud.

"Oh, you do. How do you know so much about love? Something about being King?" she shot, expecting a self-

righteous answer like one she had heard from other royalty back in the Dallis. He spun the ring on the pinky of his right hand. As she noticed it more closely, it was gold with tiny diamonds dotting the band.

“Nothing to do with ruling. Long ago, probably before you were born, I was in love,” he replied more somberly than anything she had heard from him before. “Mother and son, lost in childbirth,” he lamented.

“My mother passed trying to bare my little brother,” she answered matching his tone. They connected with a glance of understanding before continuing to fill themselves on dinner.

A few evenings later Alice found herself at the very same table with Jack. The conversation with Ulfric was still fresh on her mind. Jack had asked specifically that morning if she would join him for food and then, ‘a walk’ to a place with a good view that night. It was out of the ordinary for him to make specific plans. Both of them had rolled into a routine of training every morning together with Taisteal. Jack would then go off every evening for sword training with Arturius, and she would explore town or go shooting with Pulchra. They usually ended up spending time together every evening, without him needing to ask.

“So, tell me about this *grand* view you found?” she asked Jack emphasizing the word grand. He stumbled in his answer much to her amusement.

“Well, I have not been there before. It is supposed to be a grand view of the city at night.” She looked at him through tight eyes, not revealing her brevity. “...the lights from the city are supposed to reflect off the water in the harbor...” he continued, most unsure. She broke her tormenting stare and laughed with a big smile. He quickly

released a smile as well, exhaling the tension he had built in his attempted explanation. "Why are you teasing me so tonight?" he asked.

"Why are you so prone to being teased tonight?" she rebutted.

"I don't know," he answered keeping his smile. She could not help but appreciate his smile. It was charming even when he was embarrassed, and she could not place her finger on the source of the embarrassment.

"Maybe I am missing something. What is special about tonight?" she asked. His sheepish look returned for a moment but then flashed away, replaced by a look she had seen from him before but could not place its meaning.

"I will tell you when we get to the overlook," he answered confidently. Jack continued on, being quieter than usual as they finished their meal and headed west out of the city and up the slowly winding road that ascended through a series of wide switchbacks. For a while they both walked along quietly. The road was surrounded by thick young trees that were only about three times as tall as Jack. A gentle breeze swept through the brush, creating a pleasant soundtrack to accompany their trek. As darkness was falling the light nip in the air was just right for a night out from shelter. Jack led the way along the empty road with a small haversack thrown over his shoulder and his sword, over which he had developed some pride, at his waist.

"Hope you have a torch in there," she jested playfully up to him.

"Oh...?" he turned and returned the tone in his response looking back while he continued to walk. She walked up alongside him as they turned up another switchback, this

one ascending much steeper than the last. "With a powerful sorceress like you... will we need a torch?" he jested.

"Right... Alice Rockhurst, sorceress of the Dallis," she mused loudly, "...only sorceress of the Dallis," she reiterated more quietly.

"Want that to be your title when we return?" Jack asked in a light tone.

"When we return?" she considered out loud.

"Yeah..." he answered again with that confident demeanor she could not quite place. It melted into a smile that she returned. Somehow his simple answer implied many things. Most of which she enjoyed the thought of, and he seemed sure could happen. They continued on in satisfied silence. She twitched her lips in delight before losing another quip to break the silence.

"Jack Fletcher, lord of magic ...arrows, and wit," she spouted so that a small echo came from the rockface ahead at the next switchback.

"Fletcher... I suppose I should be grateful then my father had no name to give me," he responded dryly before continuing again in a more playful manner, "I certainly would not pick one that had to do with arrows." Her brows furrowed lightly as she considered the idea of choosing one's name. Rockhurst was certainly not something she or her father chose. Her thoughts came to a head as they poured out of her before being overly filtered for fear of judgment of what she was about to say.

"Family names do not tell us who we are, only who our ancestors were..." she stated as they kept walking.

“I suppose that is especially true for us,” Jack replied. She grinned wide and honest at her next thoughts.

“Perhaps we should pick one for ourselves then?” she played out the question.

“One name together?” he asked.

“Why not? It’s hard to imagine that our futures are not intertwined at this point,” she answered. She noticed his trying to hide a smile, and prepared herself for some sarcastic response about sharing a name.

“We are almost there,” he stated, dropping the subject to her surprise.

After two more switchbacks, it had become completely dark, less the silvery light cast across the hillside by the moon. Rounding one last corner, she saw a flat clearing along the right or east side of the road. It was covered in thick grass that laid low in gentle tufts, dotted here and there by purple flowers that glowed all the more in the dim moonlight. As Jack walked ahead next to the cliff’s edge at the end of the clearing, the view became apparent. The lanterns of the city streets burned a soft yellow amongst the dark contrast of the sleeping city. She walked up to the edge next to her friend, taken in by the vista. He turned to face her as she marveled. The forest and plains were a black blanket surrounding the light-dotted city. The ocean was as dark as the rest, and she could not tell where land ended, or where water began except for the delicate reflections scattered across the bay. The soft light from flames around the city’s edge drew long lines across the shimmering, nearly still water of the bay. Further out into the sea, a bright, white troupe of tossing reflections danced a silent, twinkling choreography under the moon.

“Jack... it’s beautiful,” she exclaimed, surprised at how breath taken the view had rendered her.

“Very beautiful,” he replied in a soft, confident voice. She knew a wide, foolish feeling smile was on her face but did not really care. She had taken little time to enjoy such things recently and this view was like a scene described in one of Jack’s boring old books.

“I suppose we have found our real adventure together after all,” she considered out loud. Jack remained silent. When she looked over to her friend, he was looking only at her. He was wearing the look that had perplexed her as of late. He stepped closer to her, closer than they would usually have stood. Dim light revealed to her the lines on his face she had come to know well. She considered for a brief moment if she might look at Jack like she just had the moonlit bay, had she not seen him so often as they grew up.

“Alice...” he said quietly. She stepped closer to him. She felt a rush down her spine like she had not felt since he kissed her long ago.

“Yes...?” she asked, intently waiting for something, anything to happen.

“The first time we met we were children wondering in the woods... hiding from our parents who were both mad at us for something I don’t remember. You told me to meet you in the tired meadow the very next day. When I ran off the next evening, you were there. We grew up playing in the meadow, exploring the old woods, me reading you books that I... I borrowed from the Single Moat Inn,” he went on keeping his tone both warm and cool at the same time.

“...or losing to me in shooting tournaments,” she interjected with a spry giggle. The light was low, but she could

see and hear the big smile that her comment produced on his face.

“...I never minded losing to you. I never minded what we were doing, so long as we were together. Even now it would not matter whether I was bound to explore exciting things only in my books and sweat over the old forge every day, or if I was stranded forever on the road, always running; as long as we are together,” he paused for a moment before continuing. His voice waffled ever so slightly as he continued, yet it quickly leveled. “Alice, I found my adventure the day we met. I love you, Alice. I always have... and always will,” she was not shocked to hear these words. She had never heard them but had felt them for years and reciprocated in a similar silence. There had been a blighted pit in her center since accepting the proposal from Indoctus, and Jack’s words seem to wash away the struggles of her last year like dry leaves over a river. She jumped slightly as she felt his hands touch her cheeks before gently sliding down onto the base of her neck. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she placed her hands on his arms. Though it should not have, his physique surprised her again; feeling the ripples of muscle under the thin shirt he wore. Like slow motion magnets, their lips collided. The kiss was as delicate as a single drop of mist on a daisy’s petal, while simmering underneath she felt as violent as a raging torrent over the open ocean. Their lips parted as their foreheads lay easily upon one another. She pulled him in for a second kiss and her simmer under the surface boiled over as they embraced tighter. The night became its own journey of exploration and ecstasy into territory she had long considered but never before dared to tread.

Chapter 12: "Sundries with Jack"

Jack found it difficult to do much other than be impressed with how Alice had handled this King Ulfric with her choice in words back at the pier. Soon he found himself riding in the carriage Hattaway's men had brought to carry them from Rauthlaus to his estate. The carriage was broad and comfortably carried Taisteal, Arturius and Alice all along, in one compartment. A heavy tapestry separated the second compartment where Layuk and Pulchra also rode along in the same fanciful cart. The seats were a smooth, dark burgundy leather with black piping around the seams and the roof lined with some sort of slick sil-like substance that provided a uniform, taupe sheen. He could tell Alice was lost in thought but had little inclination of the topic.

"What is that stone, Taisteal? It feels to have no enchantment in it," Arturius interrupted the silence. Looking up, Jack noticed the same stone that had grabbed his new friend's attention. It was small and marble in shape. About the size of a dagger's blade, it was a creamy, white color split up by orange striations that held a faint glow within them. The light was just bright enough to notice beyond the natural light, with the large curtains in the windows of the carriage let down.

"Some sort of gem only found here, in the mines to the south of the Island. It is the same place where his gold is mined. In the dark caverns that run underneath the sea all the way to the mainland, those stones are the only source of light," Taisteal answered plainly as he often did. It seemed to Jack that everyone was lost in the little worlds inside each of their heads.

"There really are caverns that run under the ocean?" Jack could not keep but inquiring about such a thing.

“Oh yes... That is where that Dragon was last seen!” loudly interjected a hearty and silly input from Layuk, beyond the tapestry in the next compartment. Taistéal gave Jack a slow, refined look as his gold eyes glanced up to the thick curtain behind Jack, and back toward the dragon man.

“Yes. But Hattaway had the known entrances to the caverns sealed many years ago, after the war with the League of Nations,” Taistéal answered.

“How old is this dryad?” asked Jack. Taistéal sat expectantly looking back at the tapestry separating them from Layuk and Pulchra. A moment passed before the priest sighed.

“Would you enlighten us, Pulchra?” Taistéal asked.

“...it is one fifty-seven p.f. by Namel’s count so... he is nearly eleven hundred years now,” her voice rang from the other side of the carriage.

“I did not realize. Most of the stories about him are from the fall of the ‘League’. Few dryads have ever lived so long,” interjected Arturius. He was slow to close his mouth after revealing his revelation.

“Few outside Mon Dryadalis do,” the sharp and very young dryad when compared to who was being discussed, answered. Jack’s thoughts drifted into considering what it may be like to live so long. How lonely it might be to discover so much if there was not someone desirable to share it all with. His eyes drifted over to Alice as they rode along. Her perfect eyes were fixed out the window on the horizon.

Corium lead the way across the busy central street, that ran from the great piers in the bay, clear through town. Jack followed on behind bumping into and attempting to

excuse himself through the afternoon crowd that seemed to part automatically for the monk he followed. Corium was one of the younger monks who stood tall, and his lean frame wore well the garb of his order. Long, dark leather coats that had big, rolled collars. Jack had learned over the week he had been here, that here close to the coast and near to the southern end of the island, the monks left their coats open, exposing their chest. When they journeyed to the tall peaks on the stormy northern coast of the island, to the eleven towers from where they garnered their namesake, they used their jackets to bundle up tight and stay warm. Corium was one of the monks who had been casting the group spell each day that encapsulated the sound or power of the spells from Jack's and Alice's training. Apparently, it kept them from revealing their position. It was similar to what Drem had done when he spoke in secret to Jack and Alice in Manefold. Though most of the spells they were casting did not carry enough power to be heard even by diligent ears, it was a precaution that Hattaway had insisted on.

“So, what do you think of it up close?” Corium mused self-assuredly as he paused on the wood-lined street at the base of the great fortress. Jack stopped dead in his tracks as he walked out of the tight alley they had just squeezed out of. The fort seemed large from across the bay, but here on the back-alley docks of the town, it dwarfed the wooden buildings and docks that went out into the marshland to the south of town. Breaking from his gawking, Jack stepped past the monk right up next to the tall, curved wall that formed the base circle of the fort.

“There are no seams...” Jack realized out loud as he ran his hand along the smooth, stone wall. “Was this made by magic?” he asked.

“Everything is magic,” Corium formed a grin on his round and neatly shaven face. “Come on,” the monk continued as he led on. Soon they had passed through one of the two entrances into the gut of the fort, down a deep tunnel that went under the thick walls. Every so often there was an arched doorway leading off to either side, to other accommodations beneath the walls. Try as he may, Jack could not find a single seam to the entire structure. The whole circular wall seemed to be carved out of a single stone itself larger twice over than Castle Rockhurst. Not only could no seams be found, but not even one mark from a chisel or other tool. Armored soldiers and even more heavily plated knights may have perused through the city and the countryside of Rauthlaus, but the fort was guarded and operated only by the monks. It was strange going through a check point, stationed by unarmed men, but Jack knew that these men needed no steel to be dangerous. The tunnel let out in the center of the circular wall to a small, open field surrounded by four stairs leading up to the top of the walls. They climbed the steps and onto the slick wall top. The fort was taller than any building in town, so the panoramic view not only took in the marsh and bay, but also overlooked the entire city and back inland. About every forty feet sat one of the long, black cylinders mounted on the edge of the wall. They sat in some sort of wooden cradle that seemed to allow them to pivot down, to either side and probably straight up. In contrast to the calm posture of the monks in the wall’s tunnels below, the ones up here were stoically busy, moving black, steel balls stacked in waist high pyramids from one side of the black cylinders to the other. There were about two monks per station, and they all moved with purpose between the steel crates, pyramids, and the large objects of war. Some went from station to station and either asked questions or gave orders to the others in foreign tongue.

“Cannon drill. I knew you would appreciate seeing this from up close,” Corium stated as he motioned to two of the black cylinders that pointed out to sea. Jack and his new acquaintance walked closer. One of the cannons was loaded from the muzzle only with one of the slick metal balls. The other had some crushed pieces of the orange gemma, that Jack saw a few days before in the roof of Hattaway’s carriage, shoved down the muzzle just before a cannon ball was added. “We take turns of course to stay in practice. About once a year we each get to practice firing one,” the monk said to Jack who looked on intently at the process.

“Incipit!” the Monk who walked in between the two stations shouted to the first team that had loaded its cannon.

“Tine!” the monk behind the cannon shouted, and produced a flame in both hands before stuffing them to the back of the cannon where there was a small, soot-covered opening at the top. He sealed his hands over the small hole that was no bigger than a pearl. A faint bit of smoke emitted from the slightly angled up opening at the other end of the barrel. “Tine leathnú!” he again shouted, this time louder as he flexed his arms and hands tightly to the black, smoking cylinder. Fire rushed out the end of the large muzzle interrupted only for a split second as the steel ball they had loaded, fired straight out giving off a heavy thud that Jack felt in his chest. The ball flew too fast to keep track of out to sea, until way past the bay, far beyond the ships that carried on around the bay and river, a large splash indicated where it fell. Before Jack could say something, in his amazement, the other duo of monks had taken to sparking a piece of flint stone to the back of their cannon near the small hole. One added a little bit of taupe orange dust to the orifice. The next time, the other struck the flint stone, it sparked, and the cannon erupted in a dirty, smoking eruption that fired its cannon ball

equally far out to sea. In the aftermath, there sat one cannon clean and one still rendering soot into the air.

“Magnificent, huh?” Corium asked again, revealing his youthful smile that dichotomized the usual stoic demeanor of his order.

“Ingenious!” Jack exclaimed and asked, “How many are there up here?”

“50 in all,” Corium answered.

“And they all can be fired with or without magic?” Jack asked. The young monk smirked for a moment. The hustle of the others on the walls calmed down, as now only the two that had fired still carried on doing some sort of cleaning. Corium motioned for Jack to follow as he walked to the wall’s edge, one cannon down from the two that had fired.

“You see that ship there?” he asked. Jack nodded looking at small skiff heading out of the mouth of the river, just south of the fort. “That ship is controlling the wind, with nothing more than timber and sewn cloth. ...See these buildings, not as large as the fort here...” he continued pointing at the teak wood structures near the fort’s base, “but someone turned trees into those houses,” he looked at Jack who looked at him curiously. “Those people there,” he pointed back to the city down a crowded alley, “Some of them love each other and entire families will grow from that love... You see, there are many ways of doing a thing, but everything is magic,” Corium concluded. Jack nodded once more, turning his gaze out to sea and considering the monk’s words carefully.

On a particularly cloudy afternoon, after the usual training of spells and the like with Taisteal, Jack found himself walking over to the cliffside between Hattaway’s manor and

the north end of the city. The green hills rolled gently from the base of the steep mountains, from the west over to the ocean, where they fell some hundred feet as black, sheer cliffs into the wave, churned water. As he walked alone in the tall and thick, green grass, he noticed a flowered thistle here and there. The plants were different, but it still reminded him of 'the tired meadow.' These were the only times in their day where he and Alice were not together. Training each morning, scheming over maps of the Sky Cap Mountains most evenings. The block house on the edge of town they were given was pleasant enough. Arturius, Taisteal, and the two from Petram each had their own room. Some nights, however, Jack and Alice had fallen asleep in the same room with Alice listening to Jack read aloud. He was certain she had no interest in listening to stories of Ru Arc de Oro, or Korin Stonefinder. She only needed him to bore her to sleep when her mind was wrestling with the few things she would not share with him. He wondered what those topics might be that she kept to herself as he neared the steep cliff, and gazed out over the frustrated and stormy abyss.

"I hoped to catch both of you here today," a voice rang out behind him that broke him from his trance. As he turned, he found that a startled Arturius had walked up behind him, yet further still behind, was Ulfric.

"Do you desire to participate in our lesson of warcraft today, instead of watching from a far?" Arturius asked Ulfric who was drawing near them. The Paladin calmed from the immediate surprise of the King, having followed the two of them so quietly out to the cliffs.

"Humbly, I have hopes of helping you teach our savior the way of the sword," Ulfric answered while stopping a few paces away from Jack and his paladin friend. There was not a single humble thing about the King's manner as he answered.

Arturius dropped the bundle of wooden training spears and swords of different lengths into the deep grass. Jack peered on at the two men and the tension between them as they faced each other. Arturius was armored as usual, but in a flat steel plate, since he had made good on his word of giving his gold-trimmed armor to Layuk, even after Hattaway made the dragon man wealthier than Jack could count in payments of gems and gold. Ulfric wore his simple wooden crown and only a grey tunic over plain clothes. He was unarmored but they both had two-handed swords slung at their waste. "...I noticed, from a far... that you are only teaching single counters," Ulfric continued adding a hint more condescension.

"That is the true stroke of a master swordsman," Arturius answered.

"Is it?... A single parry and strike require you to anticipate your opponent perfectly," Ulfric rattled back.

"Indeed," the paladin answered.

"And that can always be done?" the King mused and continued, "Show me." The slicing sound slithered through the air as both men drew their steel. Ulfric swirled his blade back and forth for a movement, while Arturius lowered his blade and broadened his stance like a statue. A couple of two-handed wooden swords clattered to the ground in between them. Jack had tossed the training swords interrupting the tension between the two proud men.

"Alice is the one with a knack for healing wounds with magic," Jack joked with no humor in his blank stare. "I can probably help with bruises though," he continued. Jack noticed Arturius glance around, wiping off a look of embarrassment. Ulfric maintained the smirk he wore since walking up. The paladin sheathed his steel sword while the King brought his sword over and handed it to Jack. It was

shockingly light, the leather handle felt delicate while the long, fullered blade seemed like it should be heavier than it was. It gleamed in Jack's hands, reflections of the light streaking through the stormy clouds overhead.

"Very well. I can still show you with this," Arturius stated, picking up the training sword and again taking a wide stance. Ulfric took a few quick steps and scooped up the wooden sword, bounding toward the paladin, making a single-handed swipe. Arturius stepped back out of range. The swipe caught nothing but air. The paladin moved like a statue, changing poses like flashes of lightning while the King took sweeping steps and swirling motions, going through many grip changes over a multitude of faint movements. Finally, he stepped in, earnestly engaging Arturius. The armored man made one quick strike, both blocking the King's attack and catching him on the shoulder with a quick pop of the wooden sword's tip. Ulfric danced to the side, obviously wincing in pain. Arturius stayed calm with no signs of celebration.

"That's good. You are fast, I'll give you that," Ulfric belittled. The two men took to circling once more just outside of range. Again, the paladin taking deliberate steps while the unarmored man bounced in and out of striking range like a finch from one branch to another, all while twisting his wooden blade from one angle to another. In a flash, he brought his sword for a stab and Arturius parried while stepping in for another master strike finish. The King darted backward, avoiding the paladin's pointed attack before knocking Arturius' blade down hard with a strike of his own. Stepping back in, he brought the wooden sword back up hard into the paladin's chest plate, causing a loud thud of wood against steel. Jack watched curiously over the two styles at play. The exchange continued. Another strike for Arturius, then two stabs landing for the King. Arturius kept his serious

statue demeanor while the King exaggerated his face along with his motions and sounds. Soon the paladin missed with another blow and the King swirled his training swords, single-handed around and toward his opponent's face.

"Sciath!!!" wailed Arturius. Ulfric's sword bounced off thin air about an inch from Arturius' right cheek. The wooden sword splintered from the impact with the invisible shield the paladin spoke into being.

"...That is something I cannot teach," Ulfric said with a chuckle as he stepped casually away from Arturius. Both men visibly relaxed under Jack's watchful eyes. It was a minute of the most brilliantly displayed combat Jack had ever seen.

"I have never seen royalty that could handle real conflict," Arturius admitted.

"If it makes you feel any better... if we had used steel, you did land the first blow," the King concluded, still wearing his confident grin. Arturius let a small smile slip through. Jack was nearly as impressed with the King's charisma as his swordsmanship. Few people seemed to level with Arturius or garner more than a flat glance from the paladin, observing their posture or armament. "So, shall we share this burden in educating the young man?" Ulfric asked, looking to Jack.

"You will have to decide which pieces from our styles work best for you, Jack. These disciplines are very different, but you will most likely be better for it," the paladin announced before asking. "Think you are you up for that?" Jack smiled back at the two men. Excitement was bubbling up in the young man. For years he was passed over by knights and soldiers alike, only training at the bow with Alice in secret. There had been a piece of him that had long desired to be one of those gleaming knights, caped in green, riding around the Dallis. He had been training with Arturius for a few days now

and knew he was highly skilled, but after watching him face an opponent of equal skill, Jack knew; nowhere in his homeland could he have learned swordplay from a better teacher.

“I would be honored twice. I am up for it,” Jack answered moving past the boyish excitement into the determined words of a man who was coming into his own. Jack stepped forward, offering the King his sword back.

“I think the honor will be ours,” Ulfric said placing one hand on Jack’s shoulder. “Keep it,” he continued. Jack’s eyes lit up even more. He looked at the gleaming blade as he held it, point up. Chocolate brown leather wrapped with a silver, spiraling inlay along the grip; the pommel was like a brass tear drop and the cross guard had a polished brass bar along with two damascus steel rings that flanked the flat sides of the blade. The blade itself had a wide fuller running full length down near the skinny point of the three-foot blade. It was weightless in Jack’s hands and so brilliant that the grass and grey sky reflected along the shimmering blade. “In the common tongue, she is called ‘feather,’” Ulfric said, looking at the sword that had captured Jack’s gaze.

“Of course, you named a sword,” Arturis scoffed as he tossed another wooden sword over to Jack. He caught the training weapon by the grip with his off hand.

Some time later, one morning Jack was musing about something his paladin friend had told him. “*You never know when love is going to reveal itself... and even a warrior knows you would have to be a fool to let it pass by,*” the words of Arturius echoed in Jack’s head. The Paladin had surprised him a few days ago as Arturius had used those words to excuse himself from sword training. Jack was moderately sure his friend was speaking about the Dryad, Pulchra, but that only brought up more questions. Alice certainly was convinced

that Arturius and Pulchra had developed a secret affection for one another. He paced back and forth in front of the stone block house they had been staying in. The air was heavy with cool mist in the early light of the morning. He could hear the others mustering inside. Jack had been up for hours before day break. He had put this off for too long and his nerves were punishing him for it. He thought of all the brave moments he had been through in the past year as he paced on the dirty, cobbled stones. One thing he had learned the stories got wrong, was how being courageous felt. It seemed to him that confidence and calm were only achievable when you knew the outcomes.

Being brave is painful, but being a coward is deadly. I cannot hide what I want for what I fear may happen. A monologue played out inside his head for only him to hear. He paused, looking up into the grey-soaked sky. He resolved in the moment to take the risk. She was his best friend after all, who else would he confide such a thing in anyway.

"You're up early," Alice said right away after swinging open the square, wooden door Jack was pacing in front of. "Poor sleep last night?" she asked while closing the door behind her, squinting in the bright grey exterior.

"Yeah. I had a lot on my mind," he answered, still looking away.

"I'm sorry," she said simply as she nudged him in the elbow with hers as she stepped beside him. "I may need to read 'super interesting' histories of the Far Continent to you tonight," she mused with a smile.

"Super interesting, huh?" he remarked, squinting back at her. Her smile grew as she glanced back at the door waiting for the others. "Would you go on a walk with me tonight?" he

asked, mustering enough courage to attack a horde of hobgoblins.

“A walk? Where to?” she asked curiously.

“Ulfric told me about a place that has a grand view in evenings,” he answered directly.

“...Sure,” she answered simply. Jack was full of an energy that he could barely keep from coming out in nervous movement. She glanced back at the door once more not paying him much attention; she seemed eager to train. That did not surprise him as she had been making great progress. He quickly pulled himself from simply admiring his friend.

“...want to eat at Barton’s beforehand?” he asked. She turned back to him with an inquisitive look. He knew the look, and that it usually meant she was about to get her way in a discussion. Taisteal opened the door behind them and stepped precariously over the threshold on his prosthetic feet before stretching up tall with a loud snap, crackling from old bones in his heavy back.

“Yeah, ok,” she agreed to Jack’s question.

“Good morning, early birds,” Taisteal greeted like a bass drum. “Eager to call more lightening today?” he asked Alice with a glimmer of excitement in his gold eyes. She also carried a muted enthusiasm, turning from the inquisition she was preparing for Jack.

“No... we should just go for a run today,” she answered straight faced. A moment passed as she glanced down at his legs. His stone glare at her softened into a deep laugh. He began to take a few awkward steps before he loosened up and walked, as if his inanimate feet were his own flesh and blood. She followed along while looking back at Jack

who also began to follow. “Why do you think the lighting I call is so much brighter than that which Jack calls?” she played out the question. Taisteal laughed again.

“Obviously because you are a powerful sorceress, and he is not,” Taisteal jested. Alice giggled in delight at the priest and her ganging up to tease Jack. After beginning to walk through town, heading north to their training spot, the big priest turned and winked at Jack with a knowing look.

“Don’t worry Jack. Everything is going to go exactly how you hope it will today. I do occasionally see the future you know,” Taisteal mused calmly. Jack smiled deeply to himself as he followed behind the other two.

“Yeah! You have never explained how either?” Alice protested quickly, following up.

“Some things are mysteries to us all,” the large man replied as light as he could in his heavy voice.

Chapter 13: “A Flame in the Darkness”

The morning sun was just peaking over the long horizon of indigo. Fog was quickly rising and burning away in the early light. In the thickly grassed cliff overlooking the Rauthlaus bay, where they had spent the night, Alice and Jack lay tightly wound together, covered by a wool blanket that Jack had brought with him up the road. She stirred slightly against his sleeping arms around her as she peered out from the soft, grey covering into the light. His calm breathing

behind her was as comfortable as the streams of warm sunlight that struck them, sneaking over the edge of the world. A creaking and squeaking sound soon rumbled down the road behind them. Jack jumped awake and Alice tucked her head under the blanket hiding. A small carriage slowly bumbled past them on the road down the mountain. Jack was bare from the waist up as he sat up covered by the blanket that his friend was completely balled up and hiding under. Jack did not know the man driving the cart behind the single mule, but he was sure his embarrassment was brighter than the sunrise.

“Starting a family, I see young fellow,” the man with a big nose and ruddy cheeks jested as he continued to guide his load right on past the young duo without slowing.

“Tell me that is no one we know...” Alice wiggled out beneath the wool.

“...I have never heard one of the monks speak before...” Jack said with his best attempt at sounding surprised. Alice shot her head out from under the blanket looking at the carriage to see some farmer driving the carriage who was a stranger to them both. She quickly pulled her gaze up to her friend who could not hold his laughter any longer. Her frustration quickly evaporated as she found the predicament equally humorous. “I suppose, Taistal will be waiting on us,” Jack followed up after their spell of mutual giggling subsided.

“I am surprised we were left uninterrupted all night,” she added.

“Disappointed?” he asked as sheepishly as his earlier joke. She placed a hand on his cheek as their eyes became like tethers into one another. She shook her head and smiled. Her radiance was becoming silhouetted by the rising sun

behind her. Jack was taken by the sight, so much so that he wished he could focus on all the aspects of beauty before him all at once. His survey of beauty was interrupted though, by a disturbing occurrence far out to sea. He felt within him as if a fine wine was having saltwater poured into it. Alice watched with delight that degraded as she saw the lines of Jack's face go from giddy rhapsody to serious concern. She quickly looked out to sea to find out what had caught his attention in such a negative way. "Out to sea, just south of the sun," he spoke. After a moment of glaring and eyes adjusting to looking into the morning light, she saw it. A dark spot forming on the horizon far out over the water.

"What is that?" she asked. They both looked on in dubious focus. The small, dark spot that started smaller than what may have been the shadows cast by a ship's sail, grew like a gathering storm. Only this dark spot was not high into the sky, but low lying and spreading over the water. A tendril of the darkness began to grow toward the Island in a slow streak. Jack's stomach completely felt as if it were turning as a memory from an old book rushed to the forefront of his mind. He sprung to his feet.

"Get dressed!" he spat as he found and began pulling up his trousers. Alice quickly began finding her effects while pulling around the large blanket trying to not be exposed completely.

"Jack, do you know what that thing is?" she blurted as she pulled her blouse down overhead.

"Maybe... In an old book –" he started.

"Of course!" she exclaimed while racing to tie off the long laces of her tall, thin leather boots.

“One Taisteal lent me years ago... Leave it...” he added as she began to roll the blanket now fully dressed in her olive, split riding skirt, teal silk belt and dark blue blouse. She tossed it down and looked at Jack as he strapped his sword around his waist. “There was a dragon, *Dorchadas*, that was always cloaked in darkness... So much that it could blot out the sun!” he finished. She glared out at the growing dark spot. The two of them set about running back down the mountain road.

“Hopefully, Taisteal will still be at the house,” she said as she hustled over the loose gravel surface, trying to keep up with Jack’s tall strides.

In town just before dawn had come, Taisteal stood outside of the small house framed out of large, square-cut stones. He had spent the night alone for the first time since leading Jack and Alice into the forest toward Cole’s Crossing. He knew right where Jack and Alice were resting, and had a good assumption that wherever *Arturius* was, you could also find *Pulchra*. He stretched up tall in the misty air of the first lights in the morning. He was happy that his young companions had found some satisfaction in the midst of this journey. He knew the journey ahead into the biting cold of the far north would not be an easy time to find comfort. Looking down at his prosthetics, he smirked. He was finally comfortable himself, even after losing his feet. Now in their place were leather-covered wooden soles. Most of the brass was covered by the long pants he wore underneath his tan robe. His elated smirk sobered up with the realization that soon they would need to be back underway and off this island refuge. He shook his head slightly.

“...a month ago, a dryad had to convince me to slow down... now I dread moving on,” he considered lowly, out loud. A snicker came from somewhere nearby. His gold eyes shot up from the dirt street, glancing left and right. A few others had

taken to the street in the early morning on the way to their respective workplaces. A couple of ladies headed out of the city. It had been a man's voice; he knew it did not come from them. A fisherman in the distance heading east was too far away. A man in plain clothes and a pale, balding head was a dozen paces toward the city's center from him. He glared at the pudgy, poorly dressed man who stopped and turned to face Taisteal. The face was that of a simple, middle-aged man that he did not recognize, but the eyes were a dead giveaway. Dark and beady, copper eyes that lazily condescended everything they saw. The man turned to continue walking away. Taisteal started after the man taking one heavy step after the other.

"Bodach!" Taisteal shouted like the beat of a bass drum.

The man immediately burst into a laughter familiar to the priest's ears and began to sprint away into the city. Taisteal pursued like a charging bull. The man moved like nothing; he appeared swift and light. Soon they were coming onto the main street where their race had caught the attention of a couple knights on the corner of an alley, and locals that were beginning to crowd up on their way down to the water.

"What's the matter with you, Homer?" one barefoot and older dock worker shouted as the man Taisteal pursued pushed between him and a younger man.

"Pp P Priest is b ba bad bad man," he fumbled out some words with an innocent look about him as he continued past the bulk of the crowd in the street. Looking from where that man had come, they saw Taisteal charging at full speed.

"Hold up, newcomer," the older man spoke up at the charging priest, assuming Taisteal would comply. The large

man swatted the older fisherman to the ground, to the pure shock of his younger companion. The two knights shot up to full attention, one drew his sword, and they sped after Taisteal who ruthlessly pursued the balding man. All four squeezed through an alley and onto the wooden docks that ran between the imposing stone fort, the marshlands next to the river and the teak buildings on the south side of town. Another fisherman, this one a tall, red-headed man with broad shoulders, saw the balding man running and grabbed him by the arm.

“Homer, what are you so excited for today...” the gruff voiced fisherman was cut off by the balding man Taisteal had called Bodach.

“Dùisg mo sheirbhiseach! Aithne do d' mhaighstir!” Bodach yelled at the man.

“How are you talking so fast?” the tall man asked in surprise while he held onto Bodach’s arm.

“He is not who you think! Shut his mouth!” Taisteal yelled, like firing cannons booming while clacking across the wood planks toward the duo, still followed closely by the two heavily armored knights. Bodach turned his beaded, copper eyes that glowed like they were embossed in a forge’s fire onto Taisteal and continued speaking.

“A h-uile duine leis an do chuir mi seachad an ùine sin,” the words flowed out of the pudgy man like hot steel from a foundry. “Dúisigh agus marbh ar son do mháistir!” As Bodach finished speaking, the tall man’s steel blue eyes glossed over a dull amber hue. He waddled for a second before looking over to see the large priest.

“Kill for the master!” the fisherman yelled in a crazed slur. He swung forward toward Taisteal, attacking with his

thin fishing rod like a whip. Taistéal ignored the incoming blow across his face and ran a straight right cross into the glossed-over man's temple. The tall man fell backward, out cold like a tall wood plank falling on the dock. Steel clanged behind the priest. He looked to find one of the knights wildly and unskillfully swinging his sword against the other who deflected the attacks with his shield.

"Stop Jonas!" the competent knight yelled while his assailing friend shouted.

"Kill for the master!" in a garble of barely coherent phrasing. Taistéal closed his eyes for just a moment before he outstretched a hand and spoke softly.

"Coinnigh Duine," the mad knight froze solid in an instance. His accomplice, who had been doing all he could not to be driven off the dock and into the marsh grasses from his friend's blows, lowered his shield and looked to Taistéal.

"The one this one called Homer..." the large priest said motioning to the knocked-out man behind him, "go tell anyone in your ranks not mad, to find and kill him!" The man looked back at his friend frozen in place, who's yellowed-over eyes still tracked him with a wild gaze.

Looking back to Taistéal, the knight still in control of his senses asked, "He's just a feeble old man... what was that he was saying?" the knight spoke with a confused gasp.

"Just a façade he is wearing. That 'feeble old man' is Bodach, the Copper Dragon!" Taistéal answered before quickly turning to consider which way Bodach would have fled, since there was no obvious sign of which alley or door he may have fled into. The knight looked bewildered before he left the priest and his frozen friend behind to jog toward the stone fort. Sounds of chaos began erupting from the center of

town, sounds of fighting and mad shouting. Taisteal hurried across the wooden-planked southern street, to the cobblestoned alley, and back out into the main street. Some outnumbered knights scrambled through a wild scene, trying to stop about one third of the people in the street from killing the other two thirds and themselves! They attempted to keep from killing but soon their swords were red with the blood of people they had known for years as friends. Of the people who were unaffected by Bodach's madness, most of them fled from the larger buildings away from the bay, some attempted to fight back and defend their friends and loved ones. Taisteal stood still at the edge of the madness thinking over his next move. His gold eyes scanned the scene for Jack or Alice.

A trumpet blared nearby to the west. Ulfric, King of the Island, was leading a column of knights, lesser armed soldiers, and a couple of the monks through the retreating crowd. The group that had gone mad, coalesced into a single group surrounding two knights who had survived, bloodying their swords. Taisteal jumped in midline with Ulfric and his makeshift unit. The maddened crowd leapt wildly toward their King.

"Kill for the master!" more cried as they recklessly attacked with open, grasping hands. Ulfric skipped back, drawing a plain two-handed sword. The rest of his column did the same and quickly fanned out. They all instinctively tried not to kill the oncoming onslaught, but not all prevailed as the intensity of the assailing crowd was such that they would attempt any means available to harm the knights near the front of the column, biting at their necks, gripping and attempting to rip off the plates of armor and chainmail, and bashing, breaking fists against their helmets. One mad man with a small dagger plunged his blade between the cracks of one knight's armor, and then through the tunic of another soldier.

Ulfric strode around the attackers carefully, cracking heads with the blunt side of his blade in hopes of only stopping the attackers. Corium and one other monk were rolling into opponents and sweeping legs. Two mad women fell from their attacks and were grabbed up by stronger soldiers. Corium slipped past the stab of the red dagger that had just taken two soldiers' lives and constricted his arm around the man's shoulder and neck. He brought his hands in like a praying motion and squeezed; in only seconds the man went limp.

"Codladh..." bellowed Taisteal in a calm juxtaposition of the chaotic moment, as he pushed through to the front of the action from within the ranks of soldiers that had assembled with their King. "Codladh. Codladh agus scíthe," he continued with open palms, walking down into the once seething crowd of madness. The few that remained alive or conscious after the attack from the soldiers slowed to a halt, dropping to their knees. He walked further amongst the two dozen or so mad ones still active. "Faigh suaimhneas agus suaimhneas," the large priest finished as the once wild people laid their heads down on the street's stones, like babes after a belly full of milk would lie in a manger.

"What is going on!?" Ulfric demanded of the large priest with none of his usual poise. "What is happening to my people?" he further demanded from amongst the bewildered and still shocked assemblage of warriors. Taisteal strode back over, close enough to the King to speak low enough where the whole crowd could not hear.

"Dragons, Ulfric. A spell of the insidious, Bodach. He must have been hiding amongst us for some time," Taisteal spoke calmly with a resolve like thick stone.

“...Hiding in a different form?” the King guessed. Taisteal nodded his head in simple agreement. “Where is he now?” he asked of the priest.

“Some locals called him, Homer; I lost him between the docks and the —” Taisteal was cut short by a deafening blast out over the water behind him. Immediately followed up by a heavy grumble that echoed over the bay like waves of sounds slowly crashing across the town. Taisteal turned to see what Ulfric had looked past him to gaze upon. Down the wide two-lane stone-laid street that ran all the way to the two large piers, stretching out into the bay, on the horizon of the rising sun rose a terrible sight. A growing dark blot covering the south third of the sun, and a glistening red silhouette of a mighty flying serpent with three pairs of wings beating through the air just to the north of the darkness. It was nearly two miles out, but the size of the red, flying beast was already dreadfully apparent. Ulfric looked on with a gapping mouth and stunned, blue eyes made all the brighter by the light of the rising sun. The large priest, towering over him, looked on in a muted disgust that barely registered through the slight squint of his gaze and upturn in his lips.

“...Two dragons appear in my days?” the King asked with little energy behind his hopeless sounding words.

“No. Three,” Taisteal added matching his tone to the revolt on his face. “There is another one in that void of darkness,” he continued.

“...Are they after the vessels?!?” Ulfric asked like a whip’s crack, stepping in closer to the large priest and putting a firm hand on the large man’s right arm.

“Likely,” the priest answered, dropping even deeper in tone.

“Corium! Soldier, you also!” Ulfric turned to the monk and one other who quickly slipped up next to them. “To the Stone! Have all able hands ready as many cannons as the garrison can muster and shoot anything that flies! Anyone not carrying a bow, follow the monks to the fort and follow their orders!” he rallied in a loud voice. Quickly, Corium was on his way, and more than half the assembled warriors were following them south through alleys to the fort. “Well, get on with that plan of yours!” he turned summoning a mountain’s share of bravery, shouting at Taisteal.

“Ulfric...” Taisteal began with a perplexation of compassion against his frustration.

“I allowed them to stay on my shores, old man. This was my risk to take,” he barked at the heavy man standing half a head taller. “Now, get them below the sea in the Dryads ship and make this worth it!” he finished.

“Stay spread out... aim for the mouth and the thin part of the wings,” Taisteal replied.

“Farewell, friend of my ancestors. Alright, spread out into the alleys,” Ulfric began shouting to his men with bows who remained with him. The large priest sprinted off to the north. “You, and you!” Ulfric singled out two younger, unarmored soldiers. “To the barracks and the stables, call for the knight commander...” The orders of the King fell out of hearing as Taisteal made it through the nearly empty streets of Rauthlaus, back toward the house he and his young friends had called home this past month. The big man moved with long heavy strides quickly along on his creaking and straining prosthetics.

Out at sea, in a small skiff, a woman dressed in bright yellow yelled to the young man frantically working with the riggings of the single mast of their ship.

“No fool! Cut the lines, we don’t have time to downhaul!” the woman cried. The panicked sweaty face of the young man looked over the woman, steering the rutter in a hard turn inland. His eyes widened as he saw the serpentine, red glisten of scales and wings descending with speed in the distance. “Move!” she shouted letting the rutter go and pulled a knife to cut the lines that held the sail in place. The eastward wind strung out the loose sails as she quickly took a port seat and grabbed an oar. “Come on, boy!” she squelched, now facing the rear of the boat and looking at the red horror approaching. The dark-haired young man sprang to the seat across from her and they rowed frantically. They only made a few strokes before the beating of the six-winged dragon was blasting sharp mist from the sea’s surface across them. The dragon turned its long snout and head sideways, looking at the frantic duo from a deep, yellow eye as it passed maybe fifty feet overhead with speed. A long tail dropped like a whip, breaking the mast of their skiff overhead as it passed by. Splinters flew like shrapnel, impaling the young lad.

The dragon took a wide span with all six wings at the same time, and gained altitude as it closed on several other small boats and ships in the bay. As a sound hearkened from the bellows of the beast, it echoed across the water of the bay a crackling fire. Deep, red flames fell like as a deluge from a waterfall out of the mouth of the beast as it flew circles around the helpless crafts. Sailors jumped overboard to no avail as the hot streams of fire fell on each vessel, until the sea around the doomed, boiled from the heat. Two ships destroyed, then a third and a fourth; the bay was a boiling grave.

Back along the city’s coastline, off a small, wooded dock that went south off one of the great stone piers, Pulchra was frantically battening hatches on the smooth topped ship

that had no mast and no sails. It was one long hull, about twice as long as the trident, and shaped like a whale with no fins except for on the very rear. Arturius stood unarmored with his long sword drawn, standing at the edge of the ship's deck. Layuk stood on the dock facing down the paladin's blade.

"We are not leaving them!" the paladin called strong and true at the shirtless and brawny dragon man. Layuk tossed off one of the dock lines and stepped to the last one still connecting the ship to the dock. The paladin quickly followed the large, scaled bipedal man to the rope and plunged the tip of his sword between Layuk's clawed hand and the rope. The sword was already painted red from the dock hands who had gone mad earlier. With his clawed fingers, he attempted to swat Arturius' blade away, but the paladin withdrew the edge so that he swatted only air. Quickly he flew the point up to the chin of the Taul.

"You really court death, don't you, paladin? The city has gone mad and that's a god attacking those ships! Stand aside you pious twit!" Layuk yelled standing up straight. "This dryad and me are leaving now, with or without you!" he continued.

"This is the only ship that can leave this island, and we are not leaving them," Arturius replied with a calm force that ignored the chaos that was taking place over the burning sea in the bay. The roar of the dragon's fire grew louder amongst the two facing off on the edge of the submersible ship.

"We are out of time, Arturius," Pulchra said in a much-rattled tone as she approached behind the paladin. He turned, placing one foot toward her and keeping one aimed at Layuk. Twisting the blade pommel to her and the point toward the dragon man. He seemed ready to attack either.

The dryad continued attempting to put a calming hand on the paladin. "...If we dove the ship and hid it underwater... I could swim to shore and look –" she continued before being interrupted.

"Shove off!" Jack yelled as he led Alice and the heavily clanking Taisteal down the wooden dock.

"Thank the One!" Arturius shouted as he relaxed his sword. Layuk swung the last line free just as the three approached. Pulchra quickly dove into the last open hatch toward the bow. The ship yawed away from the dock as they began jumping from the dock to the Ocoee's deck. Taisteal's prosthetic slipped on the wet, curved wood of the ship. Jack instinctually turned to grab the large man. They both began to fall over the edge. Alice slowed on the deck to simply waive her hand in a motion from them to herself, and they were tossed from nearly falling overboard back onto the deck's center by a gust of wind.

"Come on," she yelled before looking to find a surprised Arturius who had paused in the threshold of the port. The water on both sides of the long ship rolled with big air bubbles. The ship began to sink. The three scrambled below deck and Jack pulled down the hatch as he hopped down last. The wooden hatch was wedge-shaped and its wax-coated edges were pulled hard into their seats by the metal screw that tightened the door once it was shut. Lit only by the amber glow of gemma stone lights they watched as small water droplets slowly began leaking around the hatch. They were submerged.

"Have you mastered the ship's functions yet?" Taisteal called down the hall to the two shipmates who were scrambling about below.

“Richer that I want to be! Right, cripple!?!” Layuk yelled from the rear of the craft. “Pulchra, guide us as close to the sea’s floor as you can,” he yelled again.

“Stay near the hatch, all three of you,” Taisteal yelled as he moved down the one central hall toward the stern. As he shambled down the tight corridor, the crackle of Layuk’s fire breath could be heard. A whirling sound soon arose, and the ship lurched forward.

Back over the surface, the cannons rang out their dull thuds. One after another, smoking streaks soared across the bay toward the beast, spewing fire. Most on the water had already been decimated but a few small rigs nearer to the piers remained with frantically rowing crews. The first shot narrowly missed the long, large creature as it stopped to hover over a larger ship. It reared in an angry triple thump of its three sets of wings as the projectile flew by. The follow up shots from the fort came swift and numerous like rapid beats of a great drum, but the dragon’s speed made it a hard target once it started moving. The serpent quickly flew up high and then dropped back low for great speed as it spanned out over the city. When it passed over the main street, a volley of arrows few up in a streaking chorus. A few hit and reflected off the large-scaled underbelly as if made of shields; only one found a good purchase sinking into the fleshier part at the base of one wing. The beast rolled out a roar and quickly cut a tight circle landing atop some of teak buildings next to the main street. Cannons were quick to turn along the black, smoking walls, and the hoard of aggressive monks and the King’s soldiers twisted them into adjustment to fire at the landed monstrosity. They quickly set into loading their barrels. Nearly all 50 cannons were being operated and most had already been fired once.

“Surround it!” Ulfric shouted to his terrified men. A few fled down alleys but most, some three dozen, took to running to various vantages between the buildings with their brave King. “Get around the beast! Fill it with arrows!” he continued to give charge as he pulled and set loose an arrow that flew true and bounced, spinning off the brow of the dragon. It quickly turned to see the King in his finely trimmed armor in the distance. Ulfric and the two others right next to him, leapt behind the cover of a building’s corner as a wash of fire danced down the alley where they had just stood. The dragon stepped with its four sleek legs from rooftop to rooftop heading in the King’s direction. Brave soldiers took quick shots at it before it turned to spit a ball of wet flame that crashed down where they had shot from. Many of the wood buildings were catching up in the blaze. In only a few seconds, the dragon was over the alley Ulfric stood in. When the beast peered over them, it saw three brave soldiers with bows pulled to the ready. “Hold!” the king commanded. A quick moment passed as the beast glared at them standing overhead, ignoring the arrows that bounced off it. The jaws slipped back as if to make a smile that stayed closed yet revealed a staggering overlap of long teeth protruding out from its lips. Ulfric took his shot. It glanced out of the corner of the beast’s right eye. A snort of anger and a shake of its head was all that was produced from the shot. The creature reached quick and deep into the alley with a long arm and a terrible clawed hand. The King dove to the ground but one of his faithful was clasped and pierced by the dragon’s claws. The ringing of cannons sounded out once more. As the brave King rolled over to look up at the dragon, it dropped his friend’s body before reaching for the King himself, he saw a cannon’s blast hit the beast. Several cannon balls in rapid succession railed into the red creature’s body. The dragon howled a wild roar as it attempted to rise into the air, beating

all its wings, swiftly producing a torrent of dust and ash in the alley the King laid in. Several shots whizzed past, missing. Another hit tearing a whole through the thin part of one wing, showering the King beneath in a bloody spay.

In the stone fort, cheering and yelling sounded, as the monks continued to load cannons. Some barrels just primed and ready, took aim at the wounded creature attempting to rise. On the other side of the round wall, cannons pumped heavy rounds out into the dark void that had seemed to have stopped about two thirds of a mile away from the fort, out over the sea. Splashes could be heard from within the darkness as the projectiles disappeared into the black. In the center of the fort behind the circular wall, Homer or Bodach, walked out of one of the dome-topped doorways with a wicked smile. One monk noticed him and grabbed a bow staff, yelling for the others over the cannon fire to no avail. As the fearless man whirled the staff and charged the simple looking man, Homer leaned down onto all fours and a deep rumble, erupted in the fort. He quickly stretched out and grew, changing to a taupe color and then producing scales that grew rapidly into a coat of copper shields that covered the beast, Bodach. The approaching monk was squashed by the heavy drop of a front paw. His two bat-like wings stretched up high like tall, great sails sticking out of the fort. In his true form, the copper dragon barely fit in the central courtyard of the fort. Before the cannons atop the fort's wall could land, more shots into the bleeding and fleeing red serpent, Bodach, exhaled. The entirety of the round fort erupted into a rolling yellow blaze that went up into the sky in a column of bright flame. Some soldiers were able to leap from the walls before the flames lashed out over them, but most were scorched where they stood.

“The stone!” Ulfric cried out as he looked at the column of fire that rose over the heights of the buildings. It quickly subsided into a tower of dark smoke and soot.

“The fort has never fallen! What do we do?” the knight who survived near the King asked in panic. A startling growl echoed through the city. Ulfric instinctually drew the sword from his side, dropping his bow. As he entered the main street, so did a few other soldiers who ran along behind him. Looking for the source of the insidious deep rumble, he looked to the sea but saw only darkness. The void had come quickly to swallow up everything but a few buildings between the King and itself. A washing rush of water sounded in the void, followed by heavy pounding steps that shook the flame-riddled buildings behind the King.

“Run, Liam,” the king commanded quickly as he raised his blade high overhead before bringing it back down with the ricasso next to his right cheek.

“Never, my lord!” Liam, the knight nearest to him replied, matching the King’s broad and brave stance.

“Behind the stables, regroup and take any survivors into the forest,” Ulfric insisted with his voice mellowing out closer to his charmed demeanor he carried most days. The darkness moved closer along with more heavy thuds. The King said nothing more, only stared into the void. Liam stammered for a moment and then began to flee as other knights had already taken to flight behind them.

“Yes, sir,” he fumbled as he ran. The remaining soldiers followed; one began protesting at the lot of them for abandoning the King. Soon the darkness engulfed Ulfric and he felt heat in front of him. He could see nothing, not even the sword in his hands. One more heavy step sounded mere

feet in front of him, before a hot and terrible voice spoke in front of and above the King.

“What is this that my eyes see. A King with brave words... and deeds,” the voice leaved in a rumble.

“Leave my shores! Worthless!” Ulfric railed into the darkness.

“No one commands me, young King of the Island,” the voice replied with hot air falling around Ulfric. The King took a long swing with his blade up and forward. It met only air.

“You are just a servant of the Great Ghost. Leave worm!” he said regaining his footing.

“The Ghost is only a whisper. I am here, in flesh... in fire,” the voice in the darkness answered with an intensifying heat throughout the void.

“You will never find them!” the King shouted trying to keep his courage while his eyes wetted with tears.

“Them?” the voice rasped a rumble like a malicious slide of rocks down a cliff. Ulfric bit his frightful tongue not to speak. He felt hot breath on his front and swung again and again stepping forward.

“So, the false god has found... them,” inquired the voice as if it began to think unto itself.

“Show yourself, coward... Show yourself, wretch!” Ulfric continued to step forward, swinging a tight swing of his blade each step. He tripped over something like a broken plank of wood in the complete darkness. It was on fire! The object he tripped over sent flames curling off it and onto the King. Yet, he could not even see the flames as they burned his shin, thigh and hand. Ulfric sprang back to his feet in pain and

anger, tossing the blade to his off-hand and swinging in another direction. "You are only a beast, reveal yourself!" he raged with tears making paths down his ash covered face.

"You wish to see?" the darkness recited in a great hiss after ignoring the fumbling King for a moment. Ulfric stopped flailing around. His shoulders slumped and he lowered his sword.

"Yes," Ulfric answered. A moment passed in the darkness.

"Behold my splendor!" The voice in the darkness rang out as the void receded within itself allowing some light in its center. Revealed was a great, black-scaled face with a broad, angular snout. Nostrils flared and lips quivered as the dragon pulled in great sums of air in its deep breath, while raising its head high to look down its nose at the mortal man. Twice as large or larger than the red dragon and with a head adorned with dark, tall spikes that made a crown. All surrounding two giant, gold and knowing eyes with round pupils like that of a man. "Lasair anns an Dorchadas," the dragon spoke calmly as Ulfric's armor and sword began to glow red with heat. He dropped his sword and in agony attempted to pull at the plates of glowing steel on his chest. He yelled a guttural blow that ascended in pain. Leather straps and cloth caught fire and the mighty King's ivory skin cracked, darkened and peeled as he fell, crumpled and shaking on the ground. The line of elected Kings was ended. The darkness soon regrouped, pulling all light out of the area around the dragon, and once again blanketing the scene in an utter void.

On board the Ocoee, now gliding swiftly through the deep indigo water near the sea's floor, Jack and Arturius still kept watch on the hatch above the center of the ship's hallway. Jack could not tell if he and Arturius were simply

watching the hatch slowly leak salty water in intermittent drops to the floor, or waiting for some new horror to break through after them. He could clearly see Arturius' sword was coated in human red. He considered himself lucky that Alice and himself were able to slip through the chaos with Taisteal to the ship without having to kill. The large priest had taken to the boiler room with Layuk. Apparently the two had the heating rods hot as designed. The turbines whirled loudly, and the ship pushed through the deep faster than most sail-powered ships on the surface. Alice had taken up behind Pulchra at the very front. The dryad guided the ship with two small wheels and a series of brass valves on the dash around them. One small porthole, shaped like a diamond and fitted with glass so thick it distorted the view, gave a little insight as to what was ahead. The water was dark and the sea floor a light grey, dotted with irregular rocks and sparse strings of long weeds that reached up toward the surface. After a moment, Alice slammed a tight fist against the low wood ceiling with a face that seemed as hot as the boilers that powered their ship.

"Are we really running again while others stand and fight!?" she protested. Pulchra glanced at her but for a bit before focusing forward out the little window again. Alice huffed and marched down the hall to her friend and her love. "Are they dying for us?" she demanded, softening her question only slightly. Jack was hunting for words to say but also considering if he should agree with Alice's outrage.

"It will be good for you to keep that fire in your heart, chosen one," Arturius said as if proclaiming something religious. She raised an eyebrow in inquisition. He rotated his sword over horizontal and pulled out a black cloth to wipe off the blood. Jack watched Alice closely as her face broadened to reveal some empathy. "We may all need your candor and

resolve to keep our bravery where we are going now,” the paladin added. He sheathed his sword and started to the back of the ship where Taisteal was. Pausing for a quick moment to look over his shoulder and admit, “I will need it.” The tall man walked away as if he was walking away from a defeat.

“At least we are going together,” Jack spoke up after a somber moment. Alice looked her lifelong friend and love in the eyes before taking his hand. Her face twinged with a slant of resolve. “Together,” she nodded. They were no longer the young inexperienced chosen ones, plucked from lives they were dropped into. Now, they are brave and capable, ready to rise to the challenges life has in store for them. In the Ocoee, with their companions, they moved steadily on, following the ocean floor like a submerged arrow. Heading northeast, to the ice and stone of the world’s north most mountains and perhaps, to The Door in the Mountain.

To be concluded in “The Door in The Mountain: Ascension of Fire”