

The old, grizzled drover and his mount guided the sell-sword and her stallion down from the steep mountain passage into the barren valley. The intermittent gusts of wind and rain slapping against the hood of the sell-sword's cloak told her that the rage of the Northlands' storm season was coming a full month earlier than its usual late autumn arrival. It promised to make getting back out of the valley just as treacherous as the trip to the valley, if she even made it that far.

The drover looked back over his shoulder periodically, a grim look on his face, as the pair picked their way to the valley's base. He knew her purpose for being there, and she knew this old friend of her father's did not approve. Once at the bottom, the drover turned his horse to face hers and studied her for a moment. She pushed back her cloak hood, uncovering her dark hair, and studied him with gray eyes that matched the storm clouds above. She knew what he was going to say.

"This is where I leave ye, Aeryn Ravane." He squinted at her and grimaced in the face of another biting gust of wind. "I don' feel good 'bout it. Yer father wouldn' approve, ye know."

"This was what he wanted," she replied. She had hired Phineas because he knew her father and knew his way through the Black Mountains and past some of the recent rockslides the locals in Valis warned her of. She had not hired him to lecture her.

He shook his head. "Once, mayhap, as a young man. I think he'd disapprove o' his only daughter takin' up this foolish idea of breaking the curse in his stead. I only agreed to take ye here to this gods-damned place because I knew no one else would, and ye'd come anyhow on yer own. Ye're just as damned stubborn as he was, and it's like to get ye killed."

Aeryn smiled slightly at the backhanded compliment. She pushed her cloak aside so that she could untie a pouch attached to her belt and nudged her red-brown stallion closer to him. "As agreed, the rest of your payment. Thank you for your help. May you have safe passage back."

The drover took the coins and said, "Don' thank me. It jus' makes leavin' ye here all the harder." Phineas looked sidelong at the rest of the valley. "I don't expect ye to make it out o' here alive, honest. Even if ye manage to set foot in those caverns, ye'll be dead like all the rest 'fore you. Likely, I won' get to spend this 'fore bad happens to me, as well."

"Believe what you wish. I put no stock in superstition."

"That's what they all say, whens they come here lookin' to test that curse." Phineas looked down at her horse. "Ye leavin' the stallion? I can take it back with me to Valis, if ye'd like."

She shook her head. "No, thank you. Fare thee well, Phineas." She tried to move their farewell along. She wanted to be on her way, for good or ill.

"I'll have a drink to the memory of yer father and ye tonight, Aeryn, if I live so long. Luck be with ye." The old drover kicked his horse into a gallop back toward the path up the mountainside.

Aeryn watched him retreat for a moment and then turned her attention to the wide, windswept valley surrounding her, a vague sense of anxiety prickling in her stomach. The Valley of Death seemed a much better name to her now that she was looking at the place once known as Night Valley. The long-ago massacre, and all

the mysterious deaths that followed, were not the only reasons for the renaming, she suspected. Most plant life, with the exception of some scrubby bushes and short, tortured-looking trees, seemed unwilling to grow in the valley.

She frowned as she surveyed the valley, looking for a suitable place to leave Rowan. This was the only thing she had been unable to plan ahead of time. She decided that leaving him near one of the trees was best, and she turned him in the direction of the tree closest to the entrance to the caverns. He walked slowly, as though he, like the drover, felt anxious just being in the valley. This uncharacteristic behavior had started the moment they left Valis the day before, and she wondered what had gotten into him. His strange mood did little to reassure her that her quest would end any differently than those of the adventurers and treasure hunters who came before her seeking to break the curse on the Black Caverns and unlock its secrets.

Aeryn pulled Rowan to a halt next to one of the low trees and dismounted. She draped his reins over a branch of the tree, not needing to tie him to it, and then opened her saddlebags. She removed an apple, a heavy blanket, and a short length of rope. She draped the blanket over the stallion to shield him from as much of the rain as possible and loosely secured the blanket with the rope so that it did not blow away. Rowan whickered at Aeryn, and she offered him the apple. He neatly bit it in half.

She smiled and patted his rain-dampened neck. She told him, "I'm sorry to leave you in such an inhospitable place, my friend. Father likely would've scolded me for doing so, but I'm afraid I have no choice in the matter. I cannot risk something happening to you in the caverns if my plan doesn't work. I couldn't forgive myself for that."

Aeryn offered the rest of the apple to Rowan, and he devoured it. She stroked his head one last time and then said, "If the weather worsens, or I don't return before sundown, get yourself out of here. Find your way to someplace better."

The horse nudged her shoulder with his head, and Aeryn could not help but feel he understood her. Rowan was her father's horse before he became hers, and her father always said Rowan was smarter than some humans. Aeryn did not disagree. She knew he could get his own reins loose if he needed to, so she tried not to worry about him.

Aeryn untied a leather pack that hung to the side of her saddlebags and slung it over her shoulder, next to the pair of sword sheaths on her back. She turned away and trekked up the side of Nightstone Peak. Rowan neighed behind her, but she kept walking without looking back.

She picked out her destination on the mountainside without any trouble. The entrance to the caverns was not well-hidden. Her pulse quickened the closer she came to the boulder that served as the Black Caverns' door. She felt the weight of all those who died in the valley and in the caverns before her and it slowed her steps.

When she stopped in front of the boulder, Aeryn gently bit her lower lip. Try as she might to relax, her stomach tightened. She reached under the clasp of her cloak to draw out a small amulet with a ruby at its center, hanging from a sturdy silver chain. The elf from whom she got the amulet simply called it "the key." The amulet came at a high cost, and she hoped it was worth the price she paid. Trion admitted it might not work for her, since it was created for his son alone, and there was a chance the amulet would reject her. If so, she would not know until it was too late to turn back. Tynan's curse on the caverns remained strong more than a century after its inception.

Aeryn stared at the closed entrance of the caverns, hesitant still to test her fate. The wind gusted behind her and blew more rain at her and strands of long hair into her eyes. She shook off her fear. She smoothed her hair

back from her eyes and stepped forward to lay her hand on the boulder. She read the inscription on the back of the amulet aloud and then offered a silent prayer to Morghell, protector of the dead, that the curse did not immediately strike her down for what she had come to do.

A deep rumble heralded the opening of the entrance, and the boulder rolled back into a recess inside the caverns. Its absence revealed a black hole. No light penetrated the caverns. Again, Aeryn hesitated. Many before her had reached this point—an intonation to open the caverns' entrance, different from the one on the back of the amulet, was common knowledge among adventurers. However, of those who went in, none came back out.

Aeryn closed her eyes and stepped into the darkness of the caverns. Solid ground met her boots. She opened her eyes again and found herself looking down a corridor lit by torches. She took another step forward. Nothing stopped her, and no pit opened below her. Aeryn allowed herself a moment of relief. Behind her, the boulder rumbled back into place and sealed the exit with a sharp crack of stone on stone. The sound echoed down the corridor in front of her.

With the daylight behind her cut off, Aeryn could see better by the light of the torches. Their flames burned low, as though they were somehow aware their master had passed on long ago, and this saddened them. The sepulchral silence inside was broken only by the sound of her breathing and the occasional drip of water from somewhere in the caverns.

She slipped the small pack off her shoulder and laid it against the wall. The caverns were much warmer than she expected, so she removed her cloak as well. She readjusted her shoulder plates and the pair of sword sheaths that hung on a baldric of woven leather from her right shoulder down to her left hip in the style common to warriors in the Northlands. Only one of the sheaths contained a sword. Just below her blue tunic, a dagger rested against each thigh.

Aeryn set her cloak next to the leather pack in the hopes it might dry, and then knelt down to rummage through the pack. She moved aside a lantern and a vial of oil, neither of which she now needed. Her fingers brushed against the roll of sheepskin parchment, which she extracted, and then located the stick of drawing charcoal. Getting lost in the Black Caverns' labyrinth was the last thing she wanted.

A familiar whisper tickled at her mind, but she shoved it aside, unrolling the sheepskin. Using the charcoal, Aeryn started her map with a sketch of the entry chamber. Then, she rolled the sheepskin and tucked it and the charcoal away. Before she rose to her feet, she also took a small coil of rope from her pack, in case she found a fork in the caverns. Aeryn threw the rope over her left shoulder and started down the corridor that led away from the entrance at a gentle, downward slope. She counted her paces while she walked; she wanted an exact map.

Aeryn noticed neither the small pool of water forming behind her nor the smaller cloak that appeared out of thin air and dropped down next to her own cloak. Small, wet boot prints followed after the sell-sword at a safe distance. The boot prints became less and less wet the farther they went, until they were hardly visible at all.

Aeryn continued down the corridor, intrigued by the handiwork of the caverns' creator. Farther down the corridor, Aeryn caught sight of a blue glow. As she drew closer, she realized the glow came from blue runes carved into the obsidian walls in sporadic groups, which slowly turned into organized lines. Though not a magik user herself, Aeryn recognized the runes as wards of some kind from protection wards she had seen in other places. The rune lines continued on, unbroken, when the corridor ended at a three-way junction. Aeryn paused, considering each of the three options.

Her destination lay somewhere in the center of the cavern, but neither of the passages facing her now went straight—one branched off to the left, the other to the right. Her hand rose, and she fingered the thin white scar over her left eye. The scar split her eyebrow in two. After a moment, her hand dropped again, and she chose to go right. She marked this on her map, but did not lay down her rope. This, she reserved in case the path became more complicated.

The runes followed her into a passage lined on either side by wooden doors. Each one was massive in height, and she wondered how they got to the caverns. According to the legend, the adventurer Tynan Selvantyr created the caverns on his own, without the aid of other people. Aeryn supposed he might have used his fabled magik abilities to transport the doors there, fourteen of them altogether. She admired the workmanship of the intricate carvings that decorated each one. Each door's carvings depicted a different scene: a war, a hunt of some kind, the creation of a god whose artifacts she did not recognize. Looking closer at this last scene, she realized that the carving of the god's head bore scratches and scars, as if someone tried to obliterate it from the wooden door. Aeryn stepped back and wondered what lay beyond this particular door. She decided it was best not to find out.

Each of the scenes depicted on the doors from that point forward became darker and darker. One of the scenes showed a religious sacrifice, though she could not tell what the sacrifice was—a small animal or a child? Aeryn shuddered, a sense of deep discomfort washing over her. She wondered why these doors were here and what story they were meant to tell. She thought back to the stories her father told her and the stories she read about Tynan on her own, and could think of nothing in Tynan's history that these scenes might depict. The lack of an explanation for these scenes caused a small knot of apprehension to form in her stomach. She decided it was best to move on.

She picked up her pace until she reached a large, circular chamber at the end of the hall of doors. The contents of the room reflected the torchlight a thousand times over. Open chests arranged around the room overflowed with gold and silver coins and jewels of all colors. Coins covered the floor in miniature gold mountains.

Aeryn walked to the middle of the room and turned around slowly to take everything in, amazed at the wealth contained in this one room. Her spine tightened a moment later when she heard someone gasp behind her.

Aeryn spun in the direction from which the sound originated, drawing her sword in the same motion. Coins slid and scrapped underfoot. She ignored them.

“Show yourself,” she commanded to whomever she had heard.

The gasp had been the briefest of sounds, just loud enough for her to hear, but Aeryn knew she had. The sound caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand at attention. She studied the room with steely eyes, body still and sword at the ready. She waited for any betraying movement from her unseen watcher that she could pounce on.

Time stretched on, but no one appeared. With reluctance, Aeryn admitted to herself that she might have imagined the sound, although the lasting tingle on the back of her neck told her otherwise. She resheathed her sword anyhow, knowing she had no choice but to move on and wait for her watcher to make themselves known in their own time. She exited the room through the door opposite the one she had entered. Her sword hand remained near her dagger hilt.

The new passageway had no doors, but other passages and open chambers branched off from it. Aeryn focused on her destination and her map, marking each new room and corridor on her map as she came to them. She stayed alert for additional sounds that might give away her watcher.

Her boots, though thick-soled, were broken in well enough they made little noise on the stone floors of the caverns. Her long strides carried her past libraries filled with tomes among which she knew her father would have loved to have gotten lost. Though he chose the life of a soldier, he appreciated the value of knowledge as much as a good sword arm and spent every evening reading one of a handful of books he carried with him. Seeing the vast rows of bookshelves made her feel his absence once again.

Aeryn continued on, since the books were not her purposed for being there. As she walked, she wondered how many of the books Tynan wrote himself. A few of his journals were available in the library at Valis, and his entries chronicling his own and his company’s adventures displayed an impressive attention to detail and a bent toward long, flowery prose. Aeryn guessed by his accounts that he felt no one could tell his story quite as well as he could.

After reaching the end of yet another passageway, Aeryn began to wonder whether she had taken a wrong turn and missed the passage that would lead her to the center of the caverns—the most likely place to find Tynan’s remains. She stopped and unrolled her map. She examined it to look for where she might have gone down the wrong path.

A scream of definite human origin tore through the passage, and Aeryn froze. The sound came to her from one of the passages behind her. She crammed her map in her belt and again drew her sword. She jogged down the passage in the direction of the scream, looking into one room after another. A second cry accosted her ears, this time a distinct cry for help. This cry gave Aeryn a better sense of where it was coming from, and she picked up her pace.

She passed a room with pieces of antique weaponry hanging upon the walls and then stopped and turned back. A young girl hung from the ceiling, bound from neck to knee in white,ropy webbing. A black spider the

size of a bear cub crept toward her. It emitted a hissing sound as it advanced on the girl. The girl writhed in an effort to free herself, but the webbing held her fast.

Aeryn ran between the girl and the spider, her longsword gripped in both hands. The spider skittered a few paces backward and studied her with its eight black eyes. Its mandibles snapped while it decided what to do with her. Aeryn thrust her sword at it to help it make up its mind. The spider reared up on its hind legs.

Behind Aeryn, the girl shrieked, "Look out!"

The spider spit a blob of webbing at Aeryn. She dove aside to avoid it. The blob of sticky material flew past her and hit the girl. When Aeryn hit the floor with a clatter, she switched her sword to her left hand and flicked one of her slim daggers with her right. The dagger flew true and hit its mark. The spider squealed in pain. Green slime bubbled up around the dagger blade buried in the spider's back.

Aeryn rolled to her feet as the beast lunged and snapped at her. Aeryn knocked it back with the flat of her sword. She thrust her longsword at the spider again, striking its body. Slime bubbled out of the wound again, this time spattering Aeryn's arms. The spider made a screaming sound. It scuttled forward in a rage.

Aeryn's boots slid on the slime that coated the floor as she backed away from the advancing spider. She skidded and cursed while she fought to stay upright in the face of the charging beast. She brought her sword's blade up again and intercepted the spider's mandibles, which snapped around it. Her muscles strained to keep the spider at arm's length. When her boots gripped dry ground again, Aeryn shoved the spider back, swung her sword, and brought it down on the spider's head, cleaving it in half. The spider fell. Its legs twitched once before it stilled completely.

"Gods be damned," Aeryn muttered. "I hate spiders."

The viscid slime that had sprayed her bare arms remained stuck there, though Aeryn shook both her arms in an attempt to get it to come off. She looked around the room for something to wipe the goo off with, but the only thing her gaze landed on that was not metal was an ornate, woven leather sword belt, similar to her own. Without anything else suitable at her disposal, she went over to the sword belt, flipped it to its back, and used the braided leather to scrape the bits of slime off. When she finished, Aeryn turned the sword belt right side out again, though there was no one around to care, and turned her attention back to the dead spider. She retrieved her dagger from the spider's side and cleaned it off on her leather leggings, just above the top of her boot. She did the same with her sword before she resheathed it.

The girl hanging from the ceiling cleared her throat, reminding Aeryn that she was still stuck in the spider's webbing. Aeryn turned and looked at the girl, studying her for a moment before she walked over and removed the webbing that had conveniently landed on the girl's mouth.

The moment Aeryn removed the webbing, the girl started talking. "Help me down already? I think my head might pop if I hang here much longer."

Aeryn crossed her arms over her chest. "You've been following me."

Defiance planted itself on the girl's face. "How do you know? Wouldn't you have seen me if I was?"

"Perhaps."

The girl raised an eyebrow. "Maybe I've been here all along. I could be a nymph. If you get me down, I'll grant you three wishes."

Aeryn guessed the girl to be no more than ten years of age, and her hair and face could use a good wash. She wondered how the girl got into the Black Caverns on her own, and why she was there. Then, something on the floor caught her attention.

"Nymphs don't grant wishes, djinn do," Aeryn muttered.

She picked up the object that had caught her attention and held it up. "I'll hazard a guess and say this had something to do with your little invisibility act."

The girl's hazel eyes shifted to look at the torn leather bracelet in Aeryn's hand. "What is it?"

One of Aeryn's eyebrows rose. She admired the girl's pluck. Telling lies seemed second nature to her. The silence between them stretched on, and Aeryn grew impatient for the girl to drop the act. She turned away.

"Wait," the girl called after her. "Alright, yeah, I followed you. Don't just leave me here, *please*."

Aeryn turned back. She knew she could not leave the girl on her own. She sighed and pulled her sword loose from its sheath again; she sliced through the webbing holding the girl. It broke with a crack, setting the girl loose to crash to the stone floor.

"Don't try to catch me or anything." The girl glared up at Aeryn.

Aeryn knelt down and cut the rest of the girl's bonds. She looked the reed-thin girl in the eye when she got up and asked her, "What do you suggest I do with you?"

A smile full of charm fell into place on the girl's face. "I'll just come with you."

Aeryn asked her, "Am I apt to end up with a knife in the back if you do?"



The girl frowned. "Where am I going to go? I've already gotten lost once, and you saved my hide. I'd call it rude to stab you after that."

Whether she wanted one or not, Aeryn now had someone else to look after. "Alright. But don't get underfoot, don't stray, and don't get into any more trouble. Understand?"

Nodding, the girl dusted off the oversize flax shirt and wool pants she wore.

"What is your name?" Aeryn inquired.

"Theo."

"Do you have a family name?"

The look of insolence returned. "What does that matter to you?"

Aeryn rolled her eyes. "I am Aeryn Ravane."

"Nice to meet you, I suppose. Where to now? I don't much like this place anymore."

Aeryn could not argue with her. Her enthusiasm over having successfully breached the caverns without being felled by the curse was also starting to wane. "Let us not get ahead of ourselves. How did you get here?"

Theo sighed. "I'm from Valis. I stole the bracelet out of some guy's shop in Middle City a while back. I was playing around with it, and I heard you in one of the local taverns asking around for someone to guide you through the Black Mountains and the Valley of Death. I figured you were another one of those adventurers trying to get into the caverns. Everyone knows the caverns are filled with gold, so I hitched a ride with a caravan that passed near the valley and hiked the rest of the way."

Aeryn felt like this was only half the girl's story, but for now, she let it go. She asked, "You did not fear the curse?"

Theo shrugged. "I thought the curse couldn't get what it couldn't see. But then, that spider somehow saw through the illusion, and the bracelet broke when it attacked me. I don't even know where that thing came from. You'd think I'd have heard it or something."

Aeryn nodded. She wondered if the girl was telling the truth, but her story seemed as logical an explanation of what she was doing in the caverns as any. Greed drove many to brave Tynan's curse. "Alright then, let us go on."

She turned out of the room and headed back in the direction of the passage she had been in when she heard the girl scream. While they walked, she asked Theo, "How did you plan to get back to Valis again?"

"What makes you think I want to go back?" was the girl's reply. "Anyways, I figured if the curse got you, I'd just take your horse wherever I wanted to go."

At least the girl was honest, Aeryn told herself. They passed the point she had reached in the passageway the first time. A dancing golden light filled the end of the passage, coming from something in the next room. A strange sensation washed over Aeryn at the same moment she heard Theo exclaim in wonder behind her. Something in the room beyond made Aeryn want to turn back and yet also drew her in.

The end of the passageway opened into a large, irregular-shaped room with a vaulted ceiling; it burned with the light of hundreds of golden runes carved into the walls and ceiling. Off to the side stood a stone altar to Wersal, the god of benevolent magik, also decorated with the golden runes. Another archway on the opposite end of the room led out of the chamber, but Aeryn stopped just outside the chamber, staring into it.

A section of dull rock on the opposite side of the room from the altar drew her attention. That section of wall was straight, whereas all of the other walls in the chamber were curved. The texture of the rock looked nothing like the graceful, satiny obsidian throughout the rest of the caverns. It seemed to suck in the golden light of the runes and kill it. It looked dead. It drew Aeryn into the chamber, toward it, even as her sense of unease increased the closer she got to the dead stone.

“This place is creepy,” Theo whispered behind her.

Aeryn barely heard her, her attention was so consumed by the wall. Additional runes, larger and in a different style than the others, covered the dead rock but did not glow as bright. Aeryn felt an almost imperceptible hum being emitted by something in the rock. The subtle throb hurt her head. Her hand rose and touched the wall. The moment her skin touched the stone, the runes shifted like snakes on the surface of the wall, and a death-like cold seeped into her outstretched hand and crawled its way up her arm.

In her head, Aeryn heard her father’s voice. “*Where were you?*”

Aeryn cursed aloud and yanked her hand away from whatever force pulled her to the dead rock. She staggered back several steps and turned away, holding her hand close to her. She closed her eyes, massaging the cold out of her hand with the warmer one.

Theo went to Aeryn, her eyes wide and anxious. “What happened?”

Aeryn turned and looked back at the strange wall. The runes were back in their original places, causing her to wonder if she imagined that they moved. She replied, “I do not know.”

And she decided she did not want to know. Aeryn shuddered, thinking of her father’s voice coming to her as clear as if he stood beside her. She turned her back on the wall and crossed to the altar at the other end of the chamber.

“I felt . . . something. I do not know what it was.”

Behind her, the girl said, “I think we should get out of here.”

Aeryn nodded. She had never been the religious type, but she said a brief prayer to the god all the same before she turned away from the altar. There was no reason to tempt any gods to look upon them in disfavor because of a sign of disrespect, Aeryn told herself. When she turned back to look at Theo, the girl was chewing on an end of the cord that laced the collar of her shirt.

The girl let the damp cord drop and set her mouth in a frown. She repeated, “Something feels wrong in here. We should go.”

Aeryn agreed, but glanced back at the wall of dull, black stone once more before she turned toward the doorway that led out of the strange chamber. She beckoned for the girl to follow, though she did not need to; the girl was close on her heels.



Theo could still feel the presence of the eerie golden-runed room, though they were far from it now. Ever since the sell-sword touched that strange wall, she swore it felt as though something followed them, dogging their steps. She shuddered at the idea. Theo, for her part, wished she had never come to this place, but she had no choice in the matter, she had to come.

To distract herself, Theo did what she did best—she started talking. “Where are we going anyhow?”

Aeryn stopped. An intersection of four passages faced them: the one that had just ended and three others. Theo knew what came next even before Aeryn unrolled her sheepskin map. Each time they reached a new passage, the sell-sword stopped to make notations on her map. She was obsessive about it. This time was not different. The sell-sword sketched out the passage just finished, made additional notations, and then drew the intersection. Theo stifled a yawn.

The woman mumbled while she made her notations, “The center of the labyrinth.”

“Why?”

“I am looking for something,” Aeryn said. She rolled the map and tucked it into her belt again.

She already knew what Aeryn sought, but she asked, “What? Treasure?”

The sell-sword shot her an annoyed look. “I am no treasure-hunter or adventurer.”

“Then why come here?”

Aeryn started walking again, choosing the center path, as she had at every other intersection. Aeryn seemed to be trying to go in a straight line. This passage, however, started curving to the right not far along, and no doors or doorways lined it, nor were there passages that branched off from it. Aeryn slowed her pace, to Theo’s relief. Her legs could use the rest. The sell-sword’s legs were much longer.

A door appeared farther down the passage. When she passed it, Theo wondered what could possibly be behind it. It appeared to be made of iron, rusted over now. No holes or decoration marred its flat surface. It had nothing on it other than a handle and a padlock the size of her head. She crossed behind Aeryn to the sell-sword’s other side, keeping the sell-sword between her and the iron door.

Theo asked Aeryn again, “Why did you come here?”

Aeryn sighed. “My father wanted to break the curse.”

“Was he an adventurer?”

“No. He was a soldier, but he loved Tynan’s legend, and he considered the curse to be an interesting puzzle to defeat. He enjoyed puzzles.”

Theo considered this. She supposed it was a good puzzle. Most people just wanted the gold. “Who was Tynan anyhow? I know he died a long time ago . . .”

The sell-sword nodded. “Nearly a century and a half ago. Tynan Darius Selvantyr, adventuring great. At least for his time.”

“What made him so great?”

Aeryn shrugged. “According to the journals I found and my father’s stories, Tynan and his adventuring company, the Seven, were very successful. As you’ve seen, he amassed great amounts of wealth and knowledge. I

suppose that is the definition of success, if ever there was one.

“I couldn’t say what captured my father’s imagination about the old stories of Tynan’s adventures. Maybe it was just how he died, ambushed by his greatest nemesis, the Order, but breaking free from them so that he could reach the caverns and leave a curse to guard them in his stead.”

Theo commented, “He must have really loved his gold and books.”

Aeryn made a noise and nodded. “Legend says, on the day Tynan died, although he was pursued by more than thirty men, he escaped into the caverns and locked them out. Then, a great storm appeared out of a blue sky, and the heavens turned black. Lightning and brimstone bore down on them. Only one man, a coward who hid under the bodies of fallen mates, escaped the slaughter. This man made it out of the valley and back to Valis on foot, but when he got home, his hair and beard had gone white. He told of what he saw in the valley and then died that very night. No one knows what killed him.”

The sell-sword made a fair storyteller, Theo decided. The tale gave her the chills.

Aeryn stopped short and frowned at the path in front of them. Now, three corridors faced them, but the one across from them was caved in. No more going in a straight line. The sell-sword annotated her map and then turned to the left-most passage.

Theo looked up at the ceiling, wondering if the obsidian rock was likely to come tumbling down on them. In studying the ceiling, she noticed that some of the runes did not glow, like they had burnt out, as a torch might. Plenty of torches continued lighting their way, but Theo wondered what might cause a rune to burn out.

Theo asked, “So, if the curse is so terrible, how is it we aren’t dead? And where are the bones of the others who’ve made it into the caverns? I’ve heard some have, but they never returned.”

“Strange, I know,” Aeryn agreed. “It’s like the caverns swallowed them whole.”

Theo’s eyes grew wide. When she looked over at the sell-sword, however, the woman looked back at her with a half-smile on her face.

“Funny,” Theo said and glared in return.

Theo decided she would find some way to get back at Aeryn for trying to scare her like that. Then, they entered the mural room, and all such thoughts vanished from her head.

Like the hall of doors carved with frightening scenes that Theo saw while still following the sell-sword, the mural room held a series of painted murals on each wall depicting scenes even darker than those on the doors. The first mural showed piles of corpses of peasants and soldiers alike strewn across a red field. A robed figure stood alone at the center of the carnage, a sky full of black thunderheads above him. She could tell the figure was male but not what he looked like—dozens of scratch marks obscured his face, all but his eyes. They stared out at her with twisted glee.

“What is this place?” Theo whispered.

At first, Aeryn said nothing, but then she replied, “Let us keep moving.”

Theo nodded and turned away from the mural. Something tugged at her, daring her to look back again, but she resisted. She kept her eyes on the sell-sword’s back and followed her out of the room. She felt no desire to see what was on any of the other murals.

She remained silent for a time while she walked next to the sell-sword, still feeling the same strange presence following them. She wondered what the dead adventurer was doing in these caverns when he lived. Theo considered asking the sell-sword her opinion, but then a silver light coming through the open doorway next to her caught her attention.

Forgetting the sell-sword's warning that she needed to stay close to her, Theo slowed to a halt and went to the door to see where the light came from. She discovered five small pools filled with what looked like mercury, set into a stone platform. Theo wondered what they were and ran into the room to investigate further. The moment she crossed the room's threshold, however, a deep rumble came from somewhere below the stone floor.

Theo froze in the inane hope this would help her. Her feet

disobeyed her when she told them to take her back out of the room. She glanced down at them and saw tiny fractures appearing under her boots.

