

ASHCLIFF BEGAN UP THE STEPS LEADING out of the room that Roland and Eldryn had trod down. He led them back to their left and they traveled east for about seventy feet and turned back to the south. They followed the hallway along its winding path until they came to a T intersection. The hallway ran north and south. They all heard the sounds of battle coming from the northern hallway.

"I'll take a look," Ashcliff said. "I'll be right back."

With that Ashcliff trotted silently down the northern hallway and turned out of sight just before reaching the edge of the torchlight.

"How will he see in the black?" Eldryn asked Roland.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

Roland and Eldryn waited impatiently for Ashcliff's return with their weapons ready. The minutes went by slowly. The damp air of the deep cavern filled their noses with a tangible dread. Finally, Ashcliff returned as softly as a breeze up the hallway.

"We may have encountered some luck," Ashcliff said. "Yorketh and Dawn are outnumbered and locked in a battle with twelve of the dark elves. If they aren't killed, we will at least have the time to get part of what we came here for."

"I came here for them," Roland said.

"We can go back and get their corpses in a while," Ashcliff said. "If they are not felled in combat then they will at least be weaker so that we can take them with more ease."

"What else are we here for?" Eldryn asked.

"Treasure," Ashcliff said, grinning.

"There is no treasure here or anywhere that I want more than I want those two in irons and on their way back to Fordir," Roland said.

Ashcliff's grin dropped.

"Look, the items I was sent for are of great value," Ashcliff began. "I am not talking of silver and gold. They could change the outcomes of wars and save many lives. If in the wrong hands, Daeriv's hands, many will die. Which do you want to pursue? Two spies who have thus far failed in their mission, or something that could change the tides of kingdoms?"

With that Ashcliff took up the lead again and began south down the hallway. Roland and Eldryn exchanged a look. Neither possessed a magical telepathy, as some did, but they did have a more natural means of communication. The type of communication that comes from years of friendship. They turned and followed after their friend.

Ashcliff froze thirty feet into the hallway.

"Trip wire," Ashcliff said, pointing out the thin wire running across the floor of the corridor.

Roland and Eldryn carefully stepped over the wire with their breath held, and then continued on following Ashcliff. Ash pointed out three more traps along the way that the other two young men would have certainly fallen prey to without him to guide them.

Ashcliff led the boys down a series of hallways and through several hidden doors. The boys trod on into the dark. Roland and Eldryn had lost track of time and distance in this heavy blanket of dark that rested around their struggling torch. Finally, they reached a large iron bound wooden door.

"Through here is our goal," Ashcliff said. "There is a great beast within. Beyond it is another room. In that room we will find the treasure we seek."

"And what about Dawn and Yorketh?" Roland asked.

"If we can obtain what is in that room then they will come to us. That is why they are here and they will pursue that item until they have it or they are dead."

"What is it we seek?" Eldryn asked hoping this time to get more than generalities about mystical powers.

"There is an ancient holy book, The Book of Fate. Next to that book should be a large hourglass. The Hourglass of Time. Both items are artifacts and are pursued by some very powerful individuals."

"And this beast?" Roland asked.

"That is for you to figure out as you go. I'm afraid I won't be much help against the creature. As you may have already put together, that is not exactly my specialty."

"Well, there is no time like the present," Roland said. With that he went through the doorway.

Eldryn prepared himself and stepped through behind Roland. Neither boy noticed where Ashcliff went.

Inside they discovered a large, hair covered creature that resembled a lion with the exceptions that it possessed two heads, and its back was almost twelve feet from the stone floor. A smell of stale musk oil filled their noses. The beast was enormous and immediately vicious. Both boys felt an uncommon fear shake them to their cores.

Both young men were courageous. Either from a birthright of strong blood, years of training, or the fact that most young men

lack the ability to fathom their own demise, these two were sturdy in the face of danger. This fear was not that. This was somehow magical in nature and stole throughout them until it reached their center. Until it crashed into the minds of two warriors and the will forged within.

In less than a second this struggle of magic versus determined minds was fought. In less time than the flap of a bird's wing was the power of this creature repelled.

The beast came for Roland and then veered away rapidly. When Eldryn entered the room and began to circle it, the creature turned its attention on him.

Both heads struck at Eldryn in turn. Eldryn could smell the decaying meat on the beast's breath as he struggled to parry the bites with his sword. Roland struck the creature's hindquarter with his axe and it whirled on him. It bared both sets of its great fangs, and then turned to face Eldryn once again.

Roland struck the beast again and again, sinking his axe deep into hide and muscle. However, it maintained its attention on Eldryn. Eldryn dodged several swipes from the great monster's claws before it defeated his defenses.

The creature's large claw caught Eldryn squarely, knocked him back and crushing him against the stone wall. Eldryn dropped to the ground, breathless and disoriented. The creature prepared its maws and started toward Eldryn's fallen body, preparing to rip him in two.